

Awakenings (1990)

In 1969, Dr. Malcolm Sayer (Robin Williams) is a dedicated and caring physician at a local hospital in the New York City borough of the Bronx. After working extensively with the catatonic patients who survived the 1917–1928 epidemic of encephalitis lethargica, Sayer discovers certain stimuli will reach beyond the patients' respective catatonic states; actions such as catching a ball, hearing familiar music, and experiencing human touch all have unique effects on particular patients and offer a glimpse into their worlds. Leonard Lowe (Robert De Niro) proves elusive in this regard, but Sayer soon discovers that Leonard is able to communicate with him by using a Ouija board.

After attending a lecture at a conference on the subject of the L-Dopa drug and its success with patients suffering from Parkinson's Disease, Sayer believes the drug may offer a breakthrough for his own group of patients. A trial run with Leonard yields astounding results: Leonard completely "awakens" from his catatonic state. This success inspires Sayer to ask for funding from donors so that all the catatonic patients can receive the L-Dopa medication and experience "awakenings" back to reality.

Meanwhile, Leonard is adjusting to his new life and becomes romantically interested in Paula (Penelope Ann Miller), the daughter of another hospital patient. Leonard also begins to chafe at the restrictions placed upon him as a patient of the hospital, desiring the freedom to come and go as he pleases. He stirs up a revolt by arguing his case to Sayer and the hospital administration. Sayer notices that as Leonard grows more agitated, a number of facial and body tics are starting to manifest, which Leonard has difficulty controlling.

While Sayer and the hospital staff are thrilled by the success of L-Dopa with this group of patients, they soon find that it is a temporary measure. As the first to "awaken", Leonard is also the first to demonstrate the limited duration of this period of "awakening". Leonard's tics grow more and more prominent and he starts to shuffle more as he walks, and all of the patients are forced to witness what will eventually happen to them. He soon begins to suffer full body spasms and can hardly move. Leonard puts up well with the pain, and asks Sayer to film him, in hopes that he would someday contribute to research that may eventually help others. Leonard acknowledges what is happening to him and has a last lunch with Paula where he tells her he cannot see her anymore. When he is about to leave, Paula dances with him, and for this short period of time his spasms disappear. Leonard and Sayer reconcile their differences, but Leonard returns to his catatonic state soon after. The other patients' fears are similarly realized as each eventually returns to catatonia no matter how much their L-Dopa dosages are increased.

Sayer tells a group of grant donors to the hospital that although the "awakening" did not last, another kind — one of learning to appreciate and live life — took place. For example, he himself overcomes his painful shyness and asks Nurse Eleanor Costello (Julie Kavner) to coffee, many months after he had declined a similar proposal from her. The nurses also now treat the catatonic patients with more respect and care, and Paula is shown visiting Leonard.

Cast

Robert De Niro as Leonard Lowe

Robin Williams as Dr. Malcolm Sayer

Julie Kavner	as Eleanor Costello
John Heard	as Dr. Kaufman
Penelope Ann Miller	as Paula
Max Von Sydow	as Dr. Peter Ingham
Ruth Nelson	as Mrs. Lowe
Alice Drummond	as Lucy
Judith Malina	as Rose
Anne Meara	as Mirriam
Richard Libertini	as Sidney
Keith Diamond	as Anthony
Peter Stormare	as Neurochemist
Bradley Whitford	as Dr. Tyler
Dexter Gordon	as Rolando

Memorable quotes (with notes on difficult vocabulary)

Dr. Ingham: Most died during the acute stage of the illness. Those who survived, when awoke, seemed fine, as though nothing had happened but just didn't realise how much the infection had damaged the brain. Years went by – five, ten, fifteen – before strange neurological symptoms would appear but they did. I began to see them in the early 1930s: old people brought in by their children, young people **brought in** by their parents. They could no longer dress themselves or feed themselves, they could no longer speak in most cases. Some families went mad. People who were normal were now...elsewhere.

Dr Sayer: What it's like to be them? What are they thinking?

Dr. Ingham: They're not. The virus didn't **spare** the **higher faculties**.

Dr. Sayer: You know that **for a fact**?

Dr. Peter Ingham: Yes.

Dr. Sayer: Because?

Dr. Peter Ingham: Because the alternative is **unthinkable**.

To bring someone in : (qui) ricoverare; **to spare**: risparmiare; **higher faculties**: capacità di ragionare; **for a fact**: con certezza; **unthinkable**: inconcepibile

Dr. Sayer: His **gaze** from staring through the bars has grown so **weary** that it can **take in** nothing more. For him, it is as though there were a thousand bars and behind the thousand bars no world. As he **paces in cramped circles** over and over, his powerful **strides** are like a ritual dance around a centre where a great will stands paralysed. At times, the curtains of the eye lift without a sound and a shape enters, slips through the tightened silence of the shoulders, reaches the heart and dies.

Gaze: sguardo; **weary:** affaticato; **to take in:** assorbire; **to pace:** camminare avanti e indietro; **cramped circles:** cerchi stretti; **stride:** falcata, passo lungo

Dr. Sayer: Do you think that simple Parkinsonian tremor taken to its furthest extreme would appear as no tremor at all?

Neurochemist: Are you talking to me?

Dr. Sayer: Oh yes. Imagine that you accelerated the simple Parkinsonian hand tremor to the point of immobility. Well, suppose there's a patient with all the Parkinsonian convulsions accelerated: the hand tremor, the head **bobbing, ticking**, a **quickening** of speech. Might it all **cave in** on itself and, in effect, turn the person into stone?

Neurochemist: I don't know, maybe.

Dr. Sayer: Well, do you think L-DOPA would change the situation?

Neurochemist: Dr. Sayer, right? I'm just a chemist doctor. You're the **physician**. I'll leave it to you to do the damage.

To bob: (qui) scuotere; **to tick:** muovere avanti e indietro; **quickening:** accelerazione; **to cave in:** crollare su se stesso; **physician:** medico.

Dr. Sayer: There was extreme rigidity of the axial musculature. This is a **gross impairment** of the postural reflexes and autonomic dysfunction is a **brain-stemmed** type of rigidity. What's most striking is the profound facial masking or the affrontation which now we know should not be confused with apathy or catatonia. Some things could reach him though: the mention of his name, notes of a particular piece of music or the touch of another human being. But these awakenings were rare and transient, lasted only a moment or two, the rest of the time he remained as you see him here in a metaphorical - if not physiological equivalent - of sleep or even death. This was his condition when we first found him in a remote **bay** of this hospital and the quality of his life for the last 30 years.

Leonard: My name is Leonard Lowe and it's been explained to me that I've been away for quite some time. I'm back.

Gross impairment: grosso danneggiamento; **brain-stemmed:** originato dal cervello; **bay:** (qui) reparto

Mrs. Lowe: When my son was born healthy I never asked why, why I was so lucky. What did I do to deserve this perfect child, this perfect life. But when he got sick you can bet I asked why, I demanded to know why. Why was this happening? There was nothing I could do about it, no one I could go to and say: "stop this please, stop this. Can't you see that my son is **in pain**?". My son is in pain please stop this.

Dr. Sayer: He's fighting Mrs. Lowe

Mrs. Lowe: He's losing.

To be in pain: soffrire; provare dolore

Sources: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Awakenings>
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0099077/quotes?ref=tt_q1_3

