

# What Does Sleep Have To Do With Waldorf Education?



[Rev Bowen](#)

- Dec 19, 2022
- 5 min read

Updated: Apr 28, 2023

Rudolf Steiner said something quite simple and yet fundamental to the first Waldorf teachers, just before the first Waldorf school opened in 1919. His statement is recorded in "The Foundations of Human Experience (formerly known as "The Study of Man"). He said that teachers must help children learn to breathe properly.

How strange!



What about reading, writing, and arithmetic? What about science and history? What about the arts?

As one becomes familiar with the works of Rudolf Steiner, it becomes easier to understand that he had a remarkable ability to use such simple pictures as metaphors that apply to many different aspects of life. He relates breathing to various processes in life, but in this article I want to focus on one: sleep.

Of course, I cannot completely isolate sleeping from waking and dreaming. These are all part of that breathing process that we experience with our consciousness.

I have chosen this theme for two reasons. A newsletter subscriber requested an article looking at sleep, and I like to respond to these things when possible. It was especially easy to do so at this time of year, because here in the northern hemisphere where I live, we are less than one week from the winter solstice--the longest night of the year. In the annual rhythm of the solar relationship with Earth, we are in the great sleep of long, dark nights. The life-giving forces of nature are practically hibernating. So, the topic seemed especially apropos.

How, then, can we see sleep as an expression of "breathing"? If we think of the breath as our consciousness, it becomes more apparent. During our waking time, daytime for most people, we are conscious of this world and ourselves in it. We have experiences, thoughts, feelings, etc. Then, each night, we lay our bodies down and sleep. Where does our consciousness go? We might recall some dreams from this time, which suggests a sort of "in-between" consciousness. Still, where is our consciousness the rest of the night? Do we simply black out? Or, is it possible that we have another set of experiences, just as real as those of our day-waking experiences--only, we do not recall them?

I realize that the last question sounds fantastic. I had heard this idea during my teacher training, but having no experience with it directly, I simply put it up on my "shelf". I have a kind of holding area--I call it my shelf--where I put ideas that I cannot simply accept as fact without some experience and yet I reserve because I cannot simply dismiss as falsehood either. Reincarnation sits on the shelf, for instance. The idea that we might have another "life" when our consciousness "breathes out" during sleep sat on the shelf for about a decade.

I started teaching my second class in first grade, having just completed the first-through-eighth journey with my first class. One of the first grade students in the new class was a very unique boy. Bright, fun-loving, happy, and full of unique curiosities. He just had his own way about things. As I became more familiar with him and his family, his mother began to share things with me. She said that the boy, I shall refer to him as "David", had had an almost-obsessive interest in electronics for a

few years. Remember, David was only six years old when I met him. So starting around 3 or 4 years old, he had expressed interest in electronics. He wanted to take things apart and put them back together. David's parents began to buy a few basic tools for him and he proceeded to work on things around the house. Soon, the parents began buying electronics from second-hand stores for David. When the items did not function, David would request certain components to replace. Usually, David was able to repair these electronic items. Mother assured me that neither she nor her husband were trained to work with or even interested in working on electronics.

But surely there was a neighbor or a grandfather, someone spurring the boy's interests and guiding his learning? I asked. No. The mother was as flummoxed as I was. There was simply no explanation for it. Finally, she asked David to tell her how he understood these things, how he knew what to repair or replace? How, she asked, was he learning to do these things?

David plainly told her that he went to "the other place" each night and that was where he learned what to do. He was surprised she did not remember because, according to David, she was there too.

Do you feel some skepticism rise up as you read this? I certainly felt it when I heard it. Yet, the more I got to know this family, the less I could dismiss this account. They were honest, good, kind people. They did not try to garner attention with fantastic stories. In fact, the parents and the children were all fairly quiet people. They were genuine in their interactions. And all the while David continued to work on more and more complex electronics.

In Waldorf education, we attempt to work with the daily breathing process that our consciousness experiences. It does not take long for the brand new teacher to recognize the value of it. We can present a new story or a new lesson of some kind on a given day. The students will absorb what is presented to some extent. If we can allow it to "go to sleep" and then "re-awaken" the lesson on the next day, then we see how the human consciousness works with it, even though the child was not aware of it happening. Each time we allow these things to sleep and then re-awaken them, they gain greater potency. The human consciousness, not just the waking consciousness, processes these things on various levels, deepening our understanding in many ways. I often think of ruminant animals, who chew their food multiple times, allowing the food to be digested in various stomachs or stomach compartments. Each time, the food is digested more fully.

Do we go to "another place" each night and work on these things together, as David insisted to his mother? This idea is still on my shelf. I have no recollection, at this point, of this happening.

However, I can say that by working consciously with the breathing process of waking-sleeping-dreaming, whether as a teacher with lessons or as a human with questions and intentions, I am more convinced than ever that there is power in embracing the rhythm. I am not sure exactly how it works, but I am absolutely sure it works. It's like electricity for me. I do not fully understand it, but I know I can plug in my lamp, put in the right bulb, and I can have light on my desk. In the case of learning, the power (electricity) is in the rhythmic waking-sleeping-reawakening process.

As the old saying goes: "Rhythm replaces strength."

This is why having a well-established routine and time schedule for eating dinner and sleeping each evening will help the growing child tremendously. This regular rhythm will support their biorhythms and foster healthy organ function. It is deeper than just feeling "rested". The human consciousness, the learning process, needs this "out breath" that occurs during sleep.

Here is a little study that presents some scientific verification. In this study they refer to part of the learning process as "memory consolidation" and assert that their findings conclude that this occurs during sleep.

### [Harvard Sleep Study Results](#)

As we prepare for the longest night of the year and whatever other holidays you may celebrate, I encourage you to consider the quality of your sleep. We spend up to a third of our days engaged in this activity. Perhaps there is more to it than we usually allow.