

how rest connects us to
happiness, healing, and hope



Ken Wyttsma

the
sleep
you're longing for

how rest connects us to
happiness, healing, and hope

Ken Wytsma



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contents

Introduction: My Journey Through Sleepless Nights 1

PART 1 Framing Sleep

1. A History of Sleep 15

✿ *Interlude: The History of Two Sleeps* 28

2. Why Modern Life Makes Sleep So Hard 32

3. What Happens When We Sleep 49

✿ *Interlude: Dream Tigers and a Culture of Sleep* 60

PART 2 The Spirituality of Sleep

4. Resting in Happiness 65

5. Sleep and Finding Peace 80

6. Sleep Is a Divine Right 92

7. Sleep and Our Creative Spirit 104

PART 3 Sleep and Mental Health

- 8. Why We Can't Rest 121
- ☀ *Interlude: Sleep-Related Dos and Don'ts* 135
- 9. Sleep and the Wounded Mind 138
- 10. When the World Sleeps Without You 150

PART 4 Recovering Your Birthright to Good Sleep

- 11. Repatterning Our Minds 165
- 12. How We Think About Solving Sleep 183
- ☀ *Interlude: Essentials for Improving Sleep Quality* 193
- 13. Ten Strategies for Getting the Sleep You Long For 199

Conclusion: A Good Night's Rest 215

Acknowledgments 219

Appendix A: Sleep Product Recommendations 221

Appendix B: Books for Further Study 225

Notes 229

introduction

my journey through sleepless nights

The sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his [bed]room.

—Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer

I've got a friend named Leroy. Leroy can fall asleep in five minutes, no matter the situation. We have traveled the world together, from fun family vacations in Italy and Spain to intense conferences and heated debates focused on race and racism in America. It doesn't matter what the occasion or the stressor he experiences throughout the day; Leroy sleeps as if he were hardwired for it.

The data shows that Leroy is increasingly the exception. In the United States, over seventy million people suffer from chronic sleep disorders, with roughly one in three adults regularly getting less than seven hours of sleep per night, and

nearly one in five reporting trouble either falling or staying asleep most days.¹ I am one of those people.

I think my initial sleep challenges began when I was ten. My first issue was going to bed every night terrified that there were snakes under my bed (which, obviously, there were not). I would run the length of the hallway and dive under the covers to avoid getting anywhere near the dark threat underneath. My second issue arose from a film produced in the Cold War era that ended with a dramatic nuclear explosion that swept away the characters in a sudden, world-ending blast. Each night, thereafter, I found myself lying in bed looking out my window, worried that a red flash followed by a massive mushroom cloud would suddenly appear and I'd be instantaneously vaporized. This, of course, was accompanied by existential thoughts in my already overactive mind about life, death, and the capricious nature of human existence.

My chronic sleep problems, however, began a couple years later when I worked as a paperboy for *The Washington Post*. My father, a Dutch immigrant with a work ethic that would make John Calvin jealous, insisted I have a job from age eight onward. When I was twelve, I picked up a daily paper route in the northern Virginia suburb of Washington, DC, where we lived. It included well over 140 homes, with an even larger distribution on Sundays. My mornings began at four o'clock. After folding the papers and getting them stuffed into a burlap bag with large pouches, I rode my bike through the cul-de-sacs of our neighborhood, throwing papers into the darkness and onto the front steps of homes.

It would often be after six o'clock when I returned home, climbed the stairs to my bedroom, and fell—exhausted—back into bed. When it was time for school, my mom would come

to wake me. After three or four tries, she would finally pull the covers off my bed and force me to get up. I hated mornings and getting out of bed then and still do to this day.

I didn't realize it then, but the brain creates associations and makes patterns that linger throughout our lives. Like many, I remain hyperalert and can't sleep if I have an early-morning flight and know that I have to get up at four o'clock.

Whether it was caused by poor sleep habits, fear, or frequently interrupted sleep, I have struggled to get rest most of my life. Sleep has been a constant battle for as long as I can remember.

An Expert on Sleeplessness

It's odd to become an expert (sort of) by failing at something. Yet that is what I've become. I'm quite knowledgeable about all the ways one can lose sleep and the wide-ranging effects it can have on one's life.

In addition to my overactive mind, a hopelessly philosophical bent, and the poor sleep routines that I developed as a child, life has thrown plenty of curveballs my way that have negatively affected my sleep over the years. Here are a few examples, some of which you might relate to:

- We have four kids (need I say more?), and none of them were good sleepers as infants (as the memoirist Leo Burke humorously wrote, "People who say they sleep like a baby usually don't have one").
- My spouse and bed partner has chronic back pain, which causes her to toss and turn. She sometimes travels in her sleep, migrating to my side of the bed and causing me to wake up from being overheated.

- I'm a hot sleeper in general and easily overheat at night if I don't get the ratio of blanket weight to room temperature just right.
- I suffer from seasonal affective disorder, which is amplified by gray Portland winters and disrupts daily routines and circadian rhythms.
- I spent a decade traveling internationally and managing chronic jet lag.
- I have sleep apnea.

I recognize that this list is pretty typical. The less typical contributors to my struggle with sleep have been a decade of chronic illness and a subsequent dependence on sleep medication, which started with a specific work trip in 2010.

I was directing a creative team for World Relief when the 2010 Haiti earthquake hit. I traveled there just weeks after the disaster as part of a response and strategy team. We documented stories, gathered imagery, and connected with local staff. The devastation was overwhelming—over two hundred thousand lives lost, homes flattened, and entire communities living without sanitation or shelter. In the middle of it, I got sick. Parasites, they said at first. But what began as a short-term illness became something else entirely.

The infection triggered Crohn's disease, a chronic condition that went undiagnosed for the next decade, leaving me without answers as to why my body hurt so much. I kept working, pushing, trying to live out the justice-driven calling I'd preached for years: *Give your life away*. But something was fraying at the edges. I wasn't bouncing back anymore. My mind was still running at full speed, but my body couldn't keep up.

I had to learn—slowly, painfully—that giving your life away doesn't mean ignoring the life you're living. Service

disconnected from rest will eventually reduce to performance, not passion. What I needed, underneath all of it, wasn't just energy. I needed rest that restored me. Not simply sleep that passed the hours but sleep that healed the wounds I didn't yet have words for.

In those years of uncertainty, I did what many of us do: I tried to keep going. I kept writing, teaching, traveling, and pushing through. When the nights grew unbearable, I turned to sleep aids—first the gentle kind, then nightly doses of Ambien—just to make it through.

That season taught me just how fragile and essential sleep really is. It also showed me how complex the relationship between our bodies, minds, and rest can be. This book is, in part, a response to that journey, a deeper dive into sleep as something that shapes (and is shaped by) our culture, health, and humanity.

I once told someone that Ambien saved my life. I don't know whether I would have made it through what seemed like an impossibly difficult season of anxiety and depression without it, but eventually the remedy became the thing that needed a remedy. My Ambien usage led to a strong dependence and ultimately an addiction following a traumatic season of life. It started as a sleep aid but then became an unsustainable physical and psychological necessity. As is often said about addiction: *It worked until it didn't*. I eventually had to seek professional treatment for my Ambien addiction, help for which I am forever grateful. All of my sleep problems, culminating in multiple years of disastrous insomnia and panic around sleeplessness, led me to begin thinking more deeply about sleep, its purpose, and how it is connected to the things that hold deeper meaning in our lives: health, family, a life of service, and happiness.

While dealing with the most intense sleep issues of that period, I saw a psychologist, Babak Govan, who has a PhD in clinical psychology with an emphasis on insomnia and sleep. His advice and insights have had a profound impact on the way I think about and relate to sleep. He introduced me to *sleep hygiene*—the basic habits of what makes our animal brains feel safe, secure, and able to sleep—and best-practice coping mechanisms for sleeplessness rather than the default thrashing around in bed. He also pushed a mantra into my head about life change. He repeated, “Make a plan . . . work the plan,” at least a dozen times on each phone call. Clear directions matter. The compass, as it were, has always been more valuable than how fast we’re going.

I didn’t realize it then, but the mantra of slowing down and building a plan, along with the tools he provided, were empowering and guilt relieving.

There is a huge need for encouraging and focused help for sleep problems. It is a positive sign that more is being written about sleep and that a greater number of people are prioritizing it. I sometimes wonder why sleep wasn’t highlighted as important for our health and well-being when I was growing up. I think a few things are at issue.

The first is language. Poor sleep undermines health. Pick up almost any book or article on sleep, and you’ll see related health issues listed in plain terms: heart disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, dementia, and more. These are serious, life-altering consequences exacerbated by lack of sleep, yet we don’t often take the connection seriously. This isn’t because we don’t care, but because the language doesn’t make the danger feel real. Language matters, and it’s easy to sail past the diseases related to sleep, thinking, *That’ll never happen to me.*

High blood pressure is known as the silent killer. In other words, it operates in the background and slowly degrades the cardiovascular system to the point that many people die of aneurysms, heart attacks, or other health issues. It's language that connects.

Poor sleep works against our health in much the same way. It is also a silent killer, and we should be talking about it as such. If we find the right language for talking about the importance of sleep, maybe the health risks would stick in our minds and prompt us to push against the false bravado that often comes with purposeful overwork in Western culture. Early in my marriage, I fell victim to the pride of thinking I didn't need sleep. I bought into the early 2000s tech culture ideal that needing only five hours of sleep a night proved your worth and superiority. I now know those efforts were hurting my health and annoying my coworkers rather than making me more effective as a leader. We need to connect poor sleep to language that sticks in our minds and compels us to prioritize it.

Second, many of us see sleep as an isolated aspect of human life, one that's disconnected from more meaningful pursuits. However, sleep is more than a health metric to be optimized. Sleep sits at the intersection of our emotional lives, our sense of purpose, and our relationships. Happiness, justice, creativity, even love, are not detached from how we sleep. They are deeply entangled with our rest. We sleep better when we feel safe, joyful, and connected. And when we are truly rested, we move through the world with more clarity, compassion, and confidence.

When sleep really unraveled for me, I wanted to study everything about it. I have worked my way through a lot of books on sleep and rest. Many were prescriptive and had so

much negative information that it felt overwhelming. For me, these books didn't boost my motivation but rather killed it. They often left me feeling pressure or guilt—like I was somehow failing and needed to do more. It's not the fault of those books; it's just hard for someone exhausted by sleep challenges to have new routines and work placed on their shoulders.

I loved history books focused on sleep and the night because they helped me feel like part of a larger story. But few books made a connection between personal struggle, cultural pressure, and the long history of how we rest. It was only when I started looking beyond advice on *how* to sleep that bigger themes about the way we rest, recover, and reset helped me gain clarity.

This book comes out of my quest for rest that's more than just functional. I've learned that sleep is deeply tied to how we live, what we believe, how we love, and whether or not we feel safe in the world. It's not just an obligation we have to our bodies at night but an integral part of all that we value in our daytimes.

When I reached rock bottom, baby steps were what I wanted. Grace was what I longed for. I needed to see everything in a positive, empowering light. I needed empathy and understanding to make me feel I wasn't alone, wasn't broken. I needed space to make a plan and then to work the plan, as Dr. Govan had advised. I needed hope that things could get better and that I could trust my body to repattern itself for sleep.

Empowerment and grace. History, context, and understanding. Stories of failure and success. That is what I hope this book can provide for you. I want to offer what I've learned from my experiences in a way that feels safe, relatable, and hopeful. At the end of the day, my goal is to help people reclaim restful sleep in a disrupted and broken world. It's a

personal journey, yet also a universal, cultural, and historical one. If your story is anything like mine, you may also have to examine and change some of your beliefs and practices before you can overcome your obstacles to restful sleep.

Go to Bed with a Smile on Your Face

When my four daughters were young, I would tuck them into bed with the charge, “Go to bed with a smile on your face!” I believed in the psychosomatic principle that if they actually put smiles on their faces, it would allay any stresses from the day and trigger feelings of gratitude and joy in their hearts—hopefully leading them to a night of sweet dreams and peaceful sleep.

I have now begun to think there is something deeper to this. *Go to bed with a smile on your face*. It draws from some of what I’ve learned through mindfulness practices. It echoes much of what we were taught to say in our nightly prayers as children. And it’s rooted in a deeper principle: The rest we are about to enter stems from the peace we’ve cultivated in our minds and the gratitude we’ve celebrated in our hearts. Sleep, in this way, prepares us for the pursuits that will matter to us tomorrow, once we are restored.

Not all of us can be like my friend Leroy and fall asleep the second our head hits the pillow. I’m not writing this book because I have solved or mastered sleep but because I want to deflate guilt and self-recrimination, help instill a sense of hope, and link our pursuit of sleep to the deeper pursuits of happiness and meaning we are hardwired for.

Many of us are dealing with hard stuff: clinical diagnoses of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic illness, sleep disorders, or simply too much stress. Many of us have

jobs or family responsibilities that don't leave much space for quality sleep. Many of us feel hopeless about finding consistent rest. I don't name these lightly, because I personally know the depths of pain, helplessness, and loneliness you might be feeling.

We can, however, patiently make a plan and work the plan.

We can find spaces and practices that empower us by centering grace and hope.

We can find the language and set the intention to make our focus on sleep concurrent with our pursuit of happiness, service, and creativity.

We can rewire our brains and repattern ourselves for gratitude.

We *can* choose to go to bed with a smile on our face.

Where We're Headed

In this book, we will explore our subject in four parts:

- Part 1 looks at the history of sleep and frames our understanding of the broader topic to help us grasp the current cultural moment as it relates to sleep.
- Part 2 explores the connections sleep has to the things that hold deeper meaning in our lives and pursuits.
- Part 3 charts how modern life disrupts our fundamental need for sleep through anxiety, trauma, and isolation. From the rise of mental health struggles to the biological impact of fear on our bodies, this section examines how psychological and social challenges hijack our ability to rest.
- Part 4 begins to lay a framework for some grace-based and practical things we can do to prioritize and pursue

healthier sleep habits. The good news is that we can do *plenty* of things right now to affect our sleep and help navigate the nighttime hours. There are best practices for addressing the brain, body, mind, and spirit.

Each part will begin with a poem by my daughter, Esther Wytsma, who works in the arts. Thanks for lending your talent, kiddo; your words always connect with me.

I have also included brief interludes between some of the chapters to share lists, ideas, or brief discussions. You will also recognize the recurring theme of how sleep is intertwined with so much of life.

Sleep is not merely a biological necessity; it's a deeply spiritual, emotional, and communal act that serves as a gateway to flourishing, peace, and the good life. You deserve to sleep better. Hopefully, this book can help you along the way.



PART 1

framing sleep

Did no one tell you?
When they raised you with the fear of failure
When they told you to find your purpose
Did they leave it out?
When they drove you to production
When they taught you to squeeze the marrow out of life
How could they have failed to mention
That in order to achieve
You first must sleep?

1

a history of sleep

I put my face away from the moonlight into the shadow,
but I could not sleep and lay awake thinking about it.

—Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*

I love history. I mean, *really* love it. I'm the sort of person who has always needed to research and understand the “why” of things—and to me, history is the ultimate “why.” It helps us grasp the way things are by explaining the way they used to be.

After I wrestled with sleep for years and watched it wear my body down, it seemed only natural that I should do what I always do when I want to know the why of something important to me. I began a quest to devour everything I could on the subject, to get at the story and wrap my mind fully around it.

Studying history allows us to look beneath the surface and perceive the turning points in the human story, like a lens through which we can view things that are otherwise hidden.

What, then, can we learn when we place that lens on the history of sleep? Because here's the thing: Sleep isn't new, nor are people's sleep woes. Every human sleeps, and most have wrestled with sleep issues. It's one of the few truly universal experiences, right up there with birth, death, gravity, and the Seattle Mariners not winning the World Series. And like many things we take for granted, sleep has a surprisingly interesting and complex history.

Sleep Through Time and Culture

Across history, sleep has always been a part of the human story, but our experiences vary. How we rest—how long, where, and with whom—has been shaped by everything from fire, fear, and weather to architecture, spirituality, and zoning regulations. The more we look backward, the more we begin to see that many of the things we think of as modern sleep “problems” are actually ancient themes reappearing in new forms.

Imagine early humans preparing for bed some ten thousand years ago. A fire crackles in the center of the cave or inside a ring of stones in a small glade. Around it, the tribe settles. Some people lie on animal hides or the bare earth. Others stay awake. After all, the fire isn't just for warmth but to serve as a shield against the unknown dangers lurking in the darkness. The threats facing the tribe are real—predators and rival bands of humans roam the shadows, looking for an opportunity to strike.

When humans began settling into agrarian life, domestic space changed, and so did the way people slept. The earliest large Neolithic houses we know well, such as those at Çatalhöyük in modern-day Turkey, had raised platforms used for sitting during the day and for sleeping at night.¹ These early

beds also offered comfort and heat, allowing them to eventually evolve into symbols of security.²

Fast forward to 3000 BCE. In Egypt the pyramids were rising, and sleep was no longer just physical but metaphysical. The ancient Egyptians believed that the *ba*, the soul, left the body during sleep and communed with the underworld until dawn. In this view, every night was like a miniature death, and every morning brought resurrection. Hence, sleep perfectly reflected the Egyptian reverence of life cycles, with temporal existence serving as preparation for the afterlife.³

This time period is also when we get our first glimpses into the cultural understanding of dreams. The dream book of the famous pharaoh Ramses II provides one of the earliest insights into dream interpretation. Recorded in the thirteenth century BCE, the text categorizes dreams as either good omens or ominous portents of danger ahead.⁴ While the Egyptians were probably not the first culture to view sleep in spiritual terms, they were the first to strongly associate sleep, death, and dreams with their spiritual beliefs. For premodern societies that did not understand the actual science of sleep, their cultural focus when it came to interpreting it was overwhelmingly on dreams.

Meanwhile, east of Egypt, along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the people of Mesopotamia were also weaving sleep into their myths. This is best exemplified by the Sumerian great flood myth. In this story, the god Enlil, vexed by the growing number of humans and the increasing amount of noise they were making on earth, sent enormous tidal waters to wipe them out.⁵ This, he conjectured, was the best way for him to get a proper night's sleep.⁶

Centuries later the ancient Greeks strove to intellectualize sleep in an unprecedented way.⁷ In Homer's *Odyssey*, poor

Odysseus spends ten years trying to make his way home to Ithaca after the Trojan War. Throughout the narrative, sleep is treated as both a reward and a threat. In one instance, the sirens attempt to lull Odysseus and his companions into sleep so that their ship crashes on the rocks. Meanwhile, their ability to rest is constantly treated as a reward, something they can fully indulge in only once they have returned safely home.

A concern for sleep was everywhere in Greek culture. They even had deities associated with the night. Some of the most notable included Hypnos, the god of sleep, and Thanatos, the god of death. As the poet Hesiod relates in his *Theogony*, the two are brothers, serving as a symbolic reminder that sleep is close to death.⁸ Even the word *cemetery* in ancient Greek derives from a verb, *koiman*, that literally translates as “to put to sleep.”⁹ Many other Greek poets, dramatists, painters, and writers would go on to debate and theorize on this connection.

The Romans followed Greek thinking in many things, but they also innovated. In the sphere of sleep, they gave us the first real cases of “urban insomnia,” as many of their cities were large and crowded. They also built bedrooms (*cubicula*), filled them with feather-stuffed mattresses, and established separate beds for sleeping, dining, and dying.

Wealthy Romans had the leisure time to take a post-meal nap and even ingest sleep aids obtained from distant lands.¹⁰ But for most Romans, sleep was neither quiet nor private. Cities were loud. *Insulae*—multistory tenement buildings—housed dozens of families and were typically constructed in rows. As residents tried to sleep, neighbors stomped above, shouts echoed in the streets, and nearby taverns roared late into the night. The modern inability to sleep in the urban jungle found its first expression here.¹¹

The Roman Empire collapsed across much of Europe and the Mediterranean in the fifth century. As this occurred, there was a swift process of de-urbanization. People retreated to the countryside to produce food and sustain themselves. Simultaneously, the old systems of legionaries providing law and order collapsed and the night became a more precarious time. Anxiety became a fresh issue when a person tried to sleep. Today we go to bed at night generally assuming safety is ensured. For medieval people after the fall of Rome, this was no longer the case.¹²

In this period, wealthy homes had dedicated bedrooms with furniture and curtains, but the poor often slept in shacks with communal rooms. This was common not just for families but for strangers staying at inns and taverns, who often had to share beds. As one might expect, all this cohabitation made a perfect breeding ground for disease.

Similarly, in medieval Europe darkness was still associated with danger and temptation. Only this time, with the rise of Christianity, it was a specific demon, the Devil, thought to be working through the night to drive innocent Christians to sin. The first curfews had nothing to do with physical safety. They were about morality; foraying out late meant you might be robbed of your soul, not just your purse.

In the Christian mystical tradition, sleep symbolizes the soul's surrender to God. Meister Eckhart, a fourteenth-century German mystic, wrote, "The soul that is united to God rests in God with a simple, clear, and unselfish repose. Sleep is the image of this rest."¹³ For Eckhart and other mystics, sleep mirrored the quiet stillness of contemplating the presence of God.

And why not? We've long feared the night—not just for what it hides, but for what it awakens in us. By the Renaissance, fear of the dark had begun to take on a new shape,

drawing from older medieval superstitions but growing in psychological precision. It was during this period that the term *witching hour* took hold in European folklore, typically marking the hours between midnight and 3:00 a.m., when supernatural forces were believed to move most freely. Some traced the witching hour to midnight, the liminal threshold when one day gives way to the next. Others named 3:00 a.m. the devil's hour, in contrast to the 3:00 p.m. hour of Christ's death, making it, in a sense, its spiritual inverse.

The church, ever attentive to cosmology and time, reinforced this view. Witches, it was believed, huddled in covens at night and summoned powers under cover of darkness. Fear became a form of control—both cosmic and civic. It wasn't just witches that haunted the imagination but an entire cast of figures: hobgoblins, faeries, imps, and spirits. Darkness, especially after midnight, was imagined as a tear in the fabric of daylight logic, a time when the unseen slipped through the seams and could profoundly disrupt someone's nighttime peace.

Across continents and centuries, sleep has always been one of our deepest human needs, but it remains one of our most fragile. We see in sleep the echoes of fear and faith, of ritual and resilience. The way people slept tells us about how they lived, as well as what they longed for. That longing remains. For silence. For safety. For rest. If you have ever felt like you are somehow alone in your sleep struggles, take heart. You are part of an ancient story.

The Colonization of Sleep

Before we look at what sleep does inside the body, we need to acknowledge what the world has done to sleep.



Figure 1.1. Illustration of a *kang* bed at a Chinese inn, circa 1840

The humble bed doesn't usually come to mind as a cultural artifact, yet the way people have slept tells a story of tradition, environment, and belief. In the fifteenth century, sleep was deeply shaped by local climates and customs: thick pelts on packed earth in North America, heated *kang* beds in China (see fig. 1.1), woven mats in Africa. Sleep was wrapped into spiritual rhythms and communal living.

That began to change with European expansion. In pursuit of spices and trade routes, colonial powers divided the world among themselves and imposed control on thriving civilizations.¹⁴ As empires grew, so did profits—and so did control.

At the outbreak of World War I in 1914, colonialism and imperialism had reached their zenith. Roughly 84 percent of the world's landmass was under colonial rule, encompassing

560 million people.¹⁵ The British Empire alone governed over 412 million people, nearly a quarter of the global population.¹⁶ The reach of imperial oversight was almost total, and with it came a radical reshaping of how the world slept.

Colonialism framed itself around two principles, both of which shaped sleep. The first was economic incentive that wanted to maximize production and saw little value in sleep. For stolen Africans who survived the Middle Passage, the trauma of enslavement left lasting psychological scars—including sleep disturbances, insomnia, and emotional distress.¹⁷ In a very different form, industrialists cast the same skeptical eye toward the sleep of immigrants and the poor with the same logic and hunger for production. Thomas Edison was famously quoted in 1914 saying that the future man would “spend less time in bed.”¹⁸ For Edison and many others, sleep was an unfortunate distraction from work.

The second colonial principle was what was called *the civilizing mission*, which presumed European culture and religion to be superior—thus justifying its forced introduction in non-European lands. Where the first principle sought to minimize sleep, the second aimed to shape and establish cultural norms around it.

Therefore, sleep, in the colonial frame of mind, was a frontier to both exploit and shape. Missionaries and industrialists alike equated discipline and productivity with moral worth. Victorian values spread across the globe. European beds and bedding replaced mats and hammocks, and cleanliness, order, and bedtime rituals were held up as virtues. Indigenous sleep traditions were dismissed as uncivilized.

Imperial powers didn't just redraw borders; they redrew bedtimes. Sleep, once oriented around sun and season, became standardized to fit Western notions of order. Colonial

schools, military outposts, and missions imposed strict schedules. The concept of the “proper” sleep environment—one person, in one bed, in one quiet room—was exported around the world as a marker of civilization. Generations of sleep knowledge, passed down through landscape and lineage, were pushed aside almost overnight.¹⁹

British colonizers introduced iron bedsteads, wool blankets, and European bedding to places where mats, hammocks, or floor sleeping had long been the norm due to climate. These replacements weren’t just functional; they were symbolic. The bed became a cultural battleground. Imported linens and pillows drove economic gain back to the home country and came to represent social status and progress, even when they displaced older, more attuned ways of resting. The sleeping preferences of elites became models for the rest of society, pushing traditional practices aside in favor of imported goods that signaled status, wealth, and colonial alignment. Cultural exchange and the exchange of goods flowed both ways. Pajamas, from India, became Victorian sleepwear. Tea, grown on imperial plantations, became Britain’s defining domestic ritual, often sipped in the evening as part of winding down before bed.

Bedtime stories and quiet bedrooms symbolized not just rest but respectability. To this effect, the Victorian era (1837–1901) saw a rise in bedtime reading rituals and fairy tales like those of the Brothers Grimm and stories by Hans Christian Andersen. Disciplined hair combing and hygiene rituals as well as “putting to bed” rituals for dolls also emerged. In fact, porcelain dolls for girls became popular in countries throughout the British Empire, reinforcing the Victorian ideal of womanhood and nurturing habits in young girls. Without always knowing where they came from, we are familiar with and participate in many of these cultural norms today.



Figure 1.2. Four-penny coffin beds at London's Burne Street hostel, 1900

Meanwhile, as the Industrial Revolution emerged, rest for the poor and working class became transactional. In 1880s London, beds could be rented by the hour and were often shared by strangers. Organizations like the Salvation Army ran “penny sit-ups” where, for a single penny, the destitute could sit on a bench alongside others, attempting to sleep upright. A rope would be stretched in front of them, allowing them to slump forward onto it for support. Those with a bit more to spare could pay for a “four-penny coffin”—a wooden box, not unlike an open casket, where they could lie down for the night (see fig. 1.2).²⁰

In New York City, some tenement residents slept on fire escapes, desperate for fresh air on stifling summer nights. For the poor, quality sleep was almost impossible. Sleep had

become a measure of class. A symbol of control. A tool of empire. A challenge for those on the margins. And like so many colonial legacies, its impacts would outlive the empires themselves.

Today, our ideas about sleep still carry the shadows of these histories—who gets to rest, how, and in what conditions. The rhythms of industrial life, the architecture of cities, the language we use about rest: All of it bears traces of colonial design.

As the colonial project spread and morphed, it laid the groundwork for new forms of sleep culture shaped by capitalism and consumerism. In postwar America of the 1950s, this transformation became especially visible. As the economy boomed and new housing construction exploded, the American bedroom was born. For the first time, vast segments of the population had private rooms and the money to fill them. Suburban homes promised quiet streets and restful nights, far from crowded urban centers. Matching bedroom sets, linens, and televisions became symbols of success. Magazines and catalogs presented sleep not as a necessity but as a lifestyle to be curated. Sleep was now something you could do with style.

Advertisements throughout the 1950s and '60s marketed mattresses, nightwear, and even alarm clocks as tools for achieving the good life. Bed sizes were standardized, led by the mattress industry to enable mass production of bedding and furniture. Mattress makers sold rest as respectability. Sleep hygiene, a moral ideal during the Victorian era, now took on a commercial sheen: Better rest meant a more successful life. Yet there was always a class element to this. This new commodification of rest was aimed at the rising middle classes in the post-war Western world. It was not specifically

geared toward people like my grandfather, who immigrated to America. Similarly, expensive smart mattresses today are specifically produced for a certain group who can afford them, while being presented as the “ideal” of modern rest.

At its peak, the colonial project drove a wave of globalization that redefined rest itself. It standardized our thinking and our cultures. Sleep was no longer just something you did; it became something to manage, regulate, and optimize. It was moralized, medicalized, and monetized. In the process, much of the world forgot how to listen to the body’s natural rhythms.

The Ongoing Story of Sleep

When I set out on a quest to study the history of sleep, I thought I’d find something distant, maybe a bit abstract. Instead, I found company. Ironically, 3:00 a.m. is about the time I usually find myself awake and pacing the floors. Evidently, it’s not my witching hour alone. In looking into the history of sleep, I found centuries of people pacing the floor as I do, staring into the darkness, pondering the trials of life, awake instead of sleeping.

I found evidence that what we think of as “normal” sleep today is really just a snapshot, a cultural moment and not a biological mandate. It has been shaped by monarchs and the aristocracy in distant lands and standardized by economic forces for purposes we’ve lost sight of.

It’s also been impactful for me to learn that much about sleep has less to do with culture and finery than natural (animal brain) processes that people have been trying to align with throughout history. The advances of our civilization can offer us a lot, but they sometimes make sleep more complicated

than it was ever meant to be. Finding natural and healthy rhythms of sleep might be more about subtracting complexity from our lives than adding ingenuity. And, of course, we must acknowledge that no two people are exactly alike, and what works for one person might not work for another.

As Dr. Govan once said when I was proudly bragging about all the new sleep technology I was adding and trying out, “You probably have more than enough gadgets already. You just need to align your life.”²¹

The point is that sleep is bigger than me. It’s not just my issue or your issue. It’s a universal thread, woven through every generation and culture, through myth and science, through religion and routine. It’s part of how we’ve survived, connected, and created meaning. Sleep is a nightly pause, but it’s also part of a much deeper and broader human story.

KEY TAKEAWAY 1

Our sleep is part of a broader human story.

INTERLUDE

the history of two sleeps

Today the consensus is that we need one long stretch of uninterrupted sleep to constitute a good night's rest. But if we take a step back in time, we discover that waking up at 2:00 a.m. might not be a symptom to fix but a return to form.

In the early 2000s, historian Roger Ekirch was combing through old legal records in the London archives when he came across a curious detail in a 1697 court document. A young girl named Jane Rowth was giving testimony about her mother's sudden death. In her account, she mentioned that her mother had gone out after her "first sleep." That phrase, presented in such a casual and matter-of-fact manner, sent Ekirch down a historical rabbit hole. He eventually uncovered hundreds of references, scattered across centuries and continents, to a phenomenon that had gone almost entirely missing as modern forms of sleep emerged: biphasic sleep.

In the course of further research, Ekirch uncovered a once-common pattern of sleep featuring two distinct phases separated by a period of quiet wakefulness. In one sixteenth-century German account, a writer noted that the best time to sneak into an

enemy camp was “before midnight and in the first sleep.”¹ English philosopher John Locke once observed, “All men sleep by intervals.”² Across cultures and languages, this split-night rhythm was seen as the norm.

During these wakeful interludes, which often lasted one to two hours, people didn’t lie in bed panicking about being awake. They got up. They stirred the fire. They checked on children or animals. It was also considered an ideal time for prayer and journaling, as well as procreation. Some even visited neighbors to borrow firewood or to share conversation under the stars. The point is that this waking hour wasn’t seen as wasted time. Instead, it was an intimate time, often described in period letters and diaries as tranquil and reflective.

Even more curious is the fact that biphasic sleep still occurs in societies where night remains unaltered by human innovation. Pre-electric light bulb cultures often experience biphasic sleep patterns, with individuals retiring soon after sunset and awakening intermittently throughout the night. Anyone who has raised a two-year-old will know that biphasic sleep is just something you adjust to. In fact, when our family goes on vacation to places where there isn’t a television and we have left behind most of our distractions, we often naturally fall into a biphasic sleep pattern stretching over a longer period.

The Industrial Revolution disrupted this ancient rhythm. With the spread of street lighting and, eventually, electricity in the home, artificial light stretched the day far past sunset. People began going to bed later and trying to sleep through the night in one solid chunk. By the 1920s, the very idea of “first” and “second” sleep had virtually disappeared.

Ekirch argues that it wasn’t just electricity that changed things. Coffeehouses, which surged in popularity during the Enlightenment, also played a major role. Over the course of a few decades,

the combination of bright light and late-night caffeine intake began reshaping people's biological expectations. Sleep became consolidated. The rhythms of the body, which had once flowed like music in two movements, were now reduced to a single, often-stressful refrain.

Nowadays, when we wake in the middle of the night, we don't think, "Oh, I'm between sleeps." We think, "What's wrong with me?" I can't count the number of times when I was at the peak of trying to relearn good sleep patterns and found myself awake in the night feeling like a failure. But the truth is, there's nothing wrong with you. You're simply experiencing what your ancestors did for thousands of years, and everyone is different. This flexible, two-part model might even be biologically encoded in us. Winter months in northern regions, for instance, bring longer nights and naturally encourage segmented rest. Even animals operate this way. Dogs, cats, goats, and deer all sleep in bursts, reinforcing the point that nature doesn't insist on eight uninterrupted hours.

In 1992, Thomas Wehr, former chief of the Clinical Psychobiology Branch at the National Institute of Mental Health, conducted a study in which fifteen healthy men were exposed to extended periods of darkness each night—up to fourteen hours, similar to preindustrial conditions.³ Over time, the majority of participants naturally adopted a segmented sleep pattern: two periods of rest, with a calm hour or two of wakefulness in between. What stood out most about this quiet interlude was its hormonal profile. Wehr found elevated levels of prolactin, a hormone most commonly linked to nursing mothers that produces contentment, during this period. The men weren't agitated by their mid-night waking. They were tranquil. Many of them later described feeling truly awake during the day for the first time in their life.

Like Ekirch, Wehr mourned what has been lost. He suggested that modern humans may have severed a physiological connection

between our dreaming lives and our waking ones, and that this disconnection might help explain our collective erosion of imagination, myth, and emotional renewal.

This connection runs deeper than we realize. Circadian rhythms, the body's internal clock, evolved to sync with the natural light-dark cycle. Early humans slept under the soft, amber glow of firelight, which preserved melatonin and supported natural sleep timing.⁴ In fact, even as recently as preindustrial times, firelight had minimal impact on melatonin suppression, helping to sustain biphasic sleep patterns.⁵ Today's brighter, blue-enriched artificial lights, from phone screens to LED bulbs, disrupt this balance, but morning sunlight can help restore it, realigning us with the ancient rhythms our bodies still remember.

Understanding biphasic sleep doesn't just give us a new historical fact; it offers something gentler. A sense of relief. A reminder that waking at 3:00 a.m. *isn't* always a failure or a flaw. It's something your ancestral body may remember, even if your calendar doesn't. Even if it's a wakeful period you didn't plan for, you can gently accept it as a possible kindness to your body.

Learning about biphasic sleep, or "two sleeps," was a major turning point in my struggle with sleep and the defeating sense of failing at this basic function. Understanding that, for most of human history, waking up in the middle of the night and then returning to sleep was the normal pattern transformed my relationship with the night. The "two sleeps" reframing and the ability to release some of the anxiety around wakefulness was profoundly liberating and marked the beginning of healing for me.