

Eutychus, Gods, and Dozing Dog-Daze

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One of my favorite bible-stories is that of Eutychus, the young man with the wonderful name—it means “good luck”—who, unfortunately, is mentioned in the Bible only because he did precisely what a number of college students do every semester—he dozed off during a lecture. He’s the patron saint of academic sleepers. I will give his story and then discuss something distressingly practical for both students and teachers—the etiquette of snoozing in class. I dedicate this story to all those students who, during my many years of teaching, have managed to catch a few winks.

On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. “Don’t be alarmed,” he said, “He’s alive!” Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted (Acts 20:7-12).

I remember the first time it happened—fall of 1972, my first semester of teaching; a crowded classroom on the third story of Holland Hall; eight o’clock class on Monday morning. I was giving this brilliant lecture on Kant’s categorical imperative and a young man’s head started nodding. But not in agreement. I was too green to be insulted—I was merely amazed. Six years of first-rate graduate school education had not given me a clue about how to respond. What’s worse, for the first and last time in my career, I had assigned seats, and young Eutychus had the front row. I thought I noticed other students placing bets on how low his head could sink before it snapped back up. I remember thinking, “Hey, this is unfair competition.” So here’s my first etiquette advice: If you are a nodder, sit in the back. At least you will avoid unfair trade practices.

Of course, you need not nod. If you just admit to yourself that you might not make it through this one, you can literally get a grip on yourself. I personally recommend the two-handed head grip: elbows on desk; hands surrounding the eyes; fingers on forehead; thumbs hooked around both cheek-bones. This way you can feign absorption in the text and still be fairly safe from sudden slips. Do remember to ask your neighbor to nudge you should you start to snore, which is also unfair competition.

However it occurs to some students—rightly so—that it is more politic to feign absorption in the lecture itself, rather than the text. Why do you think professors assign texts that require clarification? Hence the temptation toward the one-handed chin hold: elbow on desk; one hand holding up the chin; other hand with pencil poised as if to string together the pearls of wisdom thrown your way. This has the advantage of more subtlety at first, but subtlety has a short half-life when you begin dozing. Invariably either the

pencil or the head falls and all pretense is lost. And let's face it, in these situations pretense is the last refuge of dignity for everyone concerned.

Thus I cannot recommend the blunt honesty of simply putting your head down on the desk and getting your shut-eye undisturbed. I admit that sometimes when that happens the student walks out of class very refreshed. And then I feel greatly comforted because, not unlike St. Paul, I was an instrument for reviving a young person who looked dead. But sometimes blunt honesty is more annoying than refreshing and this is one of those times. Better simply to stay away—the prof is less likely to notice your physical absence than your rather more ostentatious mental departure.

But maybe there's a better alternative. For example, staying alert in class. "But how?" you ask. Here are a few modest proposals:

The obviously biblically-inspired one is to have drowsy students sit on the window ledge. I now teach on the fifth story of that same building. What a stimulating ingredient in a lecture! However, even Eutychus had the bad luck to fall. And since professors are, at best, St. Paul wannabees, this proposal could lower enrollment while raising insurance.

How about tattling to whoever is paying tuition? Every year I have a few students who divide the number of class hours into the comprehensive fee and inform me how much a one-hour lecture costs them. This year, 1994, it's \$53. Some students even multiply that by the number of students enrolled and total class hours and then wonder out loud why I can't afford to dress better. My first response is to point out that their figures also show how extremely expensive are any naps they take in class; for \$53 dollars an hour it would be cheaper to rent the presidential suite at a luxury hotel. At any rate, \$53 for a snooze would certainly catch the attention of whoever is paying the bill. Actually, that figure is very misleading. Apart from the fact that it covers only 75 per cent of the actual cost of my students' education, it ignores the reality that students do lots of expensive things besides attending class—eating and sleeping for example. (Not everybody has yet achieved the efficiency of combining all these.) If one divides into the comprehensive fee the number of hours students are doing all these things on campus, the figure is more like \$3 an hour. A bargain—considerably less than the hourly cost of sending them to prison, for example.

Of course, those paying the bill may be most interested in how their son or daughter spends the classroom hour. So let me return to that student in my early morning class during my first fall of teaching. That semester I was flattered to be invited to a dinner party with a number of rather senior faculty colleagues. During the dinner I was having fun telling about my sleeping student, complete with well-acted imitations. As I was blurting out his name it occurred to me that he had the same last name as two of those senior colleagues sitting at the table. No, it can't be, I thought. But, yes, it was—he was their son; and they said they would talk to him. As I was chewing on my foot, I resolved never to tattle again. Besides, the result was some apologies and embarrassment, but no less snoozing. It was an 8 o'clock class, after all.

Which suggests a third possibility: maybe it's all a matter of timing and conditions. For example, Scripture suggests that Paul may have gone past Eutychus' bedtime. Commentators are divided on why Luke included the curious line about the

many lamps in the room. Some say it was to suggest that the brightness gave Eutychus no excuse. Others suggest that it was Luke's way of saying that the light of faith was burning brightly that night, and that while Paul was developing ideas that changed world history, giving a lecture where church historians and biblical scholars would die for a seat, Eutychus dozed off, blissfully ignorant of the earth-shaking importance of what was going on, much as Jesus' three favorite disciples slept through the most theologically intriguing event in the history of Christianity—Jesus' agonizing prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane.

However, I am inclined toward a third school of thought—that the physician Luke was explaining the behavior of the unfortunate Eutychus by alluding to the soporific effects of high heat and low oxygen. Likewise, perhaps on campus the early morning hour—as well as the period right after lunch—are especially soporific. Maybe the class schedule should begin at 10:30 and also take a siesta break after lunch.

Alas, if anything, colleges need more, rather than fewer, classes during those times, or else the cost of building more classrooms would make \$53 look cheap. In fact, last fall the curriculum committee at my college sent many students a questionnaire asking how early a class they would be willing to sign up for. I wrote on my questionnaire that the issue is not whether we are willing to sign up for an early class. It's not even whether we are willing to drag our bodies to an early class. Rather, it's whether we are willing, the night before, to put that body into bed early enough that it comes packaged the next morning with an alert mind. At any rate, early classes are likely to be necessary at any college we can afford.

Here's another possibility: maybe we should assign these "high-risk" time slots to the most exciting teachers, the ones who are so dynamic that it's impossible to fall asleep. Let the most charismatic faculty compete for the distinct honor and high privilege of being allowed to teach the first hour. Let the less exciting faculty be shamed by being restricted to the 10:30 time slot, when teachers are least likely to induce a doze.

Unfortunately, I fear this may not be sufficient. Under the right conditions, even the best teachers get their nods. In fact, Paul himself was no slouch; he may have been one of the best lecturers in Christendom. Look at a brief (edited) excerpt from a famous talk he gave in Athens, right in the very marketplace where Socrates, the patron saint of philosophy, kept his students awake by unrelentingly questioning them. Paul did not use this "Socratic method"—he leaned toward proclamation. But this excerpt demonstrates his excellent rhetorical technique.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he reasoned in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of the asked, "What is this babblers trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of Areopagus where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus [the local philosophy forum] and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and observed your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. In him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, We are his offspring.

Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man’s design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this by raising him from the dead.”

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” (Acts 17)

Nobody slept during this talk. Granted, half the listeners were jeering, but the rest were eager to argue again. Of course, Luke all but tells us that they were a bunch of philosophy majors, but that’s not the only reason Paul kept their attention: Paul shows that he is a first-rate teacher. Notice just one important feature of his lecturing style—he builds on the previous understanding of his audience. He begins with their religious history and he quotes their poets, thus making a solid point of contact for his message. A recent publication, *Teaching Excellence*, distributed by the Teaching Learning Center at my college has an article subtitled “The Role of Prior Knowledge in Learning” (by Marilla Svinich). I quote its main piece of advice: “Use prior knowledge deliberately in the presentation of new information... One of the keys to learning...[is that] when new information gets hooked up with a particularly rich... portion of the memory, it inherits all the connections that already exist.” Paul’s lecture is a model of this pedagogical virtue. By the time he associates their unknown god with their poets’ points that “we are his children” and that “in him we move and have our being,” Paul has a hook that is actually the firm foundation of rich theism, a foundation almost begging for what Paul proclaims as the cornerstone—the living Christ. So I submit that, when Paul lost Eutychus, it was probably not something that could have been fixed by improving the quality of his lecture.

“What is this pre-Gutenberg hang-up with lectures?” I hear you ask. “That’s your problem. Why not take a clue from your other patron saint—Socrates—and rely on active class participation? That’s how to prevent your students from emulating Eutychus.” Point very well taken, though I’ve noticed that in a class of, say, 20 students, even if everyone takes turns talking, a given individual will have plenty of windows of opportunity for slumber. I recommend seeing the film, *Shadowlands*. Anthony Hopkins portrays C.S. Lewis as a master of the Socratic method. And yet even he manages to put one-third of his three tutees to sleep. Why? Well, as the plot thickens, it turns out that the young man was staying up all night. Now, I don’t claim that this is the only cause of dozing off in class. Medical conditions, overheated rooms, bad timing, and, yes, even boredom, all play their role. But I’m convinced that the sheer biological need to catch up on winks is a major villain.

Which suggests my final modest proposal, one that is stunning in its simplicity and common sense. Why not have everyone get a regular night's sleep before breakfast? (And I mean faculty as well as students. When I occasionally stay up all night grading papers, it's amazing to me the next day how sleepy my students seem to be). But research reveals the astounding fact that some college students do not regularly go to bed by midnight! And perhaps 60 per cent don't even get up in time for breakfast.

In his book *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker notes that "dog" is "god" spelled backwards, and that the human race has always had trouble deciding which way to lean. Are we just a little lower than the angels, or are we more like dogs—perhaps somewhat more sophisticated but not for that reason any less beastly? The historical and contemporary evidence is decidedly mixed, as a glance at recent headlines will confirm. I suspect that answer is as much a matter of decision as of discovery, and that we tend to alternate between denying our animal nature and denying our divine image and mandate. We are God's offspring and it's true that in God we live and move and have our being, as the Greek poets said. But we are *embodied* imagers of God. And to live in a way that denies our physical needs for sleep or food is foolish—it's bad manners and even worse theology. If we try to live all night like the God of the Psalmist, who "slumbers not and never sleeps," then we will find ourselves during the day regressing to the life of dogs—taking little catnaps at the most embarrassing times.

And who knows what we might miss? We never hear again of Eutychus, but even if—perhaps especially if—he became a Christian, he must have wondered what he missed that night, as Paul was changing the world with his new ideas. Now, I don't claim that most professors' ideas—certainly not mine—are in the same class with St. Paul's. Still, you never know when you might learn something—or miss something—that could affect your life. And I don't claim that students should never stay up all night—opportunities and responsibilities can knock in unexpected ways; Paul himself, after he revived Eutychus, went back and talked until dawn. The bad manners and worse theology come when we *regularly* challenge our physical needs. Good theology and respectful sociability require that we recognize a simple but crucial truth: if we are in this together, we have to work on some rhythm in our common life, some patterns that allows us both our ungodly need to sleep as well as our undogly calling to reason together, to create art, and celebrate our gifts—together.

When my wife and I were field supervisors for a college term abroad a few years ago, we got to know quite well a number of fine students. But some of them too frequently stayed up too much of the night having, as they would tell us, "cross-cultural experiences" in the local "restaurants." We noticed that these tended to be the same students who too often fell asleep during, say, bus tours when local guides would provide a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see and learn about such matters as how other cultures arrange their villages and farm their fields. As we alternated between trying to soothe the insulted guides and deciding whether to light a fire under the snoozing scholars, we reflected on this rich paradox of human nature: What a wonderful privilege it is to have the godlike ability to deliberately upset our animal-like rhythms in order to travel around the world and gain a global perspective, learning more about others and about ourselves. But how easy it is to use that same ability to ignore the biological need for those rhythms

and then to pay the beastly price, forcing others sometimes to decide that the least bad option is to let sleeping dogs lie.

A better idea is to be realistic about balancing these different dimensions of our lives. Eutychus would wish us his own name for that.