Understanding the Text

1. Who is the target audience for this advertisement?
2. What is the advertisement selling? A product, or a lifestyle? Both?

Reflection and Response

3. Reflect on the composition of this image. How is it designed to pitch an argument? Is it successful?
4. Today, according to the CDC, within the United States about one in every five deaths a year can be attributed to smoking and related health issues, but over 30 million Americans continue to smoke. Reflect on a decision you have made in the pursuit of happiness that you knew beforehand was not good for you. Did it bring you happiness or help you cultivate a positive outlook? Is knowingly sacrificing health in the search for happiness a sign that happiness (or its pursuit) is addictive?

Making Connections

5. The purpose of ads is to convince you that you will be better off — happier — if you buy their product. Gretchen Rubin claims that money can help buy happiness in "July: Buy Some Happiness" (p. 233). Do you believe this is true? Can material goods make you happier?

My Own Life

Oliver Sacks

Oliver Sacks was born in 1933 in London and earned an M.D. at the University of Oxford in England. He passed away in 2015, at the age of eighty-two. He lived most of his life in New York, where he was a practicing neurologist. From 2007 to 2012, he was a professor of neurology and psychiatry at the Columbia University Medical Center; from 2012 to 2015 he was a professor of neurology at the New York University School of Medicine. While at Columbia, he was the first designated Columbia University Artist. In 1966, while a consulting neurologist at the chronic care hospital Beth Abraham Hospital, Sacks identified patients trapped in strange frozen shapes as survivors of the 1916–1927 sleepy sickness pandemic. After Sacks treated them with a then-experimental drug, L-dopa, these patients were able to come back to life. The book Sacks wrote about these patients, *Awakenings*, inspired the play *A Kind of Alaska*, by Harold Pinter, and the Oscar-nominated movie *Awakenings*. Sacks is best known for his case histories about the borders of neurological experience: *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985) and *An Anthropologist on Mars* (1995). His other books include *Seeing Voices* (1989), about the Deaf community and sign language, and *The Island of the Colorblind* (1996), about a community of colorblind individuals. Sacks also documented his experiences in the medical community, as both a doctor in *Migraine* (1970), and as a patient in *A Leg to Stand On* (1984). His autobiographical *Uncle Tungsten: Memories of a Chemical Boyhood* was published in 2001, and his final books were memoirs assessing his life. The following essay was originally published in the *New York Times* in February 2015, six months before he died.

A month ago, I felt that I was in good health, even robust health. At 81, I still swim a mile a day. But my luck has run out—a few weeks ago I learned that I have multiple metastases in the liver. Nine years ago it was discovered that I had a rare tumor of the eye, an ocular melanoma. The radiation and lasering to remove the tumor ultimately left me blind in that eye. But though ocular melanomas metastasize in perhaps 50 percent of cases, given the particulars of my own case, the likelihood was much smaller. I am among the unlucky ones.

I feel grateful that I have been granted nine years of good health and productivity since the original diagnosis, but now I am face to face with dying. The cancer occupies a third of my liver, and though its advance may be slowed, this particular sort of cancer cannot be halted.

It is up to me now to choose how to live out the months that remain to me. I have to live in the richest, deepest, most productive way I can. In this I am encouraged by the words of one of my favorite philosophers,

David Hume,° who, upon learning that he was mortally ill at age 65, wrote a short autobiography in a single day in April of 1776. He titled it "My Own Life."

"I now reckon upon a speedy dissolution," he wrote. "I have suffered very little pain from my disorder; and what is more strange, have, notwithstanding the great decline of my person, never suffered a moment's abatement of my spirits. I possess the same ardour as ever in study, and the same gaiety in company."

I have been lucky enough to live past 80, and the 15 years allotted to me beyond Hume's three score and five have been equally rich in work and love. In that time, I have published five books and completed an autobiography (rather longer than Hume's few pages) to be published this spring; I have several other books nearly finished.

Hume continued, "I am . . . a man of mild dispositions, of command of temper, of an open, social, and cheerful humour, capable of attachment, but little susceptible of enmity, and of great moderation in all my passions."

Here I depart from Hume. While I have enjoyed loving relationships and friendships and have no real enmities, I cannot say (nor would anyone who knows me say) that I am a man of mild dispositions. On the contrary, I am a man of vehement disposition, with violent enthusiasms, and extreme immoderation in all my passions.

And yet, one line from Hume's essay strikes me as especially true: "It is difficult," he wrote, "to be more detached from life than I am at present."

> "I feel intensely alive, and I want and hope in the time that remains to deepen my friendships, to say farewell to those I love, to write more, to travel if I have the strength, to achieve new levels of understanding and insight."

Over the last few days, I have been able to see my life as from a great altitude, as a sort of landscape, and with a deepening sense of the connection of all its parts. This does not mean I am finished with life.

On the contrary, I feel intensely alive, and I want and hope in the time that remains to deepen my friendships, to say farewell to those I love, to write more, to travel if I have the strength, to achieve new levels of understanding and insight.

This will involve audacity, clarity and plain speaking; trying to straighten my accounts with the world. But there will be time, too, for some fun (and even some silliness, as well).

I feel a sudden clear focus and perspective. There is no time for anything inessential. I must focus on myself, my work and my friends. I shall no longer look at "NewsHour" every night. I shall no longer pay any attention to politics or arguments about global warming.

David Hume (1711–1776): Scottish philosopher, economist, and historian who argued that human knowledge is based in experience.

This is not indifference but detachment—I still care deeply about the Middle East, about global warming, about growing inequality, but these are no longer my business; they belong to the future. I rejoice when I meet gifted young people—even the one who biopsied and diagnosed my metastases. I feel the future is in good hands.

I have been increasingly conscious, for the last 10 years or so, of deaths among my contemporaries. My generation is on the way out, and each death I have felt as an abruption, a tearing away of part of myself. There will be no one like us when we are gone, but then there is no one like anyone else, ever. When people die, they cannot be replaced. They leave holes that cannot be filled, for it is the fate—the genetic and neural fate—of every human being to be a unique individual, to find his own path, to live his own life, to die his own death.

I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved; I have been given much and I have given something in return; I have read and traveled and thought and written. I have had an intercourse with the world, the special intercourse of writers and readers.

Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure.

Understanding the Text

1. How would you describe Sacks's tone in the essay? What is his attitude toward his subject?
2. What feelings does Sacks express about his life and his imminent death? Does his tone complement these feelings or contradict them? Or both?
3. Consider the final paragraph. What does Sacks value above all things? Does he provide evidence for this elsewhere in the essay?

Reflection and Response

4. Sacks refers to himself as "lucky" many times in the essay. Do you see any relationship between "luck" and "gratitude" in his assessment of his life?
5. What does Sacks mean by people "leaving holes" when they die? Reflect on this way of understanding death. How does it compare to what you believe about death?

Making Connections

6. Sacks uses David Hume's title as the title for his essay. Borrow one of the titles in this book as your own and write an essay in which you reflect on your own experience.
7. A week before her death, Amy Krouse Rosenthal published an essay in the *New York Times* Modern Love column entitled "You May Want to Marry My Husband." Oliver Sacks wrote a final message with no mention of his life partner. How would you explain the different choices made by these dying writers? What is the effect of focusing or not focusing on one's relationships in a final message to the world?