



## Sleeping Out

Lincoln Stoller, PhD, 2016

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*"Beneath the leaves and stars, everything still more impressive than by day, the fall seen dimly white, singing Nature's old love song with solemn enthusiasm, while the stars peering through the leaf-roof seemed to join in the white water's song. Precious night, precious day to abide in me forever." John Muir, 1911*

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## In The Dark ...

The process of growing is like walking backward, up hill, in the dark. There is no Rosetta Stone for what stands in front of us. The universe is the only thing in our entire mindset that might be infinite. The night sky is the only place we see it. We are hardly aware of all the information in front of us.

Have you ever looked at something without seeing it, only later to find that you were looking at it all the time? Have you not suddenly "seen" your keys or your cup of coffee after having scanned the room for the tenth time? How many times will we look into the dark night sky before we are able to see what's in front of us?



For a few of us -- and I don't know why so few -- sleeping under the night sky is a heart-opening experience. The processes that happen in us when we sleep are as under appreciated as our dreams. The connection we make to the universe during sleep is as important to us as the connection we make to other human beings when we are awake.

I didn't used to sleep outside. No one in my family does, and in my childhood no one ever did until I left home as a kid and went into the mountains. Western culture is as oblivious to nature as it is alienated from it.

I don't know why I crave sleeping outside at night. A transcendental experience, like a meditation, I don't entirely know what I get from it. Sleep resets everything. In connection not just with the air, the weather, the animal rhythms and the planets, but with galactic neutrinos streaming through me from infinity.

## **... and Clockwork Night**

It's effect on me is slow. It's inconvenient to drag my sleeping bag out to my wooden platform, burrowing into it in the clear, subfreezing air. I tried using a flashlight but it was a sacrilege to blind myself, darkening the surround to blackness. I need to see the vague form and path emerge, and my platform faintly against the inky ground, so I can look up into the trumpeting stars.

This is the first step to being immersed in my natural environment. Things happen when we're asleep that are critical to balance and connection. Mostly things just shift around inside me like the mantle beneath the earth's crust. I sleep outside to keep my mind in connection with my imagined world.



The air is great, the surface hard, the sounds are rich, and the effect of the light on my rhythms palpable. I like the idea that some animals come by and "think" to me, although at this time of year it is probably only the mice. I rarely stay out past dawn.

## Tim's Story



"I had for a long long time wanted and talked about setting up a sleeping situation outdoors. The boldest, most forward tangible aspect for this desire is my craving for fresh air, sleeping or not, however the reasons for my wanting to do this by no means ended there, although I am not sure that words will be able to capture some of the other feelings. Certainly I have always been disturbed by the gulf between "nature' and contemporary life style in our culture. Living in closer proximity to nature is almost an existential (at least psychologically) issue for me.

"As a child I grew up in suburbia, close to NYC. This suburbia was established in the 19th century and was actually fairly "natural" with many old, beautiful trees, and patches of woods, to which I naturally gravitated. My parents instilled in us kids a deep and sincere reverence for nature. We spent many, many weekends camping and hiking extensively in the forests of Vermont and New Hampshire. While NYC was geographically just 20 miles south, it may as well have been on another continent, as we kids only went there once or twice a year (my dad grew up there and commuted in and out every day). I was almost oblivious to NYC as my heart and soul were focused on the wilderness to the north.

"My wife (who grew up in ghetto-central East Village NYC in the '70s), son and I have been living in rural Ulster county now for the past 30 years. We live a fairly nature-centered life style, including raising farm animals, growing food, and foraging food. But we still live in a house, drive cars, etc., etc.. About 8 years ago I had an irrational internal mental response to someone else's bad behavior towards me. This resulted in some sort of mental event that rendered me uncontrollably angry, irrational, and vulnerable.



"Suddenly, my 'need' to sleep outdoors crystalized, and my motivation clicked into action. I selected a site on the property that was very very pleasant, with views of mountains and meadows, situated just into the edge of the woods and meadows. I wanted the site to feel somewhat open, but I wanted the woods to shade against the driving morning heat that can make waking up in a hot tent less than pleasant. My wife's one stipulation was that the tent be on some sort of platform above ground so that we did not absorb moisture from the ground.

"At this point I should clarify that this was/is not an endeavor to re-live some kind of Paleo-existence. I was not going to blog about it or try to 'prove' anything to my self or to anyone else. It's a quality of life issue, and a fairly privileged one at that.

"The first year, we slept on an air mattress in the tent. I hated that as when ever one of us rolled over, the other one took an unwelcome trampoline ride. Additionally, as the fall set in, the air in the mattress really seemed to favor holding the cold against our bodies. The experience however was so overwhelmingly awesomely excellent on the whole. I had selected a tent that was sturdy, but that had generous screen windows on all 4 sides. Fresh air while sleeping: check!

"We are serenaded by a host of assorted owl species, bands of coyotes, the chorus of frogs emanating from a distant pond, and other wildlife throughout the night. This did not intrude on our sleep in any way at all, but was so delicious to consume with our ears.

"Mornings are defined by awaking to delicious fresh air, beautiful choruses of song birds, and visits by deer, foxes red and grey, bear, and many other forest folk as we awoke in their yard.

"I set up an outdoor kitchen where we could cook on camp stove or camp fire if we desired. I hung many candle lit lanterns (carefully selected from yard sales) from tree limbs all around, mostly for beauty but also to negotiate the camp easily at night.

"I set up rustic chairs and table around a ceramic chimenea, hung a dumpster-salvaged crystal chandelier from an overhanging limb over the table, hung some of my Salvation Army bought paintings (with makeshift corrugated roofs to protect against rain) from various surrounding trees, hung cheap but tasteful crystal necklaces from various branches, and generally moved in.



"The following year I upped the ante by ditching the inflatable mattress and replacing it with a futon frame in the tent, with futon; feather bed; flannel sheets, and pillows. Clearly, this has nothing at all to do with 'roughing it,' but is about living in beauty, and in a 'more' natural framework.

"We have never ever had a single regret. The fresh cool air at night is indescribably luscious to me. The incredible orchestra at night is fresh, new and exciting every time. I often tell friends that the most exciting time of the day is going to bed.



"Lest there be confusion let me clarify that the going to bed excitement does not come from a hide-out-in-sleep sense of depression, but a highly charged life-loving excitement. We sleep SO well and wake up SO satisfied! It is always so exciting to set up the tent and start the season of sleeping outdoors, and it is always with a heavy heart that we pack up the tent once it is too cold to sleep outside. In fact, we have come to regard sleeping in our (delightful) house as 'roughing it.'

"

– Timothy Allen

## Jean-Claude's Story

"I have been sleeping outside year-round for 19 years, and there is no coming back to sleep between 4 walls. It is like experiencing freedom after years in prison. Every time I have to do it when travelling I feel the air so stuffy, so insulated from the real world..."

"I started with a sheet of plastic tensed above me, waking up one morning with snow and the plastic sheet collapsed on top of me. Now I have a fancy glass roof and an electric pad to warm the bed before I enter.

"Considering we spend one third of our time in bed. Connecting to nature is a fundamental longing in us, and breathing fresh air can only be healthier than breathing recycled air.



"I love waking with the light, feeling the ambiance of the day right away. Listening to bird language while still half asleep, and to the raccoon and the deer moving through the Salal (Gaultheria shallon) at night.

"Connecting to the moon cycle and the weather patterns, listening to the owls ([barred](#), [great horn](#), and [saw whet](#)), knowing where they are that night, where they hunt, nest. Listening to the nighthawk diving after insects, the crickets... so much interesting things happening that can be tracked when familiar with bird language. Knowing where is the hawk just by listening to the birds.

"I can also know when the loons or other ducks are courting. I can hear the seagulls and eagles, even the sea lions. I can smell the spectrum of smells over the seasons, feel the winds from the 4 directions. Sometimes I am reminded there is car traffic as far as Victoria, or that there are millions of people sleeping in a huge bath of artificial lights as far as Vancouver.

"Sleeping outside reminds me that the earth is alive, that I am also alive and belong because I am present and witness other forms of life participating in the big wheel of life. what does it tell me about my own gifts to give to the world?



"I am so feeling alive when storms come through and trees are moving so much, it is scary. I hear trees falling around me or big branches (one fell about 20 m from my bed ).

"Another big tree fell over our house during the night and I came with my flashlight inside the house to get a camera to film what I thought was two male deer fighting, and me walking on the roof at night checking the damage among a dense foliage. Life is full of adventure. The whole purpose of life is not to seek comfort and security, but to belong and participate in the drama of life and death.

"Countless times I saved the chickens from certain death in the middle of the night because I am sleeping outside and I hear the alarm to the raccoon or mink. Running naked with a giant knife or a machete in my hand.

"Direct immersion in the rhythms of nature bring both a quiet mind and vitality. I am living far away enough from artificial light to really appreciate the darkness. Sleeping outside keep me connected and healthy. I am waiting for the day when the big earth quake hits ..."

– Jean-Claude Catry



*"And following its path, we took no care  
To rest, but climbed: he first, then I --  
so far,  
Through a round aperture I saw  
appear  
Some of the beautiful things that  
Heaven bears,  
Where we came forth, and once more  
saw the stars."*

**Dante Alighieri, (1265-1321)  
The Inferno**

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