

# The Significance of Adult Sleep

by Amy Robertshaw

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My Granny used to tell me stories of when she was a young girl growing up in the rural mountains of North Carolina. She spoke of evenings when her folks, neighbors and kinfolk would gather on the front porch of her family home. She and the other children would lie on a blanket listening to the sounds of the harmonica and fiddle. Granny described gazing at the stars and the fireflies as she listened to the music, stories, laughter and the night sounds all around her. Together they were all held in the embrace of darkness.

My Granny's lovely memory is a wonderful example of a healthy night. It gives us a picture of a community embracing the darkness and the natural life rhythms that night time brings. This past year I developed a research project through my training at Sophia's Hearth Family Center. I explored sleep; particularly the sleep of mothers with young children. My research into sleep brought me down numerous paths. I discovered that sleep is sacred... sleep is spiritual... sleep is healing... and sleep is often overlooked as an important aspect of health. My hope is that sharing some of these discoveries here with you will remind you of the significance for us all to get enough sleep.

*How much sleep is enough sleep?* I did a small study of mothers who participated in Sophia's Hearth playgroups. Of the 14 respondents, only 2 answered with a clear "yes" to the question, "Do you feel you get enough sleep?" Those two respondents had one thing in common: **They both slept 10 hours a night.** Ten hours a night? This was a surprising outcome. Further, those averaging 9 to 9 1/2 hours of sleep a night answered either "no" or "sometimes" to that same question.

The amount of sleep adults need is generally stated as between 7 and 9 hours per night; however, there is also a sleep debt (hours slept less than individual optimum) that we must pay off before we can get to a place of feeling well rested after 7 to 9 hours of sleep. Otherwise we end up with what is referred to as chronic partial sleep deprivation.<sup>(1)</sup> Given that most mothers sleep is disrupted at least once a night, (only four of my respondents stated "yes" to "Do your children sleep through the night?"), perhaps 10 hours should not be so surprising. In fact before Thomas Edison's invention of the light bulb, *people slept an average of 10 hours a night.*

Has the light bulb indeed changed our sleep in such a dramatic way? Before I look at the effects of light, I want to share the results of a study conducted in 1999 by Thomas A. Wehr. This study was specifically looking at natural sleep patterns prior to excessive nighttime light:

He found that when healthy adults were prohibited from using artificial light at night – from dusk until dawn, their sleep patterns went through an unusual transformation. Participants in Wehr's study developed a curious pattern of lying comfortably awake for an hour or more before falling asleep, sleeping deeply for a few hours, awakening in peaceful contemplation for an hour or more, and then returning to sleep for a few more hours.<sup>2,3</sup>

Wehr's study gives us a picture of what sleep was like before the light bulb. Our inner life mirrored what was happening in the outer world. We became quiet, contemplative, inward. Even during the time that we were not sleeping, we were able to be in the darkness.

So, what has the light bulb contributed to our culture of nighttime and sleep? Today Americans average 6.4

hours of sleep on weeknights and 7.5 hours per night on weekends.<sup>1</sup> That is a significant drop since the advent of the light bulb! In our modern day world we are more and more illuminated by lights. Light at Night has *significantly shortened our nights*. Think of that for a moment. A man made object has resulted in shortening the natural rhythms the earth provides.

As I researched the importance of sleep and the myriad of sleep problems in our modern day world, I was particularly struck with how our culture overwhelmingly denies and suppresses the natural tendencies of quieting and slowing down at night. Instead we have 24 hour pharmacies, grocery stores and restaurants. "We refuel with caffeine, sugar, adrenaline, and yes, gratuitous evening light. Rather than allowing ourselves to gradually let go of the day, we extend an active, waking, daytime posture into the start of the night. In fact we extend daylight itself."<sup>2</sup>

Even so, I can hear all you busy mom's saying, "there is so much we can do and get done after the kids are in bed!" I know. I struggle with it, too. The allure of getting one more thing done before bed can be just too tempting for a busy mom, as well as the rest of our culture that is juggling more tasks than can fit in a 12 hour day. The night times of my Granny and her family and neighbors seem to be a distant memory in a culture that keeps a frantic 24 hours a day pace.

As the rest of the living world exists within the rhythm of the rotating earth, our species has found a way to bypass this natural inclination. But at what cost? After just one night of sleeping less than seven hours, studies show poor judgments, slowed reactions, reduced memory and concentration. Not only that but we are also less patient, more irritable, short tempered, and have mood swings.<sup>(4)</sup> As professionals working with parents of young children, this information alone ought to encourage us to stress the importance of sleep for parents. As parent educators, we spend time and energy stressing the importance of the sleep of children, but do we often enough encourage parents to get a lot of sleep? If a parent begins making their own sleep a priority, I would hypothesize that their children would be getting more sleep as well.

We have an odd notion in Western civilization that we have to stay awake longer to get more things done, but what our studies have shown is that actually getting a good nights sleep allows you to get much more done."<sup>(5)</sup> In my parent survey, "getting more done while the kids are asleep" was the primary reason for not getting enough sleep. In my own personal sleep recordings, it became evident that after sleeping at least nine hours, I was much more productive the next day.

So, we know we need more sleep. We need to make up for our sleep debt and then sleep more per night. Ten hours is not too much in fact! As students of anthroposophy and in particular as students of the growing child, we are greatly familiar with the importance of rhythms in our daily lives.

Let us not count ourselves among the sleep deprived, sleep walking, drug induced, awake only by the sake of counterfeit energies, mass of people on this planet. Rather, let us recognize that the only way we can ever be fully awake and present to the life we have been given, is to go to sleep.

<sup>1</sup> – National Sleep Foundation website: [www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org)

<sup>2</sup> – *Healing Night, The Science and Spirit of Sleeping, Dreaming, and Awakening*, by Rubin R. Naimen, Syren Book Company, Minneapolis, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> – "Lighting Steals your Sleep" on Morning Edition of National Public Radio (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18177087>), 17 January 2008.

<sup>4</sup> – "Science of Sleep" CBS 60 Minutes news show, 2008 (also available through the National Sleep Foundations website under "videos").

<sup>5</sup> – "In Today's World, the Well-Rested Lose Respect" by Margot Adler on Morning Edition of NPR (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=2100166>), 17 January 2008.