

“In Praise of Naps”
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January 3, 2016

When I see a baby carriage, I can't resist. It's not that I want to coo at the baby. I don't really want to talk to the parents about how cute the baby is. I just want to get a peek at it. I think all babies are beautiful – with or without hair, complexion, light or dark, I love to get a look at them. I like to see their eyes peering out into the world, and I like to see them when they're asleep.

There's something especially moving about watching a baby when it's sleeping. Its tiny, perfect face looks so peaceful and calm. Its little chest rises and falls with its rhythmic breathing. We smile. It's a beautiful sight. We know that a baby needs to nap. It's good for him or her. How do we know this? For one thing, we've all witnessed babies who desperately needed a nap!

Mothers and fathers like to brag about their babies being “good nappers.” Personally, I wasn't blessed with that kind of child. But, in our society, we encourage napping for babies, toddlers and preschoolers. And, as far as I know, kindergarteners still have a nap time.

After that though, napping becomes far less popular. What with schoolwork and homework and extra-curricular activities, there isn't much time. And most kids wouldn't want to take naps anyway. Napping is just for babies.

By the time we get to be adults, napping has definitely moved into the category of “guilty pleasure.” That's one of the reasons I was so delighted to read Edward Hays' refreshing take on napping.

Why does napping get such a bad rap? Why is it so hard to feel good about taking a nap?

Maybe it's because sleeping during the day is associated with Sloth, one of the traditional Seven Deadly Sins.

Medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas, in the Summa Theologiae, said Sloth is "sluggishness of the mind which neglects to begin good... [it] is evil in its effect, if it so oppresses man as to draw him away entirely from good deeds."

The Pocket Catholic Catechism says:

"Sloth is the desire for ease, even at the expense of doing the known will of God. Whatever we do in life requires effort...The slothful person is unwilling to do what God wants because of the effort it takes to do it. Sloth becomes a sin when it slows down and even brings to a halt the energy we must expend in using the means to salvation." (In Catholic theology, everything a Catholic is encouraged to do is a means of salvation.)

To be human is to struggle with our desires. When those desires seem to be winning out, humans tend to be immoral, shiftless, and self-gratifying. Early Christians felt it was important to find a way to systematize their spiritual shortcomings. The system had to be sophisticated enough to implicate the full range of disgusting behavior, yet simple and memorable enough to inspire guilt in an illiterate peasant.

The 4th-century Greek monk Evagrius of Pontus drew up a list of eight wicked human passions. They were: gluttony, lust, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory, and pride. Acedia (from the Greek "akedia," or "not to care") denoted "spiritual sloth."

In the late 6th century, Pope Gregory the Great reduced the list to seven items, folding vainglory into pride, acedia into sadness, and adding envy. In the seventeenth century, the Church replaced the vague sin of "sadness" with sloth.

So if napping can be considered a form of sloth, that could be one reason it has a bad reputation.

What about napping's association with shiftlessness? A shiftless person is one who is lacking in resources and the ability to "shift" for him- or herself. In common parlance, a person who is characterized as "shiftless" is one who is almost worthless. And, when they're not leaning against a door frame or otherwise just hanging around, we just know those shiftless people are taking a lot of naps.

It's also not a far jump from "shiftless" to "shirking." Those shirkers, who devote themselves to evading their work or duty, are probably frequent nappers, too.

And maybe "nap" is almost a dirty word because of the Protestant work ethic. Protestants have traditionally valued hard work, but for a different reason than Catholics do. For Protestants who followed John Calvin's theology of the salvation of the elect (and some still do), you might think that most of them would have just thrown up their hands. If God had already decided who was going to heaven and who would spend eternity in hell, why should it matter what they did?

Well, Calvin's followers found that, psychologically, they needed to have some means of recognizing people who were saved. First, they made it an absolute duty to think of oneself as being one of the saved, and to see doubts as temptations of evil. Secondly, by diligently acting the part, people would be more likely to feel confident that they were one of God's chosen. In other words, Calvinists knew that hard work and virtuous living were not a means to salvation, but they came to see them as a sign of having been chosen.

If you were a follower of Calvin's theology, would YOU be taking naps?

This country was founded by Protestants, many of them Calvinists. Our Unitarian forebears, the Puritans, were Calvinists. So it's not too surprising that from the Protestant focus on hard work, emerged an ideology that's still very much with us: the ideology of achievement. I think we may be getting to the crux of the matter. Achievement ideology equates success with hard work and education. If we don't work hard on the job and in the classroom, we won't amount to much, it says. Implicit in this social message is, if you want to make it, then, "No napping!"

So, there you have it. A lot of reasons we could feel really bad about taking a nap!

And now, the good news on naps. There's a small but increasingly vocal group of people who are extolling the virtues of napping. They tend to fall into two camps. One takes a scientific approach. They've found through research and observation that adults tend to

be happier, healthier, less stressed and more productive when they make a practice of taking naps.

The other camp of nap enthusiasts doesn't concern itself so much with supportive data. This camp might be represented by Tom Hodgkinson. Hodgkinson is a British writer and publisher of a magazine called "The Idler," and the book, How to Be Idle: A Loafer's Manifesto.

He writes, "I count it as an absolute certainty that in paradise, everyone naps. A nap is a perfect pleasure and it's useful, too. It splits the day in two halves...How much easier it is to work in the morning if we know we have a nap to look forward to after lunch; and how much more pleasant the late afternoon and evening become after a little sleep." Cutting to the chase, he adds, "If you know there is a nap to come later in the day, then you can banish forever that terrible sense of doom one feels at 9 am with eight hours of straight toil ahead."

There is a smaller and perhaps less vocal third group that believes in the power of the nap as a spiritual tool. I love how Edward Hays refers to sleep as a form of humility. We can check out for a nap, confident that the world will go on without us for a while, and in fact, will do just fine in our absence.

UU minister Richard Gilbert echoes a similar sentiment in his reflection, "The Shirk Ethic."

O God of Work and Leisure
Teach me to shirk on occasion,
Not only that I may work more effectively
But also that I may enjoy life more abundantly.
Enable me to understand that the earth
Magically continues spinning on its axis
Even when I am not tending [your] vineyards.
Permit me to breathe more easily
Knowing the destiny of the race
Rests not on my shoulders alone.
Deliver me from false prophets who urge me
To "repent and shirk no more."
I pray for [your] grace on me,

[Your] faithful shirker.

Retreating into a nap is not so much a recognition that our efforts are expendable as it is saying to the world, “I am enough.” We don’t have to prove to ourselves or anyone else that we’re worthy by working ourselves to exhaustion. It’s a statement of trust in ourselves, and trust in the universe. As Hays says, napping is “an expression that we are able to allow the Divine Mystery to take over in the midst of troubles and deadlines.”

Another spiritual benefit of napping is the “after-nap” effect. As we feel refreshed, so we may see the world and its challenges in a new light. We may find we have a more positive perspective and that our current problems seem more manageable or at least less worrying.

The more we can reduce our worries and increase our sense of peace and embrace the reality of our lives, the more we tend to feel connected to that which is larger than ourselves: our intuition, that sense of God or a higher wisdom speaking to us, the Spirit of Love and Life. And if it takes a good nap to get to that peaceful place, then we should all be celebrating and practicing naps!

So let’s quiet the old refrains of the Puritan work ethic and sing praises for the spiritual practice of the nap.

Oh, and if you’re taking a nap somewhere and someone tries to give you a hard time, feel free to explain to them that napping is good for you. You can even tell them, “My minister said so!”

May we all find more opportunities to experience the positive power of naps.