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 Arlington Street Church  
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### **Don't Go Back to Sleep**

The breeze at dawn  
 has secrets to tell you.  
 Don't go back to sleep.

You must ask  
 for what you really want.  
 Don't go back to sleep.

People are going back and forth  
 over the threshold  
 where the two worlds touch.

The door is round  
 and open.  
 Don't go back to sleep.

That's Persian poet and mystic, Jalāl ad-Din Rumi, speaking to us across eight centuries, exhorting us to resist the pull of sleep, and not to sleepwalk, but to wake up and stay up; to pass through that "round and open" door and seize the day.

I also love another Rumi poem on this same theme. It's just one sentence:

Sit, be still, and listen,  
 because you're drunk  
 and we're at the edge of the roof.

Here it is again:

Sit, be still, and listen,  
 because you're drunk

and we're at the edge of the roof.

When we're literally or figuratively drunk or drugged on something that renders us insensible to the world, we're missing it: not just the pain but all the beauty proffered us in this life. Rumi calls us to sober up – to realize, in every moment, that we're at the edge of the roof. Will we sit down, be still, and listen ... or will we fall off?

The great early-nineteenth century Unitarian theologian and preacher, William Ellery Channing, whose statue is just across Arlington Street, said to our forbears in this congregation,

Come ... to this place to worship with the soul, to elevate the spirit to G\*d. Let not this house be desecrated by a religion of show. Let it not degenerate into a place of forms. Let not your pews be occupied by lifeless machines. Do not come here to take part in lethargic repetitions of sacred words. Do not come from a cold sense of duty, to quiet conscience with the thought of having paid a debt to G\*d. Do not come to perform a present task to insure a future heaven. Come to find heaven now, to anticipate the happiness of that better world by breathing its spirit.... Come to worship with the heart as well as intellect, with life, fervor, zeal. Sleep over your business, if you will, but not over your religion.<sup>1</sup>

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*What's your religion?*

Lately, we've seen people come out from under rocks whose religion is hatred. The Dalai Lama says his religion is kindness. We can think of other world leaders whose religion is greed. Throughout his life, Gandhi lived the question, "How will my actions affect the poorest person in the world?" His religion was compassion in action. At Arlington Street, we say Love, Service, Justice, Peace. One thing's for sure: It's not what you *say* your religion is; people know what your religion is by how you *act*.

To be wide awake  
the pain and glory,  
the great and small,  
is to live our faith.

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<sup>1</sup> William Ellery Channing, "Christian Worship," *The Works of William E. Channing, Part 4*, p. 420

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I'm thinking of two stories about the decision not to sleep over our religion. The first was told by Sebastian Junger in his book, *Tribe*. He writes, "In the fall of 1986, just out of college, I set out to hitchhike across the northwestern part of the United States. I'd hardly ever been west of the Hudson River, and in my mind what waited for me out in Dakota and Wyoming and Montana was not only the real America, but the real me...."

"That's how I wound up outside Gillette, Wyoming, one morning in late October, ... with my pack leaned against the guardrail and an interstate map in my back pocket. Semis rattled over the bridge spacers and hurtled on toward the Rockies a hundred miles away...."

"In my pack I had a tent and sleeping bag, a set of aluminum cook pots, and a ... camping stove.... That and a week's worth of food was all I had with me outside Gillette, Wyoming that morning, when I saw a man walking toward me up the on-ramp from town.

"From a distance, I could see that he wore a quilted old canvas union suit and carried a black lunch box. I took my hands out of my pockets and turned to face him. He walked up and stood there studying me. His hair was wild and matted and his union suit was shiny with filth and grease at the thighs. He didn't look unkindly, but I was young and alone and I watched him like a hawk. He asked me where I was headed.

"'California,' I said. He nodded. 'How much food you got?'...."

"I thought about this. I had plenty of food – along with all the rest of my gear – and he obviously didn't have much. I'd give food to anyone who said he was hungry, but I didn't want to get robbed, and that's what seemed was about to happen.

"'Oh, I just got a little cheese,' I lied. I stood there, ready, but he just shook his head.

"'You can't get to California on just a little cheese,' he said. 'You need more than that.'

"The man said that he lived in a broken-down car and that every morning he walked three miles to a coal mine outside of town to see if they

needed fill-in work. Some days they did, some days they didn't, and this was one of the days that they didn't. 'So I won't be needing this,' he said, opening his black lunch box. 'I saw you from town and just wanted to make sure you were okay.'

"The lunch box contained a bologna sandwich, an apple, and a bag of potato chips. The food had probably come from a local church. I had no choice but to take it. I thanked him and put [it] in my pack for later and wished him luck. Then he turned and made his way back down the on-ramp toward Gillette.

"I thought about that man for the rest of my trip," Sebastian Junger concludes. "I thought about him for the rest of my life."

Now I'm thinking about Sebastian Junger's man, and I hope you will, too. Taking the time to go out of our way to check on someone vulnerable is a good religion – the religion of kinship. Being awake to suffering and to our deep interconnectedness with all living beings is a very fine religion, indeed.

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The second story about the decision not to sleep over our business of our religion is just one paragraph! It was told by twentieth-century anthropologist Eleanor Leacock, who lived among the Cree Indians of northern Canada.

She was deep in the bush on a hunting trip with a Cree named Thomas when they encountered two men, strangers, who had run out of food. They were extremely hungry. Thomas gave them all his flour and lard, despite the fact that it meant he would have to cut his own trip short. Eleanor Leacock tried to get Thomas to explain why he did it. His response was succinct: "Suppose, now, not to give them flour, lard," he said. "Just dead inside."<sup>2</sup>

Imagine feeling that deeply and that clearly: Generosity or death. Imagine being that awake, that sober, that clear about what is life-giving and what is not. It's a choice.

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<sup>2</sup> as told by anthropologist Christopher Boehm, *Moral Origins*, p. 219

Zen teacher Daniel Doen Silberberg speaks of sleeping through life, lost in regret and missing the present. Here's the Zen way he expresses it: "If only, if only, if only – dead."<sup>3</sup> The antidote is to wake up!

Sebastian Junger says that when he read the story of Thomas – "Suppose, now, not to give them flour, lard. Just dead inside" – he finally had his answer "for why the homeless guy outside Gillette gave [him] his lunch thirty years ago: [As] poor as he was, he was [not 'dead inside,' he was] awake to life.

Beloved spiritual companions,

Don't go back to sleep!

Sit, be still, and listen,  
because you're drunk  
and we're at the edge of the roof.

Sleep over your business, if you will,  
but not over your religion.

'I saw you from town and just wanted to make sure  
you were okay.'

"Suppose, now, not to give them flour, lard. Just dead inside."

"If only, if only, if only – dead."

Let's think about that.

*Let's live our religion.*

Let's wake up!

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<sup>3</sup> please see Daniel Doen Silberberg, Roshi, [lostcoinzen.com/if-only/](http://lostcoinzen.com/if-only/)

