

Seasons of Sleep

They say that you never know what you've got until it's gone, and I can only assume that they—whoever *they* are—are talking about sleep. They also say humans need sleep to survive, and I can only assume that young parents aren't considered human, since I'm almost positive that I didn't really sleep in the first months of Nicholas's life, which was not a good thing. The only upside was that I definitely would have survived a zombie attack, since the zombies would have assumed I was one of them already.

Twenty-eight years of blissful slumber came to a screeching halt on that cold January night Nicholas was born. The screeching came from two rooms down the hall in the hospital ward. Christine was resting in relative peace, still hours away from delivery. But a lady—I was pretty sure I was hearing a lady, or else a wild animal—was having her baby right then and yelling, “Ohhhhargh! It hurts, it hurts! *Oh ... my ... God!*” I

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huddled on the tiny couch beside my wife's bed, wondering what it would be like when my wife was yelling those same things. Christine looked over at me and asked, fearfully, "You don't think she has an epidural, do you?" I shook my head, eyes wide, and hoped I could get some sleep soon.

You see how slow on the uptake new dads are? I hoped I could get some sleep soon? From the present I can only smile and pat my past self on the head. When your wife is six centimeters dilated, you're not next in line to board the fast train to Sleepyville.

Nicholas was born in the early morning, and the first day of his life went by in a blur of weighings and swaddlings and excited conversations. Then night came—in Vancouver, in January, this seems to happen at about 3:30 PM—and I discovered one of the first commandments of fatherhood: thou shalt kiss sleep goodbye. That first night I got my best rest on a couch in the hospital hallway while holding my new son. My head flopped sideways at about a ninety degree angle, and I drooled all over my shoulder. When I woke up after what seemed like only twenty minutes—because it was only twenty minutes—both my legs were asleep, and when I tried to move them, Nicholas began to wake up. So instead of sleeping, I sat up awake, the pain in my neck and legs keeping me alert. Alert enough to understand the

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second commandment of fatherhood: baby's sleep is *always* more important than your own.

This experience isn't common to all new dads. A seasoned father I knew told me—sounding oddly proud, I thought—that'd he'd never gotten up in the middle of the night with any one of his three kids. From what I've observed, however, most new dads of my generation want to be more involved in the raising of their kids than their own dads were in raising them, so leaving mom on her own every night just isn't an option. And it's not like I had an important job to fall back on. I knew some dads who *had* to have sleep—*I can't be tired at work . . . the fate of the free world depends on my being well rested!*—but my job was dispensable, seeing as how I was studying art and theology full-time. (I did try it out one night. Me: “Honey, I'm going to sleep on the couch tonight and get eight hours. If I'm not fully rested tomorrow, who will answer the question in class about Niebuhr's impact on Christian political activism?” Christine: “Someone else?” Me: “Pass the burp cloth.”)

My studies—and everything else in my life, really—became a blur, and only the moments I spent with Nicholas retained any sort of clarity. In between classes, I would stumble down to the library to catch a quick nap. There was no question of actually completing any work. What I needed was enough of a nap so I could stay awake through at least the first half of my next class be-

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fore falling asleep again. I'd plop my head down on a book, drool into the binding, and wake with one minute to get to a class two flights of stairs above me. These were the days I was functioning well.

Nicholas, who slept as much as eighteen hours some days, was unable to coordinate that sleeping with our schedule. He'd happily sack out on the couch during the day with all the lights on. We'd bang dishes, vacuum, and make a general ruckus, and he'd continue to snore contentedly. Then, when 10:00 PM rolled around, Nicholas would wake all the way up for his nightly round of screaming. The screaming didn't seem to help him fall asleep, and neither did the way he would thrash his arms and kick his legs. It was more like a full-body workout than a presleep routine, so early on we settled on wrapping him tightly in swaddling blankets and trying to shush him over the noise of his screaming.

Our doctor told us that a baby in the womb hears a volume of sound that's similar to the volume of a vacuum cleaner. So when the baby is out in the real world, things can seem pretty quiet. If you want your kid to hear something, you have to create enough noise to make an impression. In those early months, I'd take our tiny, screaming egg roll into the family room so Christine could get some sleep. Then I'd lay down on the couch, turn on the Discovery Channel, and hold Nicholas on my chest. As he screamed, I'd thump his back and sing

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whatever song I could think of, from “Amazing Grace” to “U Can’t Touch This.” This usually did the trick, and Nicholas would drift off to sleep on my chest after a mere hour or so. In the meantime, I’d get to see great programming, like a special on Genghis Khan that I watched three nights in a row. Trying to read the closed captioning without my glasses was tricky, but I’m pretty sure Genghis liked chugging fermented horse milk, a drink that would have put Nicholas right to sleep, I bet.

As restful as those first few months of fatherhood were, there came a time when we decided that Nicholas was ready to join the club of people able to fall asleep on their own. What I didn’t realize was that this meant committing ourselves to one of several opposing methodologies. Picking a sleep technique is no small choice—it can alienate you from friends and loved ones, like if Al Gore’s son decided to become a coal miner.

In the interest of full disclosure, I’ll tell you that we chose the cry-it-out approach, which makes us either responsible or cruel. I’m not interested in entering the trenches of the sleep war. Regardless of whether parents toss their kids in bed at the stroke of six and lock the door until morning or co-sleep with their child on a hemp mattress until the kid heads off to college, I’ve noticed that nearly all former kids know how to sleep. So we did what worked for us and tried not to worry too much about what other people were doing. This

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meant that we would make sure Nicholas was ready for bed—fed, burped, bathed, diapered, read to, prayed for, swaddled, and kissed—and then we'd lay him down and leave his room. Uncertain of what he was supposed to *do* in his bed once he was there, Nicholas would begin to scream while we listened. Actually, while *I* listened. On many nights like this, Christine would go somewhere—pottery class, soccer practice, a coffee shop—and I would stay at home on the couch, listening to the screams. It was better that way. As we like to say, I'm the heartless one.

Unhappy baby noises come in quite a few varieties, from your run-of-the-mill cry to your full-blown screaming bloody murder. Handily, these cries were easy to differentiate on our baby monitor. The receiving end of the monitor, perched above our computer desk, had three green lights on it. The more noise Nicholas was making, the more lights would shine. One light meant that things were just fine—he was grunting about something, but he'd calm down on his own. Two lights on meant that he was really crying, but he would almost always get quieter with no intervention.

When he was lighting up the whole monitor, though, that sure was something to listen to. It's easy to second-guess yourself when your child screams in bed every night; if I screamed every time I did something, I'm pretty sure I'd stop doing it. Those nights I'd sit there on

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the couch, listening to Nicholas's cries coming through the monitor, as well as through the wall, and I'd wonder what he was thinking or trying to say. His tone of voice usually led me to assume it was something like, "I hate you I hate this get me out of this place *ahhh!*"

Going into his room certainly didn't make things any better, so at least I didn't have to torture myself by imagining that Nicholas was crying out for Daddy's love. When we experimented with going into his room to calm him down, he only screamed more loudly. Entering his room essentially reset the countdown timer for his going to sleep eventually. No, what he really wanted was to be unbundled and brought back to where the action was. Lying still in bed when there was stuff to look at and play with was an indignity beyond his ability to bear.

And mine. Because I was the one enforcing the cry-until-you-sleep policy, I felt a huge burden of guilt and doubt. I never really considered changing our plan of teaching Nicholas how to fall asleep on his own. It was more a matter of wondering why the plan that I knew was right had to feel so lousy. I suppose that each night, as Nicholas cried himself to sleep, I could have kept a journal of my feelings, exploring the nuances of my emotional reactions. Or I could have emailed my close friends, creating a YaYa Brotherhood of support and

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encouragement. Instead I watched a lot of professional wrestling on TV.

Wrestling is actually the perfect thing to watch when your wife is gone and you have to listen to your baby crying. If I tried to watch anything more engaging—*CSI: Miami*, say—it always went badly. Either I would find myself missing the plot of the show because I couldn't hear what was going on, or, more disturbingly, I'd find myself wishing that Nicholas would be quiet so I could listen. Once, as I strained to hear a painfully ... slow ... speech ... by ... David ... Caruso, I hopped up to turn off the monitor. That was when I knew I'd never watch that sort of show again while listening to Nicholas. If I was teaching Nicholas a skill that was somewhat painful for him, the least I could do was suffer a bit myself. And what, really, is more painful than watching pro wrestling?

I'm writing this from a later vantage point, so I know the story has a happy ending. As bad as we felt when Nicholas was crying, we always knew that he'd learn how to sleep well, and we were right. Before too long, he learned how to be a champion sleeper, going right to sleep and staying down the whole night. In the morning, he would always wake up happy as a clam, cooing in his crib as sunbeams slanted through his window. We'd go into his room to get him up, and he would smile at us like we were his favorite people in the world (and maybe

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we were, but he smiled exactly the same way at his favorite red lamp and at the painting of a sailboat on our wall). I'd open his swaddling blanket, and his little arms would pop out and shoot up into the air in a luxurious, full-body stretch. "Ahh," he'd say, or, "Goo." "You slept the whole night," we'd tell him, and he'd smile again.

The other morning I remembered how things used to be as I was awakened early—just before 6:00 AM—by the sound of Nicholas calling from his room. "Get up now? Daddy? Get up now?" I open his door and see him already standing in his crib. "It's morning?" he asks, and I reluctantly agree that *technically* it's morning. Nicholas happily shouts, "Play cars!" and jumps up and down. I get him out of bed and carry him down the hall, reminding him to whisper since Mama is still asleep. "Wee-per wee-per wee-per," he repeats quietly to himself. As soon as I set Nicholas down in the family room, he hops over to where his cars and trucks are lined up at a little gas station, and he lifts out a fire engine with two hands. "Noise?" he asks. I remind him that the buttons don't work, but that he can make a noise for it with his mouth, and I demonstrate. He turns away, unimpressed. "Noise?" he asks again and pushes the engine's buttons over and over.

Christine and I decided early on that battery-powered toys were verboten. Against the tinny intrusiveness of beeping trucks and shouting action figures, we try to

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hold to a model of creative play powered by imagination—never mind the fact that Nicholas, like most boys his age, thinks that battery-powered toys are *way* cooler than regular toys. No sooner had we set forth this wise decree than we received a ton of new battery-powered toys—not ingenious wooden handicrafts lovingly carved in the Bavarian Alps, but a glut of double-A, double-loud, double-annoying plastic junk. You know the kind of toy I’m talking about—the tricked-out 4 × 4 that screams, “Racing action go!” in the voice of that monster-truck announcer. Sometimes, while Nicholas is sleeping, the battery fairy visits his toys and takes the batteries she finds to the nearest recycling center.

I’m glad that at least *this* morning’s vehicle of choice is silent. As Nicholas drives one car after another through his service station, I thank God for the nation of Columbia and, specifically, its coffee plantations. The coffeemaker is making friendly noises as I settle onto a corner of the couch with my first steaming mug. Through the window, I can see the first glow of morning sunlight as the fog begins to disintegrate like cotton candy dropped in a puddle. It’s early, there’s no denying it, and I’ll admit I’m tired. But not *that* tired. Not I-have-a-newborn tired. Nicholas knows how to sleep now, even if he doesn’t know how to sleep in. I imagine him lying in bed until noon when he’s a surly teenager and realize that I’ll miss these early mornings together.

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So when Nicholas asks me to sit on the floor with him and drive cars up and down his ramp, I agree, knowing that this won't last forever. But first, I tell him, I need to refill my coffee mug.