

Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz ...

... sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,
the death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
chief nourisher of life's feast. (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 2, Scene 2)

In 1995 I made a 5-day retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Trappist KY. Part of the draw for me was to see some of the world that Thomas Merton, the famous monk, had lived in. I got there right before lunch on Monday and checked into my room on the third floor of the monastery's south wing. After lunch I came back to my room (around 1 p.m.) and took the nap I'd been looking forward to during the entire morning's drive there. I slept for three solid hours. Even so, that evening I fell asleep early and slept for ten hours straight. After breakfast on Tuesday I came back to my room ready for a morning of reading, but not long after picking up my book, a wave of sleep came crashing over me and took me out to sea again. I came back to consciousness only 1.5 hours later. Ditto for the afternoon: another 1.5 hours. My time at the Abbey was being wasted, I feared, in one long orgy of sleep. In fact it was only Wednesday morning, after eight hours of sleep on Tuesday night, that I awoke feeling like something was different. The world was sharper, crisper, brighter and better. Really, though, the world was as it had been, but now / was rested and alive.

I'd like to say this was a unique occurrence, but during my first few retreats to the Abbey I slept for most of Monday and Tuesday. Eventually it occurred to me that paying off a sleep deficit once every six months might not be the best way to do life.

As I write this I'm remembering the bursar at the seminary I went to after college. She told me once when I was in her office to pay a bill that she only slept four hours a night, from midnight to 4:00 a.m., and that this had been her practice from the time she was a young adult. (She was in her late 50s or early 60s at the time.) Now, this isn't information to be shared with young seminarians; they will almost certainly hate you for it. I walked away from that conversation very jealous and convinced that life wasn't fair. To eliminate (or severely reduce it) would be an indescribable gift! Think what you could get done!

In fact, during a period of intense work several years ago (I was renovating an old building and wanted to "increase my productivity" as well as make a deadline) I even experimented with something called *polyphasic sleep*. It's where you go to sleep for 20 minutes in four hour intervals. (People who race around the world solo in yachts use this.) So you sleep from midnight to 12:20 a.m., from 4:00 - 4:20 a.m., 8:00 - 8:20 a.m., etc. That's six 20-minute naps over the course of twenty-four hours, or two hours sleep per day. I wanted to go fourteen days. I lasted for eleven. When in the last day or two of the experiment my mouth broke out in canker sores, when I began to hallucinate and see people who weren't there, when I heard imaginary voices, and when in the middle of using a piece of heavy equipment (I was sanding a hardwood floor with a 120 lb. drum sander) I fell completely asleep and was only awakened when I bumped against the opposite wall, I thought it might be time to stop. Whatever productivity I gained in that short period of idiocy was lost in few days that followed it.

Since then I've changed my tune. I sleep more than I ever have — about 7–7.5 hours on average — and I nap for twenty minutes 3-4 times per week. I love Shakespeare's lines from *Macbeth* (see above), which reminds us that sleep bathes us, cleanses us, rebuilds us and nourishes us. It's one of the substructures of life — part of the "Holy Triad" consisting of sleep, activity and diet. In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Homer's characters receive

“the gift of sleep” as they sink into slumber. For most of my life I could only see it as a necessary evil.

In the course of working with, listening to and caring for pastors in the Vineyard over the last few years (especially those in crisis) I’ve been paying close attention to their “case histories,” looking for what has brought life to them and what has promoted death. Normally I’m not a half-empty-glass kind of guy, but here’s my short list of the practices that erode one’s spiritual life:

- progressive loss of regular, intimate conversation with God
- erosion of Sabbath (work bleeds into every aspect of life)
- loss of authentic community / accountability (the shepherd stands alone)
- stagnation in learning (I can get by on old information)
- disregard for adequate sleep and rest (I need less than others do)
- neglect of exercise and activity (I can be sedentary all day long)
- neglect of diet (I can indulge with impunity)

I’ll address each of these in time, but over the next few articles I’d like to tackle the taboo subjects of sleep, exercise and diet, topics we avoid discussing in the church because we believe they’re “unspiritual” and disconnected from the kingdom or potentially offensive.

There are plain and very important reasons for beginning a conversation on these subjects. For the first time in human history, entire populations are routinely sleep deprived and see this as normal. On average we sleep 1.5 hours less than people did just a few generations ago. We’re also in the middle of what people from many quarters are calling an obesity epidemic. A Harris Poll released in 2002 showed that 80% of Americans over 25 were overweight. Just 19 years earlier that percentage was only 58% (still too high). And it’s not just adults: the rise in childhood obesity is astonishing. As a population we’re also horribly inactive. Approximately seven out of ten Americans have no regular exercise according to a different poll released in 2002.

In the past, of course, a conversation on these topics was unnecessary. When night came, you went to bed. You couldn’t have day in the middle of the night, but electricity has changed all that. There was no 24/7 entertainment. If you called someone a “couch potato” in the 1950s, you’d get a look of incomprehension. In past huge expenditures of energy were required of most people by virtue of the work they did through the day. But we’ve gone from an agrarian to an industrial to a post-industrial, tech-driven society, so physical activity has been gutted from daily life. TV dinners were part of a first wave of incursions on the normal American diet. But now processed food, fast food and convenience food (*unfood* as one NY Times writer put it) have become standard fare (and the least expensive fare!). Food portions have also doubled and tripled in the last two generations — right along with our appetites.

Welcome to modern life. And before you beat yourself up over any personal failures in the areas diet, exercise and sleep (if that’s what you’re inclined to do), keep in mind that this is less about you not having enough will power and more about you being trapped in very powerful cultural currents.

Now let’s get to sleep ... briefly. Although there are significant variations in individuals, the average person still needs about eight hours of sleep per night. You’re probably average, which means you’re probably sleep-deprived. (My tendency was to think that I wasn’t average. Au contraire, I was “special.” A few trips to the Abbey and a dose of honesty disabused me of that lie.) There’s a simple test to see if you’re sleep-deprived.

Sometime between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 6 p.m., sit for a while in a comfortable chair in a quiet and very dark room. Simply rest, thinking of nothing in particular. If you're sleep-deprived, you'll start to nod off or will fall asleep. The larger the deficit, the more quickly you'll fall asleep. But if you're rested and caught up, you'll stay completely awake. It's that simple. About the only thing will give a "false negative" in this test is the heavy use of a masking agent called caffeine. It can be found in many drinks, the most famous of which is sometimes referred to as "The Dark Love." But it's a masking agent; the "face" beneath the mask is still tired and reaping what it sows. If you normally need an alarm clock to wake up, you're probably not sleeping enough. When your body is adequately rested you'll wake up naturally.

Many of us have forgotten what it feels like to be rested. A woman who recently came to one of the retreats we offer [*Gettin' Your Groove Back: Renewing Rituals*] went home and began sleeping 8 hours in place of the 5-6 she had been getting (part of which was stress-related). She said to me in a later email, "I feel like I'm rediscovering life as a 'normal' person."

I simply don't have time or space to detail here the short- and long-term consequences of chronic sleep deprivation, but they're insidious and sobering. We still tend to admire people who can "push through" and "tough it out" in the face of tiredness, but we also used to admire people who could "hold their liquor" and still drive. Sleep deficits, just like all deficits, eventually have to be repaid. It's a iron-clad biological rule. You may not hallucinate, fall asleep standing up or break out in canker sores, but the piper *will* be paid in full. So one of the greatest gifts you can receive from God is to put your body to bed on time.

Giving the proper attention to sleep is a matter of stewardship. It shouldn't be seen as part of the modern cult of living long and selfishly; it's about living well and using for "the glory of God and the welfare of his people" the one life we've been given. It's about tending to the garden of our vocation as ministers of the gospel. It's about ending the day with gratefulness for what we were able to accomplish, not fretting over what we didn't get done.

May you rest well,

Dave Nixon
info@sustainablefatih.com

(If you want a great education on the subject of sleep, two of the best books out there are: *Counting Sheep*, by Paul Martin, and *The Promise of Sleep*, by William Dement and Christopher Vaughn.)