

# Why Lying in Bed Can Be a Good Thing

One of G. K. Chesterton's most profound essays is simply titled "On Lying in Bed." It begins in an odd and amusing way: "Lying in bed would be an altogether perfect and supreme experience if only one had a coloured pencil long enough to draw pictures on the ceiling."

Huh? Lolling about in bed isn't a perfectly supreme experience all on its own? Perfection can only be achieved if the one doing the lolling can pretend to be a Michaelangelo at the same time?

Blank sheet or blank ceiling, G. K. Chesterton could not create on the order of a Michaelangelo. But lying awake in bed, while staring at a blank ceiling, did lead him to ponder the possibilities that might await him.

It turns out that Chesterton really thought that lying in bed is a fine thing to do—period. It also turns out that he was quite aware of something other than adorning unadorned ceilings, namely that there are those who regard the laziness of lying in bed as not just plain laziness, but unhealthy laziness.

Such critics might even go so far as to call this unhealthy laziness decadent. But Chesterton put a variation of that very word "decadence" to a different purpose. He thought the "exaltation of very small and secondary matters of conduct at the expense of very great and primary ones" was itself evidence of "decadence."

The exaltation that he had in mind here was the exaltation of health. To Chesterton, pursuing health is decadent, but lying in bed is not. In fact, someone lying in bed may be the picture of healthiness.

Chesterton then unloads both barrels on the real problem that accompanies an unhealthy preoccupation with health: "If there is one thing worse than the modern weakening of major morals it is the modern strengthening of minor morals." Aha! Here Chesterton has hit on something of profound importance before lamenting that it has become far "more withering" to accuse someone of bad taste than of bad morals.

Today, admonitions against both bad morals and bad taste are little heard. Instead we might say that someone makes bad choices, or that someone is beset by bad genes, or that someone has bad habits. But bad morals? It's not likely.

Those two words, set back to back, have been stricken from our vocabulary of approbation. But another type of morals abounds. They would be what Chesterton terms the "minor morals." We can all list them: recycling, non-smoking, regular exercise, no straws, no plastic bags. The list goes on and on, while growing ever longer.

Chesterton's own list featured matters of health and "cleanliness." The latter was no longer next to godliness; instead, it had been declared an "essential," while "godliness is regarded as an offense."

Chesterton also targeted the organization of one's day, whether that be one's lunch time or exercise time—or getting out of bed time. Again, Chesterton turned to his definition of a "great peril" facing his England. That same "peril" looms before us today, namely that society's "mechanisms may grow fixed while its spirit grows more fickle." In other words, the things that should be constant in our lives are our "principles and ideals," while our "minor actions and arrangements ought to be free, flexible, and creative."

Should emerging from bed at the same early hour every morning be elevated to an ideal? Chesterton would have bellowed a resounding "no." Then he might have chuckled. After all,

misers get up "early in the morning," while burglars get up "the night before."

For G. K. Chesterton lying in bed, with or without a colored pencil, was potentially a "great art." And it was especially that if it was accomplished "without any reason or justification at all."

Still, Chesterton continued to turn things upside down: if a genuinely healthy man lies in bed "without a rag of excuse," he will remain a healthy man whenever he decides to get up. On the other hand, if an allegedly healthy man chooses to leave his bed for "some secondary hygienic reason," well then, he is likely to emerge a "hypochondriac."