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The Surrender of Sleep

CHARLES PÉGUY

This is an excerpt from Charles Péguy's *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope* (Trans. David Louis Schindler, Jr. [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986]: 123–28, 131–36). It is published here with permission and available for purchase [here](#). Earlier issues have featured excerpts from this same work of Péguy's on the themes of [finding eternal meaning in our daily work](#) and [children inspiring the work of their parents](#).

The Portal of the Mystery of Hope, first published in 1912, is Charles Péguy's most famous prose-poem. Going through over sixty editions in the last hundred years, it gives voice to the French socialist's profound conversion to the Catholic faith, anchored in a vision that married eschatological vision with a deep sense of social realities. For Péguy, "the little girl Hope" is the most dynamic of the three virtues, enabling Faith and Charity to reach those parts of the humanity which a merciful God desires to plumb. The virtue of hope was of especial relevance to Péguy himself, whose personal circumstances prevented him from receiving the very sacraments around which his poetic vision revolved. Few poets have meditated so deeply on the meaning of human work, and he remains the poet of the disenfranchised and the dispossessed: those who might be tempted to despair at the futility of everything they do.

Children don't even think about being tired.

They run like little puppies. They make the trip twenty times.

And, consequently, twenty times more than they needed to.

What does it matter to them. They know well that at night

(But they don't even think about it)

They will fall asleep

In their bed or even at the table

And that sleep is the end of everything.
This is their secret, that is the secret to being indefatigable.
Indefatigable as children.
Indefatigable like the child Hope.
And always to start over again in the morning.
Children can't walk, but they really know how to run.
The child doesn't even think, doesn't know that he'll sleep at night.
That he'll fall asleep at night. And yet it's this sleep
Always at hand, always available, always present,
Always underneath, in full reserve,
That of yesterday, and that of tomorrow, like good food for one's being,
Like a strengthening of being, like a reservoir of being,
That's inexhaustible. Always there.
That of this morning and that of this evening
That strengthens his legs.
The sleep from before, the sleep from after
It's this same bottomless sleep
As continuous as being itself
Which passes from night to night, from one night to the next, which
continues from one night to the next
By passing over the days
Leaving the days as days, like so many holes.
It's in this same sleep that children bury their whole being
Which maintains, which creates for them every day new legs,
Their brand new legs.
And also that which is in their new legs: new souls.
Their new souls, their fresh souls.
Fresh in the morning, fresh at noon, fresh in the evening.
Fresh like the roses of France.

Their souls with the undrooping collars. This is the secret to being
indefatigable.

Just sleep. Why don't people make use of it.

I've given this secret to everyone, says God, I haven't sold it.

He who sleeps well, lives well. He who sleeps, prays.

(He who works, prays too. But there's time for everything. Both for
sleep and for work.

Work and sleep are like two brothers. And they get on very well
together.

And sleep leads to work just like work leads to sleep.

He who works well sleeps well, he who sleeps well works well.)

There must be, says God, some relationship,

There must be something going on

Between the kingdom of France and this little Hope.

There's some secret there. They work too well together. And yet they
tell me

That, there are men who don't sleep.

I don't like the man who doesn't sleep, says God.

Sleep is the friend of man.

Sleep is the friend of God.

Sleep may be my most beautiful creation.

And I too rested on the seventh day.

He whose heart is pure, sleeps. And he who sleeps has a pure heart.

This is the great secret to being as indefatigable as a child.

To have that strength in your legs that a child has.

Those new legs, those new souls

And to start over every morning, always new,

Like the young, like the new

Hope. Yes, they tell me that there are men
Who work well and who sleep poorly.
Who don't sleep. What a lack of confidence in me.
It's almost worse than if they worked poorly but slept well.
Than if they worked but didn't sleep, because sloth
Is no worse a sin than anxiety
In fact, it's even a less serious than anxiety
And than despair and than a lack of confidence in me.
I'm not talking, says God, about those men
Who don't work and who don't sleep.
Those men are sinners, it goes without saying. They get what they had
coming to them. Great sinners. All they have to do is work.
I'm talking about those who work and who don't sleep.
I pity them. I'm talking about those who work, and who thus
In doing this are following my commandment, poor children.
And who, on the other hand, don't have the courage, don't have the
confidence, don't sleep.
I pity them. I hold it against them. A bit. They don't trust me.
As a child lays innocently in his mother's arms, thus do they not lay.
Innocently in the arms of my Providence.
They have the courage to work. They don't have the courage to do
nothing.
They possess the virtue of work. They don't possess the virtue of doing
nothing.
Of relaxing. Of resting. Of sleeping.
Unhappy people, they don't know what's good.
They look after their affairs well during the day.
But they don't want to give them to me to look after during the night.
As if I weren't capable of looking after them for one night.

He who doesn't sleep is unfaithful to Hope.
And that's the greatest infidelity.
Because it's an infidelity to the greatest Faith.
Poor children, they manage their affairs wisely during the day.
But, come nightfall, they can't resolve
They can't resign themselves to entrust their affairs to my wisdom
They can't allow me to govern their affairs for the space of one night.
To take over the management and government of their affairs.
As if I weren't capable, I suppose, of looking after them a bit.
Of watching over them.
Of managing and governing and all the rest.
I manage plenty of other affairs, poor people, I govern creation, surely
that's more difficult.
Maybe you could, without much loss, leave your affairs in my hands,
wise men.
Surely I am as wise as you are.
Perhaps you could hand them over to me for the space of a night.
While you sleep
At least
And maybe tomorrow morning you won't find them too badly
damaged.
Maybe tomorrow morning they won't be any worse off.
I'm probably still capable of guiding them a bit.
I'm talking of those who work
And who in this follow my commandment.
And who don't sleep, and who in this
Reject all that's good in my creation,
Sleep, all that I have created good
And who reject all the same my same commandment.

What ingratitude these poor children have toward me
To reject such a good,
Such a beautiful commandment.
These poor children are following human wisdom.
Human wisdom says Never put off till tomorrow
What you can do today.
Whereas I tell you He who can put off till tomorrow
Is he who is most pleasing to God.
He who sleeps like a child
Is he, too, who sleeps like my precious Hope.
And I tell you Put off till tomorrow
Those concerns and those worries that are eating at you today
And that might devour you today.
Put off till tomorrow those sobs that choke you
When you see today's misery.
Those sobs that rise in you and strangle you.
Put off till tomorrow those tears that fill your eyes and cover your face.
That flood you. That fall down your cheeks. Those tears flowing from
your eyes.
Because between today and tomorrow, I, God may have passed by.
Human wisdom says: Cursed is he who puts off till tomorrow.
And I say Happy, happy is he who puts off till tomorrow.
Happy is he who puts off. Which means Happy is he who hopes. And
who sleeps.
And I say on the contrary Cursed.
Cursed is he who lies awake and doesn't trust me. What a mistrusting
of me. Cursed is he who lies awake.
And who drags.
Cursed is he who drags through the evenings and through the nights.

Through the eve of evening and through the fall of night.

Like a snail's trail across these beautiful eves.

My creatures.

Like a slug's trail across these beautiful nightfalls.

My creatures, my creation.

The thick remembrances of daily cares.

The burning, the gnawing.

The dirty tracks of our cares, the bitterness and the anxieties.

The sorrows.

The trails of slugs. Upon the flowers of my night.

Truly I tell you that this offends

My precious Hope.

Who wouldn't want to entrust me with the supervision of his night.

As if I hadn't proven myself.

Who wouldn't want to entrust me with the supervision of one of his
nights.

As if I were asking for more than one.

Who, having surrendered his affairs in poor condition when he went to
bed,

Has not found them well when he woke up.

Because I may have paid him a visit.

[...]

As the sea is the reservoir of water so night is the reservoir of being.

It's the time that I've reserved for myself. No matter what these feverish
days may do.

As in the open sea, in the middle of the night, they bathe in the
fulness of night.

It's they that are scattered, it's they that are fragmented.

The days are the Sporades Islands and night is the open sea
Upon which St. Paul sailed
And the border that descends from night to day
Is always a rising border
A steep border, and the border that rises from the day toward the night
Is always a descending border. In the depths of night.
O night, my finest invention, my most noble creation of all.
My most beautiful creature. Creature of the greatest Hope.
You give the most substance of Hope.
You are the instrument, you are the very substance and the
dwelling-place of Hope.
And also, (and thus), you are ultimately the creature of the greatest
Charity.
Because it's you who gently rock the whole of Creation
Into a restoring Sleep.
As one lays a child in his little bed,
As his mother lays him down and as his mother tucks him in
And kisses him (She's not afraid of waking him up.
He's sleeping so soundly.)
As his mother tucks him in and laughs and kisses his forehead
For pleasure.
And he too laughs, he laughs in response while sleeping.
So too, o night, dark-eyed mother, universal mother,
Not only mother of children (it's so easy)
But even mother of men and of women, which is so difficult,
It's you, night, who put to bed the whole of Creation
In a bed of a few hours
(Awaiting.) In a bed of a few hours
Image, feeble image, and promise and prefiguration of the bed of every

hour.

Anticipated realization. Promise kept in advance

Awaiting the bed of every hour.

In which I, the Father, will lay my creation.

O Night, you are night. And all the days together

Will never be day, they will never be anything but several days.

Scattered. The days will never be anything but flashes.

Uncertain flashes, and you, night, you are my great somber light.

I congratulate myself for having made night. The days are isles and islands.

That pierce and split the sea.

But they have to rest in the deep sea.

They're forced to.

And you too, days, you're forced to as well.

You have to rest in the deep night.

And you, night, you are the deep sea

Upon which St. Paul sailed, not that little lake in Galilee.

All the days are nothing but members

Dismembered members. It's the days that emerge, but even so they have to be anchored in the deep water.

In the deep night. Night, my finest invention, it's you who calm, it's you who soothe, it's you who bring rest

To aching limbs

All out of joint from the days work.

It's you who calm, it's you who soothe, it's you who bring rest

To aching hearts

To bruised bodies, to limbs bruised from work, to hearts bruised from work

And from daily cares and sorrow.

O Night, o my daughter Night, the most religious of all my daughters

The most reverent.

Of all my daughters, of all my creatures, the most abandoned into my hands.

You glorify me in the Sleep even more than your Brother, Day, glorifies me in Work.

Because in work man only glorifies me by his work.

Whereas in sleep it is I who glorify myself by man's surrender.

And it's more certain, and I know better how to go about it.

Night, you are for man a more nourishing food than bread and wine.

Because the man who eats and drinks, if he doesn't sleep, will not profit from his nourishment.

And it will sour and upset his stomach.

But if he sleeps, the bread and wine will become his flesh and blood.

For working. For praying. For sleeping.

Night, you alone dress wounds.

Aching hearts. All out of joint. All torn.

O my dark-eyed daughter, of all my daughters you alone are, and can call yourself, my accomplice.

You are in league with me, because you and me, me through you,

Together we cause man to fall into the trap of my arms

And we take him a bit by surprise.

But one takes what one can get. If anyone knows, it's me.

Night, you are the beautiful creation

Of my wisdom.

Night, o my daughter Night, o my silent daughter

At Rebecca's well, at the well of the Samaritan woman

It's you who draw the deepest water

From the deepest well

O night who gently rocks all creatures

Into a restoring sleep.

O night who bathes all wounds

In the only fresh water and in the only deep water

At Rebecca's well, drawn from the deepest well.

Friend of children, friend and sister to the young Hope

O night who dresses all wounds

At the well of the Samaritan woman, you who draw, from the deepest
well,

The deepest prayer.

O night, o my daughter Night, you who know how to keep silent, o
my daughter of the beautiful mantle.

You who confer rest and forgetfulness. You how issue a healing balm,
And silence, and shadow

O my starry night, I created you first.

You who send to sleep, you who already enshroud in an eternal
Darkness,

All of my most restless creatures,

The fiery steed, the industrious ant,

And man, that monster of unrest.

Night you succeed in quieting man

That well of unrest.

By himself more restless than all of creation put together.

Man, that well of anxiety.

Just as you quiet the water in the well.

O my night with the glorious dress

You gather children and the young Hope

Into the folds of your dress

Though men resist you.

O my beautiful night, I created you first.

And practically before first

O silent one, draped with veils

You who descend on earth as a foretaste

You who scatter by hand, who pour out over the earth

An initial peace

Forerunner of eternal peace.

An initial rest

Forerunner of eternal rest.

An initial soothing balm, an initial beatitude

Forerunner of eternal beatitude.

You who soothe, you who embalm, you who console.

You who bind wounds and injured limbs.

You who silence hearts, you who quiet bodies

Who still aching hearts, aching bodies,

Wrought with pain,

Worn-out limbs, backs broken

With weariness, with care, with (mortal) anxieties,

With sorrow,

You who administer balm to throats torn with bitterness

A cooling balm

O my noble-hearted daughter, I created you first

Practically before first, my great-bosomed daughter

As I knew well what I was doing.

Surely, I knew what I was doing.

You who lay the child in his mother's arms

The child, brightened with a shadow of sleep

Laughing inwardly, laughing secretly because of his confidence in his

mother.

And in me,
Laughing secretly out of the corner of his serious mouth
You who lay the child, inwardly bursting, overflowing with innocence
And with confidence
In the arms of his mother
You who used to lay the child Jesus every night
In the arms of the Most Holy and Immaculate one.
You who are the turn-sister of hope.
O my daughter, first among all. You who even succeed,
You who occasionally succeed,
You who lay man in the arms of my Providence
My maternal Providence
O my daughter, *glittering and dark*, I salute you
You who restore, you who nourish, you who give rest
O silence of darkness
Such a silence reigned before the creation of anxiety.
Before the beginning of the reign of anxiety
Such a silence will reign, now a silence of light,
When all this anxiety will have been consummated,
When all this anxiety will have been exhausted.
When they will have drawn all the water from the well.
After the consummation, after the exhaustion of all this anxiety
Man's anxiety.
Thus, my daughter, you come early and you come late
For in this reign of anxiety you recall, you commemorate, you
practically reestablish,
You practically recommence the former Serenity that existed
When my spirit brooded over the waters.
But, my starry daughter, my daughter of the dark mantle, you are also

very much ahead of your time, you are also precocious.

For you announce, for you represent, for you practically commence in advance, every night,

My great Serenity of light

Eternal.

Night, you are holy; Night, you are great; Night, you are beautiful.

Night of the great mantle.

Night, I love you and I salute you and I glorify you and you are my great daughter and my creature.

O beautiful night, night of the great mantle, my daughter of the starry mantle

You remind me, myself, you remind me of the great silence that existed Before I had unlocked the firmament of ingratitude.

And you proclaim, even to me, you herald to me the silence that will exist

After the end of man's reign, when I will have reclaimed my scepter.

And sometimes I think about it ahead of time, because this man really makes a lot of noise.

But above all, Night, you remind me of that night.

And I will remember it eternally.

The ninth hour had sounded. It was in the country of my people of Israel.

It was all over. That enormous adventure.

From the sixth hour to the ninth hour there had been a darkness covering the entire countryside.

Everything was finished. Let's not talk about it anymore. It hurts me to think about it.

My son's incredible descent among men.

Into their midst.

When you think of what they made of him.

Those thirty years that he was a carpenter among men.

Those three years that he was a sort of preacher among men.

A priest.

Those three days when he fell victim to men.

Among men.

Those three nights when he was dead in the midst of men.

Dead among the dead.

Through the centuries of centuries that he's been a host among men.

This incredible adventure was finished.

The adventure that has tied my hands, God, for all eternity.

The adventure by which my Son has tied my hands.

Tying the hands of my justice eternally, untying the hands of my
mercy for eternally.

Charles Péguy (1873-1914) was a notable French poet, essayist and editor.

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