Sleep, Surrender, and the Sabbath  
By Arin Fisher, M.Div. Junior

The great English adage reminds us that the early bird gets the worm. But what happens when the bird doesn’t get REM (rapid eye movement/dream) sleep the night before due to some insomniac sleep disorder? The bird will be disoriented, as if drunk, and miss the worm anyway, completely defeating the purpose of waking early in the first place. In this tale the early bird is an American (or other nationality, really), and his or her loss of restful sleep means losing more than a meal—in some cases of parasomnia, it could lead to sleep-strangling your spouse.

The diverse manifestations of sleep disorders comprise just one part of “Sleep, Surrender, and the Sabbath,” a class taught on Tuesday mornings by Dr. Robert Dykstra. The class explores sleep, dreams, Sabbath, and, tying it all together, surrendering to ourselves and God.

As a student in the class, I’m exploring sleep-related questions: What limits my ability to be intentionally present (socially, sexually, spiritually.) every day? Can I be more receptive to a God who, throughout biblical history, communicates profoundly and diversely through dreams? The answer for me is: (1) lack of restful sleep is limiting my presence, and (2) I can be more receptive to God by being more generally aware of my dreams and most importantly, by being more rested.

But I’m just one of many students who are prone to filing into class a little after 8:30AM, having missed a few hours of shut-eye the night before, probably writing papers, reading, or sipping beer at the Ivy. The classes are sleepy, and Dykstra jokes on occasion about how sleep deprived he is. Even in a class studying sleep theory, we collectively seem to fail when it comes to practice. But that doesn’t mean we aren’t learning.

Dykstra first designed the class experimentally ten years ago after having become a father. “The alums of those first sleep classes, long after they had graduated from PTS, kept writing to tell me of the importance of the course to their lives, again both in their personal practices and in their pastoral ministries,” said Dykstra. “I brought back the course this year after the long hiatus in large part because of those former students’ responses and also because I was feeling the need again in my own life to attend to slackening patterns of rest and Sabbath observance.” The benefits of rest and Sabbath observance appear to be causally related to a more abundant life.

Understanding the architecture of sleep was a priority at the beginning of the semester. On February 19 a student volunteered for a sleep study at University Medical Center at Princeton, which involved having countless cords attached to her head, chin, arms, and legs. Students crammed into a viewing room while Vinny, the technician, narrated the events, progress, and translations of the computer-generated squiggles flowing across the screen. We, mere seminarians, were watching a miracle: sleep. And we felt fluent enough in sleep terminology to ask Vinny informed questions. In the calculated polysomnography report, we learned our student volunteer had perfectly normal sleep. For those interested in a sleep study, the costs run upwards of thousands of dollars, but health insurance makes it affordable.

Though sleep observance was a fascinating treat, it ultimately served to reinforce the idea that sleep is a natural behavior that may be done well or badly, just like breathing, eating, drinking, or exercising. “There is a lot to be said theologically, spiritually, biologically, and psychologically about topics of sleep, dreams, the night, darkness, and surrender,” said Dykstra. “We don’t often talk about them in seminary classrooms or even in ordinary conversation.” Maybe we should change that.