

Succumbing to Slumber

Were you ever able to stay awake on Christmas Eve long enough to see or hear Santa? Were there other occasions where you wanted to stay awake but simply could not?

I had been in Amsterdam for a week so I had transitioned to the new time zone. Mary Helen arrived early morning after a sleepless overnight trans-Atlantic flight. We couldn't check into our lodging until late afternoon so I planned an excursion to Haarlem where we could be indulgent pedestrian tourists. We strolled. We ate. We ventured inside the magnificent Church of St. Bavo on the main square. We ambulated, admiring the art and architecture, and read about the world-famous Muller organ, which dates from 1738 and has over 5000 pipes. It was played by Handel in 1740 and by Mozart when he was only ten years old.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, notes erupted from the magnificent instrument. It was clear that whoever was at the keyboard was an expert, confident and expressive. The organist, who remained out of sight at the console, played passionately and exquisitely. I took a seat and allowed the music to resonate and mesmerize me. I was swept aloft into a realm of pure pleasure.

Mary Helen was overtaken by jet lag. Although she thought it disrespectful to sleep in a place of worship, she reluctantly succumbed to slumber, using her backpack as a makeshift pillow. As I was experiencing the most mystical moment of auditory ecstasy of my life, she slept. I wept.

I was almost 11 years old on July 20, 1969 when Apollo 11 landed on the moon at 4:17 pm. Along with half a billion people around the world, I was watching live television as America was accomplishing its goal of having a man on the moon! The most exciting event was to be when Neil Armstrong descended the ladder of the lunar lander to be the first human being to set foot somewhere other than planet Earth. What a moment for all ages! I sat in my grandmother's tiny living room, riveted to the little black and white TV, eager to witness this profoundly historic event. However, it was to be more than six hours before Neil Armstrong emerged, and by that time, despite my extreme interest, I could barely

stay awake. It took all of my strength to keep my fluttering eyes open and uncrossed. I managed to remain marginally conscious until 10:56 pm when the deed was done. I immediately collapsed into a deep sleep. I simply could not stay awake for another minute.

As a 35 year-old college professor, I was in Maine with other scientists from around the country for a workshop on developmental biology. After feasting on fresh lobster with the other participants, we gathered in a dark teaching theater for a presentation by a renowned scientist. He animatedly described a robotic lobster that could be released on the sea floor. It used chemosensory panels to navigate up a concentration gradient to the source of a particular chemical. The topic was fascinating. (I'm not kidding.) The technology was amazing. The story was being told well and the images were convincing, but I could not stay awake. Was it the weight of that massive meal in my stomach that was tugging my eyelids shut? No matter how much I shifted in my seat or took deep breaths, I could not remain attentive even though I desperately wanted to hear this presentation in its entirety.

Think of Jesus after the Last Supper going to the Mount of Olives. He instructed his disciples to remain vigilant and pray, yet when he returned he found them sleeping. "Were you not able to keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked. I'm sure I would have succumbed to slumber. Thus it has always been: Humans with the greatest of intentions and under the most urgent circumstances fall asleep. Indeed, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

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