Sleep: Essays by readers

We gave our readers a one-word writing prompt: “Sleep.”

Readers Write in the January 2024 issue

(Clockwise from upper left: Pixabay / Pexels; Pekic / E+ / Getty; Goya / Metropolitan Museum of Art; Odilon Redon / Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The Buechner Narrative Writing Project honors the life and legacy of writer and theologian Frederick Buechner with the aim of nurturing the art of spiritual writing and reflection. Readers are invited to submit first-person narratives (under 1,000 words). Our next topics are *Help* and *Seed.* (Read more.)

> It’s a surrender, a laying down of arms . . . a rehearsal for the final laying down of arms, of course, when you trust yourself to the same unseen benevolence to see you through the dark and to wake you when the time comes—with new hope, new strength—into the return again of light.
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> —Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark

There’s a science fiction novel I read in my early 20s that postulates a future when genetic engineering would allow some people—the wealthiest and most privileged, of course—to be sleepless, never needing to spend five to eight hours of their days motionless and dreaming in the dark.

At the time, this sounded like the best idea I’d come across. Imagine not needing to sleep. Admittedly, at that age I wasn’t planning to do anything world-changing with the ability. All I wanted to do was to be able to sit reading or watching movies all night, every night. It was the idea of sitting up, awake with no sense that my body wanted or needed to sleep through those long hours between ten and six, that intrigued me.

Of course, this was well before I ever experienced my first bout of insomnia and got a sense of what sleepless really meant—lying awake while it feels like the whole world is sleeping, feeling stuck in a body that wants so much to drift off into dreams but with a mind convinced that it is time to be awake.

I suppose it’d be different if the need to sleep wasn’t preprogrammed in my genes, but that novel and its characters who stare into the dark all night, every night sound a lot like hell to me now. Like something that a cleft-tailed, pitchfork-bearing creature would dream up to torture greedy souls. Greed, after all, was what my daydreams around the novel were made of—the desire for more time than I normally got, even if it would be used for entertainment purposes only.

But now, on nights when I turn and turn and turn in bed before finally getting up to read or play sudoku until sleep or sunrise comes, I don’t want anything more than what I, at that moment, cannot have. I want nothing else than to lie down like every other creature and give up those hours to vulnerability and motionlessness. To surrender just a few moments and admit that all the other minutes in the day are

enough.

Jonathan Bennett
Lakeland, TN

I have had long COVID for over three years. I am improving, but chronic fatigue means that I sleep a lot. And, of course, I dream.

I have always been curious about my dreams. So, unable to do much else, I have begun studying Jungian dream interpretation. I record my dreams every morning. Sometimes my dreams are processing events from the previous day. More often they are communications from my unconscious self.

When our culture tells us to follow our dreams, it means our daydreams. In my daydreams, I am always the hero. I am always right. I always succeed. Daydreams are laser-
focused on the values I learned from my family, my culture, or advertisers speaking through my screens. My daydreams are ignorant of the challenges that I will meet in a changing world. They are naive about the ways my personality will complicate and frustrate their golden visions. And they don’t come from my heart. So, they never work out in real life.

The dreams that arise in the night, however, steer me through ever-changing circumstances. They are brutally honest about my faults. Yet they also offer compassionate encouragement in my journey toward wholeness.

I am learning to read the language of my dreams. That language is as personal as the verbal shorthand my wife and I have developed over half a century together. It is as universal as a wedding feast. You will never dream about the house that I grew up in, nor I yours. But either of them may point to whatever we mean by Ithaca or Eden or home.

I have learned that the person who wears my face in most of my dreams is usually the least trustworthy character. He is my ego—the person I think I am. The other characters—birds, animals, automobiles, witches, gnomes, my first boss, my third-grade teacher, my mother and father—are all there to help me face what life requires of me right now. My dreams are wiser than all the self-help books and

academic philosophies I have ever read.

I have noticed, as Carl Jung did, that some characters appear over and over again. Since I am a cisgender man, my soul usually appears as a woman. She may be attractive or ugly, furious or comforting, depending on how my ego relates to her. I also often meet a man who is my shadow—those parts of my personality that I do not acknowledge or accept. In some dreams he may want to kill me. In others, he may be someone I despise—or look up to, because there is such a thing as a “golden shadow,” positive aspects of myself that I don’t own in my waking life.

Listening to my dreams has convinced me that I am walking the road of life with a teacher who speaks only in parables. These parables are often painful. In my dream I may see a politician I despise. I cringe when I realize, in the morning, that I am that man. Then, I feel a kind of relief as self-righteousness and shame fall away and I hear the good news that all of me is accepted in some deep way.

The next night, people gather at tables in a church basement. I see familiar faces. Others are strangers who look like they were dragged in off the street. Someone who died a decade ago comes out of the kitchen wiping her hands on a towel and embraces me, and whatever pain there was between us disappears.

As I go to sleep, I often think of Ebenezer Scrooge. Dickens sends him three spirits on the night before Christmas. To the last and most frightening, Scrooge says, “As I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart.” I think I know what he means.

Roger Talbott
Jackson Heights, NY

A witch curses a beautiful princess, and she falls into an enchanted sleep. Various princes, determined to break the spell, try to break through the thorny hedge surrounding her castle but are trapped and die. Finally, a hundred years have passed. Another prince arrives. There is nothing special about him, but he has come at the right time. When he pushes through the thicket, it parts to let him pass into the castle where, in the highest tower, he finds the sleeping princess. He kisses her and the spell is broken.

“Sleeping Beauty” was never my kind of story when I was young. This was not because of any precocious feminist awareness about the creepiness of princes lurking about kissing unconscious people. I’m Gen X, and like many women my age I came to concepts like consent and self-protection a little late. Some of the stories I liked were as problematic as “Sleeping Beauty”—but they were stories where women got to do interesting things. I wanted to be a protagonist, not a prize. And I certainly didn’t want to be helpless or vulnerable.

When I was 17, I attended my first frat party. An acquaintance noticed a guy following me around and whispered that I should be careful, because he had a reputation for assaulting women. The people who had driven me to the party had disappeared, and I wasn’t prepared to walk miles through town at 2 a.m. but didn’t want to be alone with the predator either. So I crawled behind the giant boxy television in the corner, then stayed awake until morning came and I could walk back to campus.

Many women have experienced far worse in similar situations, and I experienced worse myself later in life. That time I happened to be lucky, but the truth is that no matter how adventurous we are, boldly claiming our right to be protagonists in our own stories, we are still vulnerable as women in a patriarchal society. Most women, at a young age, learn to carry their keys between their knuckles. We establish code words with friends and allies. People of color and LGBTQ people develop parallel methods of vigilance. Relaxation can compound vulnerability. Not everyone can afford the luxury of sleep.

The term *woke* comes from African American Vernacular English and means “alert to racial injustice.” In recent years, right-wing activists have rolled out a scare campaign against “woke ideology.” Of course, it serves the ends of anti-Black racism to subvert the word’s meaning and twist it into something negative. Oppressors don’t want their victims shaping words and their meanings, and they certainly don’t want them awake and aware.

While I can’t imagine what it’s like to maintain vigilance against unremitting racism, I do know the exhaustion of being a woman in rape culture and being ethnically Jewish at a time of rising antisemitic hate. So the vulnerability of sleep takes on a double signification. On the one hand, it is terrifying. It’s like the Weeping Angels in *Doctor Who*: if you look away even for a second, they attack. But it also seems like the ultimate luxury, to be able to relax your vigilance and let unconsciousness

embrace you, sinking into the many dream worlds of the night.

Predators who drug women want their victims helpless. Fascist book-banning movements want a docile and unaware society. Philosophers from Plato to Kant to Marx have used metaphors of awakening to speak of moral and intellectual awareness. Jesus tells his followers to remain alert, because we “never know the day or the hour,” and asks his disciples to stay awake with him. But staying awake can be agonizing.

Sometimes I think about the princess, asleep in her castle, rapt in visions that belong to her alone. I imagine brambles growing higher. All the princes are caught on the thorns. No one bothers Sleeping Beauty. She just gets to keep on resting.

Rebecca Bratten Weiss
Hopedale, OH

As a child, my first exposure to the big questions, to theology, to metaphysics, came in my sleep. During my slumber, I recall seeing a deep, stark, inkwell-black abyss. In the midst of that blackness, brightly colored children’s refrigerator magnet alphabet letters danced. After this dream I began to wonder if—maybe even believe that—this life is all there is. Upon death, I thought, there is just blackness (and brightly colored dancing letters).

As a youth in Burns Flat, Oklahoma, I ran down the middle of the street in my sleep, yelling, “The wolves are chasing me! The wolves are chasing me!” Back in Pennsylvania, I urinated in the trash can, believing it to be the toilet, in my sleep. I attempted a nocturnal escape in my sleep, valiantly trying to climb out the second-story bedroom window of the house. As an adult, I can sleep anywhere—at a stop sign, a red light, and especially a movie theater (those are expensive naps). I am so good at sleeping anywhere that my efforts earned a diagnosis, narcolepsy.

The Hebrew Bible includes a few unique individual experiences brought about under the stars. Sleep is the catalyst through which we learn about multi-eyed flying beings. The sacred text uses the art of story via sleep to educate the reader about dragons and winged lions, bears eating barbeque, a four-headed leopard, and speaking animal horns.

During sleep, our body miraculously fixes its physiological self. Our conscious and subconscious dance and bring about wonderment; our gray matter grows and improves our focus upon waking. The Dalai Lama calls sleep the best meditation. Buechner called it surrender. If we are intentional about that surrender, we will be better for it.

Ricky Higby
Wetumpka, AL

I had come to grief at drama school, where I had hoped to develop a talent for acting. It was my first year after college, and owing to various kinds of stress, I found myself unable to finish the term and dropped out. That summer I knocked around a bit and in the fall, I fell prey to serious insomnia. Three days was the maximum period I went without sleep. Compared to Sylvia Plath's 14, it was a drop in the bucket. But it sufficed.

After the initial, appalling three days, sleep came intermittently, with molasses-like slowness, as desire struggled against resistance into the early morning hours. There were books on the bedside table. I would turn on the light, thumb through a few pages, lose concentration, turn off the light, lie in the dark, turn on the light, turn it off again.

There is a tincture of madness in insomnia. Did I know it? Perhaps. Beneath the frozen surface of unmoving time, an inkling of the underlying chaos and conflict survives. But introspection was not part of the sheer white blanket of abstraction that engulfed me, an abstraction symbolized by the face of a clock implacable in denial, not to be moved by prayer or threat.

Help did not come from the hills, as the psalm has it; rather, it was channeled through a book, Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace*. Weil is unshakable in her admiration for the Greeks and her contempt for the Romans. She studied classical Greek to read Plato and the New Testament. The foreign alphabet, she observed, has a secondary value: it focuses the mind. This seemed promising. But why Greek? Why not Russian?

In my boarding school there had been a French teacher who was Russian, an elderly spinster who had more character, to my mind, than anyone else at the school. I did

not take her French class, but I did take a class in Russian, on special offer for eligible students. We didn't learn much in the way of grammar, just the accusative case in the feminine gender plus some songs, stories, and excerpts from the great novels.

So it was that I enrolled in a Russian class at Hunter College in New York, and what do you know, the foreign alphabet did its work. I began to sleep normally and put the unhappy interlude behind me. Moreover, I had found a direction: the following fall I matriculated in the Slavic Department at Columbia. The academic path was to work out no better than the acting career had—overwhelmed by family problems, I flunked my comprehensives. But I also won a prize for translation, so all was not lost.

As time went by and my life began to take a more stable course, the translation of Russian poetry and drama became an important part of it. As did sleep, which I came to enjoy the way some people enjoy chocolate. But the distant echo of that insomniac period haunts me from time to time, when I read of others who have experienced a similar outrage to the psyche. To lose what Shakespeare calls the "chief nourisher in life's feast" is a loss as deep as a well.

Betsy Hulick
New York, NY

During the months my baby daughter lay in an intensive care unit bassinet dying, I would lie on the plastic and foam hospital couch in her room and grasp around for my most comforting memory, something to hold close to my chest while she lay encased in plastic and tubing. It was always the feeling of cotton lightly falling in a kind of sigh over my body, curled in my bed half asleep. The sound of my mother walking quietly into my room, straightening the blankets, covering me up.

In the neonatal, the pediatric, and finally the cardiovascular ICUs, Kit was just a baby, too young to be covered, but they placed covers beneath her. Brightly colored, cartoon charactered, hand crocheted or knitted, all donated for the babies in critical condition. With my other four children, I had never placed a blanket in a crib—too risky—but I trusted that a blanket was the least of her dangers. When she died, they sent us home with stacks of them, nearly every blanket her body had ever rested on. I saved every single one.

A year and a half later, I am up in the middle of the night with Kit's baby brother she never met. He doesn't sleep well, and if I'm honest, I'm grateful for it. Grateful for those hours sitting holding him like the hours I sat and held her. Except I can lay him back in his crib, at home, without the aid of two nurses to adjust a feeding tube, breathing tube, wires, and monitors. I can pick him up when I choose, lay him down as I choose. I try, one night, to sleep with him next to me in bed, but I can't. It's too similar, so very close to the night I spent curled around Kit, who never woke up at the end, just drifted from sleep to deeper sleep.

She was diagnosed with her heart condition—tetralogy of Fallot with major aortopulmonary collateral arteries—at the 20-week anatomy ultrasound. Our other four children had never had so much as an ear infection; I told nurses that often. I told that to everyone who would listen. Kit had a random genetic deletion—DiGeorge or 22q11.2 deletion syndrome—that could happen to anyone. It actually does happen to one in 2,000. But then the heart condition and the MAPCAs were rarer. I did the math: she was one in 44,000, but she had a 75 percent chance of survival in the first year.

After the diagnosis, I begged God for signs. I wanted to know if she would die. Gideon set out the fleece, a covering, and God answered. I prayed, and I studied, and still I didn't know. Each week we drove the hour to the large city hospital, where we met with doctors and had high-risk ultrasounds. The final week before her scheduled induction, I toured the CICU and fainted at the sight of the babies in their machinery. God gave me no answer. Christ's blood covers our sins. Love covers all offenses. I covered my face with my hands.

Every week at church, I wept. I felt exposed in my grief, like it showed exactly how small my faith was. I did not expect her to survive. The women at church told me they were covering us in prayer. Another sigh, a whisper over the body, the laying on of hands.

In the night, after I lay my son in the crib, I cover up each of my surviving daughters, moving quietly in the dim glow of night-lights. My youngest daughter, the one who was only two when Kit died, sleeps with four covers, thin layers she likes in order: the unicorn blanket from my mother, the stiff quilt from my grandmother, the avocado-print fleece from my mother-in-law, and finally a pink crocheted blanket that was Kit's. My grandmother has not met three of my children, and my mother-in-law stopped speaking to her son after our grief uncovered years of hurt he couldn't

keep buried any longer. I don’t know who made Kit’s blanket.

This one barely touched her, folded neatly at the end of the adult-sized hospital bed the nurses had rolled in for us to sleep together on her final night. The other parents, the doctors, and the nurses, closed the doors to every room in the unit and stood in silence as the beds were exchanged and Kit was gently moved.

The next day, when she left us, it felt like a sigh, like a hand removed from the shoulder.

My husband and I both held her, and we were too hot under the hospital covers they’d placed between us and her, the ones they held up to hide our view of the life support lines as they snapped them. A quick, plastic snap. The nurses dimmed the lights to cover us in darkness, and we covered Kit in tears and in song.

With the baby in bed and the covers tucked tight around the bodies of my children, I slip back under my covers. Kit’s picture is next to my bed; I look at her face as often as I look at the faces of my other children, though hers is static, unchanging, beneath a blanket of time that I wish I could lift.

Renee Emerson
St. Charles, MO