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Speaks

Essay #25

A MOUNTAIN FOR A PILLOW

The average person spends approximately one third of his life at work, another third at leisure, and the remaining third in sleep (or trying to get to sleep).

Shakespeare wrote of sleep as it should be: "Sleep, that knits up the ravel'd sleeve of care; the death of each day's life, sore labor's bath, balm of hurt minds, great Nature's second course, chief nourisher of life's feast." This is a beautiful description, but to the many who are too tense and burdened to sleep easily, the words are of little help.

So ingrained in our life-style are speed and competitiveness and the fast pace that it is often difficult to fall asleep at night. One scientist named Willoughby even writes that western civilization's outstanding characteristic is anxiety. We seem to spend our days getting wound up, are unable to wind down, and yet wonder why we toss and turn at night.

A.P. Herbert, the British humorist, paints an amusing picture of the insomniac: "It is four o'clock in the morning, surely the worst hour of the entire day. You are wide awake, worried, bearing alone the burdens of the world, in despair about paying your income tax, finding a decent house, getting a better job, impressing your boss. What with the health of your son and the behavior of your daughter, tomorrow's meals and yesterday's school bills, your pitiful head rambles around the troubles and problems, scribbling incoherent lists of things to be done."

Once at a business luncheon this subject arose and one by one each person around the table began to recount his brand of insomnia and how he had tried to cope with it. Finally, one man claimed that he never had such trouble. His technique--he always used a "mountain for a pillow". Upon retiring, he mentally went apart from his day's experiences and imagined himself walking up into a mountain glen, stretching out beside a rushing brook beneath whispering pine trees under a canopy of twinkling stars, taking literally the mountain for a pillow.

When you experience difficulty getting to sleep, what are you using for a pillow? I remember once sleeping all night on my luggage during the Second World War, partly to protect it and partly because there was no place for it on the train. A suitcase is a rotten pillow, yet how often have you carried with you to bed all the concerns and possessions you are confronted with in life? How often do you, figuratively, sleep on your luggage? No wonder so many are restless and fitful. If you must, take office work home with you, but don't put your briefcase under your pillow!

Often we hear the expression, "Let's sleep on it before making a decision." This is a figure of speech, but how many times have you actually slept on some concern and made the problem into a pillow? This is a good way to start the following morning exhausted and unable to make the proper decision. So often we sleep on grudges, enmities, pet peeves and assorted hurts. A cardinal rule of any happy marriage, by the way, is never, never go to sleep with unresolved disputes and hurt feelings between husband and wife.

In ancient times, insomnia was the malady of kings. "On that night the king could not sleep" opens the sixth chapter of Esther. In contemporary times, this is a contagion that affects kings and commoners alike. The old-fashioned tailor would advise, "To keep clothes in good condition, empty the pockets every night." This is still pretty good advice. When undressing for bed, empty your mind of all fear and worry and bitterness and hatred, just as you empty your pockets. Discard all thoughts that are no longer useful, and place all else aside until morning.

I remember a few years ago that a serious student was trying a technique she was working out. She had read of talking to one's body cells and supporting them in their various tasks, and she applied the idea to nighttime meditation. She told the various cell workers to be quiet and rest; she instructed the brain cells, for

example, that they had done their work for the day and that they should now rest in His perfect peace. Naïve as this sounds, it might just work for you as well if you are as sincere as this woman. As Jesus said, we must "become as a little child." Finding that you can't fall asleep, ask yourself if you have actually said "Good-night" to all the cell workers of your body temple.

A verse that speaks volumes is found in the Fifty-Third verse of the Seventh Chapter of John: "And they went, every man into his own house, but Jesus went unto the Mount of Olives." This prospect used to fill me with a sense of the injustice done to Jesus ("The Son of Man has not a place to lay His head"). I imagined his many followers leaving Jesus out in the cold, uninvited, "despised and rejected", making His way up the Mount of Olives. Of course, I was mistaken in my sorrow. Now I can picture the men in their houses twisting and turning on their sleeping mats, rolling and unrolling their cloaks relentlessly, finding no comfort or restful sleep, yet Jesus, with his head on the mountain, resting blissfully in deep slumber. I envision a great symbolism from this scene: Jesus dropped out and separated Himself from the traditional ways of the crowd; in taking the mountain for a pillow He found real peace.

David, in the midst of fear and uncertainty for his life, recorded, "I laid me down and slept, for the Lord sustained me." If only we could attain this consciousness. "Except the Lord build a house, they labor in vain that build it. Except Jehovah build a city, the watchman waketh but in vain."

With the power and strength of the Infinite, we can do all things; without it we can do nothing. All our worrying and stewing will assist us not one little bit. It will instead short-circuit the lines of power. Sleep is a time of recharging and infusing with divine power and can be a miraculous facet of our lives. When we retire we should lay all aside and put ourselves in the hands of the infinite.

In the 127th Psalm we read, "It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest eating the bread of anxious toil; for He gives to His beloved sleep." Another reading of this could be, "for He gives to His beloved in sleep." When we are not working, God is working. When we stop thinking about a problem, the infinite creative process of mind, knowing our needs and desiring to give us the Kingdom, begins to work for us. This is what is meant by "taking a mountain for a pillow". Remember the lines, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help; my help comes from God."

This is an effective means of achieving nighttime rest, and can be useful in the daytime, too. Anytime you need rest or relief from pressures, you can take a mountain for a pillow. Take a few moments during a coffee break, for instance, to relax in spirit and find peace and renewal for your inward self. Anytime you are anxious or angry you can go to the mountain and obtain the hilltop perspective in consciousness.

I recall a man who worked for the city, and whose duties made him a villain in some people's eyes. It was his practice when things became particularly strained to remove himself from the city and go up into the hills from which the city could be viewed from on high. There he would bless the city and everyone in it, stretching out with the mountain for his pillow, and seek his oneness with God.

For all of us, taking a mountain for a pillow means getting the far-off view, seeing our lives in perspective. We can figuratively go up into the mountains and enjoy a refreshing, relaxing, invigorating night of sleep and a day spaced with many moments of beautiful silence.