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Opening Extract from...

The Secret Life of Sleep

Written by Kat Duff

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THE
SECRET
LIFE
OF
SLEEP

KAT DUFF



ONE WORLD

A Oneworld Book

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To the worlds within

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One cannot properly describe human life unless
one shows it soaked in the sleep in which it
plunges, which, night after night sweeps round
it as a promontory is encircled by the sea.

—Marcel Proust

Seeing everybody so up all the time made me
think that sleep was becoming pretty obsolete,
so I decided I'd better quickly do
a movie of a person sleeping.

—Andy Warhol

PROLOGUE

Birds do it. Bees do it. Salamanders do it. Even roundworms do it. Giraffes do it standing up. Bats do it hanging upside-down. Sea otters spiral downward like falling leaves. Dolphins do it with one eye open.

To the best of our knowledge, all creatures display some form of sleep behavior, a regular time of quiet when they settle into familiar postures, lose awareness of the outside world, and rest for anywhere from two minutes to twenty hours.¹ The universality of sleep suggests its origins are as old as animal life on earth, an estimated six hundred million years. It also implies that sleep is more than a creature comfort. It is a requirement for life on this planet.

When I was a girl, one night I imagined a world in which we slept only once a year rather than every night. I envisioned hundreds of days pounding out before me like an endless trail of falling dominoes, winding up and over the hills, one day after another without respite. The image filled me with dread—and an enduring appreciation for the gift of sleep.

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What did I like so much about sleep? It is hard to distinguish what I feel now from what I felt more than half a century ago, but I remember taking a secret, fiendish delight in the very act of going to bed because I got to shut out the world and say no to everything in it without getting in trouble. It was the only socially sanctioned escape hatch available to me as a child. The sequence of closings that constituted preparing for sleep—putting my clothes away, saying goodnight, shutting the door, turning off the light, covering myself with blankets, closing my eyes—was a ritualized progression toward my own serene departure, each step another stage of letting go and drifting off from the dock, a further phase in my nightly disappearance.

I had a child's love of privacy and invisibility, which sleep undoubtedly satisfied. But there was more. I began to notice that sleep sometimes surreptitiously changed me. When I stayed up late cramming for tests, literally shaking with a growing panic at my inability to remember everything, I inevitably woke up the next morning ready to take the exam. In time, I came to rely upon sleep's uncanny ability to convert my forgetfulness into intelligence, my shakiness into steadiness.

One night, when I was ten or eleven, I dreamed of pinks and greens next to each other, a combination that struck me as unbelievably beautiful, and still does to this day. When I opened my eyes, I continued to see hues rather than objects. My room was no longer a haphazard assortment of books, clothes, and baseball paraphernalia, but an exquisite interplay of colors and shapes playing off of each other like an orchestral piece. Somehow, sleep evoked a capacity for aesthetic appreciation I had never fully experienced before.

There were other times when I awoke from a dream shot through with love or fury toward someone for no apparent reason. At first the feelings seemed ridiculous, and I tried to shrug them

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off by telling myself it was just a dream. I would often hear that phrase and knew it to mean that something was not real and should be ignored. Sure enough, the feelings usually vanished by the time I stepped onto the school bus. However, there were other times when those seemingly alien emotions stuck with me, and I slowly came to recognize them as true—to me at least. Two of those times are emblazoned into my memory because they signaled enormous changes in my life.

The first happened when I was in secondary school, and I woke from a dream, quivering with rage at my father for reasons unknown to me. I was stunned, confused, and appalled because I admired my father and thought he was the perfect dad. However, in the weeks that followed, I started to notice things I didn't like about him, little things, like the way he dominated the conversation at the dinner table, ignored my brother, and took such pride in his family heritage. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, my idealization of my father faded like a star in a slow-coming dawn.

The second sleep-induced revelation occurred around the same time, when I woke with a feverish sexual desire for a new friend. I had never really considered the possibility of having a sexual life, and the very thought of it, not to mention the experience of it, made my neck and cheeks burn. The urgent press of longing subsided in me as the days passed, but it never went away altogether, even though it was some time before I had the courage to act on it. Whether I liked it or not, my sleep called forth parts of myself I had never known, both clarifying and complicating my life.

When I pondered these experiences, it seemed that my sleeping life was the bigger and more fluid me, and my waking life the smaller, more limited me. One day, paddling out through seaweed into a lake, it occurred to me that our waking selves are like lily pads floating on the surface of our night selves.

It was the insight of an adolescent with time to wonder and

dream. When I grew older and joined the worlds of work and parenting, struggling to find time for everything, I resented wasting precious hours on sleep every night. I viewed my nightly slumber as something like a pit stop in a marathon, a time to pause, recharge, and start again, the way the period at the end of a sentence enables us to stop and take a breath. The sentences were what mattered, not the petty punctuation.

Sleep and waking states are like separate countries with a common border. We cross over twice daily, remembering one world and forgetting the other, inadvertently tracking invisible residues from one into the other. The seemingly unknowable hours we spend in sleep constitute recurring gaps in our waking awareness, and the inescapability of sleep suggests that something important happens during these gaps. It is an occurrence that is so common, so habitual, so ubiquitous, we barely notice. Like the air we breathe, it is something we become aware of only when its quality is deteriorating.

What happens during those missing links between our days? Could these inconspicuous absences shape our lives as surely as the spaces between letters make words readable? My curiosity prompted me to explore that strange phenomenon we call sleep. I began to ask friends, clients, and acquaintances about their sleep, and I quickly found that most people have problems getting the kind or amount they want. Those with physical or psychological problems inevitably slept badly, which makes sense because it is not easy to live with pain, anxiety, or depression in general, not to mention to fall asleep and wake refreshed. What surprised me was the discovery that when the clients I saw as a mental health counselor addressed their sleep problems, their presenting symptoms inevitably became more manageable. Nothing in my training or education as a professional therapist had hinted at that possibility, and it whetted my desire to understand what

happens when we lie down and close our eyes.

Sleep is hard to study because it exists, by definition, outside our conscious awareness. Until the middle of the twentieth century, most scientists believed the brain turns off when we fall asleep, only to turn back on upon waking, something like a bedside lamp. Since there was no way to see, feel, or measure the mind asleep, it was easy to assume—and impossible to refute—that nothing happens. Then in 1953, the year DNA was discovered, Eugene Aserinsky placed electrodes on his eight-year-old son while he slept and determined that his brain waves sped up and his eyes darted around under their lids when he was dreaming. That may seem like a simple observation, and Aserinsky later acknowledged that the association between eye movements and dreaming was virtually “common knowledge,” but the simultaneous presence of an active brain was new.² When Aserinsky and his supervisor, Nathaniel Kleitman, presented their results, it provoked a revolution in scientific thought because it proved that our brains remain active during sleep. Since then, a plethora of new brain-scanning devices have generated a veritable explosion of information elucidating complex and critical processes that occur while we take a break from the outside world. Sleep research has become one of the most diverse and exciting fields of scientific inquiry in the twenty-first century, spawning an abundance of intriguing and conflicting theories.

Of course, dreamers around the world could have told scientists that our minds are active when we sleep; people have been remembering, sharing, and discussing sleep occurrences since the advent of the written word—and no doubt before. It is a different kind of knowledge that has been amassed in the cultural traditions of human life on earth, one that does not necessarily privilege the rationality so valued in the contemporary modernized world but is based on observations made by the multitudes

over millennia. People have watched over the sleep of their young children, adult lovers, and dying parents for thousands of years. Hunters, healers, and mystics have cultivated the skills of traveling between realms in sleeplike states to explore and repair their worlds. Even those who do not particularly value their sleep rely upon it for rejuvenation—and occasional revelation.

However, for many people in this day and age, sleep is neither easy nor readily available. When I first told an acquaintance that I was studying sleep, she whipped her head around, fixed her eyes on mine, and growled: “Sleep! What sleep? My sleep is called Ambien!” She is not alone. The National Sleep Foundation (NSF) reports that 25 percent of Americans take some form of sleep medication every night, and that figure does not include evening drinkers.³ Similarly, in the UK, one in ten people regularly take some form of sleeping pill.⁴ Few of us go easily into slumber without something to smooth the way, be it the late show, a nightcap, a bedtime story, or quick sex. And few can wake up the next morning without some form of caffeine, the second most traded commodity on earth next to oil.⁵ The “wee small hours of the morning while the whole wide world is fast asleep,” as Frank Sinatra crooned in the 1950s, are now lit and roiling with millions of texters, gamers, and midnight emailers. The demands and attractions of our 24/7 global economy are squeezing the hours out of our nights. We are losing the knack—and taste—for rest. Rejuvenating sleep has become as elusive as clean water, dark nights, fresh air, and all the other endangered resources of our natural world.

For many who are desperate for a little more shut-eye, sleep comes with a price tag. A plethora of so-called sleep aids—medications, teas, supplements, eye masks, luxury mattresses, white noise machines, sleep-tracking apps, gentle alarm clocks, and constant positive airway pressure (CPAP) machines promise easy

delivery into and out of the hands of sleep. The sleep industry is booming amidst faltering economies worldwide. We would do well to look at what we are losing before it is too late.

Much has been written about the science of sleep in recent years. However, few have ventured far beyond research labs and treatment clinics to tap into the enormous reservoir of human experience on this planet, most of which rarely makes it into academic articles. That body of knowledge expresses itself in the vast array of cultural practices, rituals, oral teachings, proverbs, and lullabies that people around the world have developed over the millennia to fully inhabit the very sleep we rush to leave behind.

In writing this book, I drew upon every source I could lay my hands on: personal experience, scientific research, literary descriptions, autobiographies, myths, sleep and waking routines across cultures and eras, and spiritual traditions from around the globe. Sometimes the observations dovetailed nicely; at other times, they flagrantly contradicted each other. The conflicts have been especially engaging for me because they challenged my assumptions and stretched my powers of comprehension. The topic of sleep opens a Pandora's box of bigger questions about the nature of consciousness and unconsciousness, remembering and forgetting, body and soul, and reality itself, which cannot be ignored.

The chapters that follow are loosely organized to reflect the trajectory of a night's sleep, from the moment we close our eyes to the outside world and descend into the otherworldly realms of slumber and dreams to the moment we rub the sleep from our eyes and return to the waking world. However, each takes a different angle, drawing upon another distinct body of knowledge to reveal the importance of sleep, our need for it, and our so-human efforts to command, control, and even eliminate it from our lives. If there is a theme that threads through these diverse approaches to understanding sleep, it is that our waking and sleeping lives

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require and inform each other, whether we like it or not. For our waking hours are, as the French novelist Marcel Proust observed, soaked in sleep “as a promontory is encircled by the sea.”

I invite you to join me at the shore, where we can peer into the watery depths, tickle our toes in the waves, and leave the dry land of our days behind.