

## Sweet Dreams

by Susan Gray Weber

We have all heard it said that the morning is wiser than the evening; and certainly have been advised to sleep on a question, or dilemma, or a challenging life decision. But in truth, sleep in our time is an elusive gift. We are a culture of the sleep deprived, the sleep obsessed, often drugging ourselves into sleep and again, in the morning, drugging ourselves to conscious awakening. We live in a timeless time in which one can live daily life all through the night: working, shopping, exercising at the gym, communicating via fax or e-mail. Night and day are intertwined and confused; the traditional picture of the rhythms of the cosmos – the rooster rousing us with his cock-a-doodle-do, the farmer at work with the rhythms of the suns rising and setting are unfamiliar to most of us. And we, on the other hand, are pummeled with the model of technology - the machine that needs no rest, the pressure that if we only tried harder, we human could successfully mimic the machine and work ceaselessly.

And so we are confused, and our children are confused, and we are all tired! We learn early on, as new parents, what a large task it is for our children to learn to wake and sleep in an earthly, fulfilling and restorative rhythm. We gently cradle the baby in our arms, rocking or singing a lullaby, trying to guide her into sleep, but this is no easy task. How confusing today's world must be to the little one: darkness is not quite complete, with electric light shining brightly; activity rarely ceases in our homes; we adults may work at night or at day, or even a little of both. And so, the child is offered so few natural cues, and imitation of us as adults in our daily rhythms is not a natural support, either.

At the same time, sleep is crucial for the infant and young child, a time during which it is developing its body with all its might. If day time is over filled with sense impressions, the child will be affected not only in the effort of going to sleep, but throughout the entire night, and we know well how greatly the night itself affects the day to follow.

So - what can we do for our children, to offer sleep as a gift to receive comfortably? Our first task is to examine our own relationship to sleep. How do we feel about it? Do we feel guilty for sleeping, or anxious about the effort of falling asleep, or do we carry a confidence in the goodness and healing of sleep, happy and relaxed as we approach our own bed times? Do we have a sense for the transition between day and night, for the qualities of the evening, that special transition time? Perhaps the first step will be to develop a fresh relationship to sleep and the night within ourselves, one that is confident and positive, recognizing that we must not feel sorry for our children that they must let go of the day and sleep, but rather, feel grateful for the day that has passed. Then our children can feel this as well.

Secondly, we can create a picture of the environment of sleep. To sleep well, we all need quiet, warmth, and a feeling of protection. For the child, this might mean a special soothing canopy or veil over cradle, crib, or bed; a wool or quilted sleeping sack, or a cozy hot water bottle. For the infant, or in some cases even an older child, swaddling creates this sense of protection. Eating also relates to sleep, as the liver takes up its restorative work in preparation for the day to come, and wants to rest from the act of digesting heavy foods. Thus, a heavy meal in the evening can disrupt our sleep.

For our children, a living, dependable ritual for bedtime that is unwavering creates this sense of warmth and protection as well. First, we put all in order by tidying away the playthings of the day: now it is time for the dollies to be tucked in, the cows to go into the barn, the toy train to park at the station. We can prepare for the morning by laying out the clothes. Then perhaps comes the bath, then the lighting of a candle and a story, finally concluding the day with a poem or prayer and a kiss. Our calm, centeredness as parents can work miracles at this moment! This is not the time for recorded lullabies or stories or songs, but rather the moment to send our children to sleep with the loving human voice of those who love the child most dearly as the last sound.

It may be helpful to observe as carefully as possible: how many impressions can this child tolerate during a day in a satisfying way? How can we arrange the child's day to limit the impressions to this manageable quantity, being ever mindful of the quality of the impressions? For it is the rhythm of the day that creates the support for the night's sleep. It is often observed that an overtired child will have difficulty sleeping, but that the more a child sleeps, the more he will sleep! Sweet dreams!

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