

Sleeping in Church

by Dr. Rosalie de Rosset

I have come to realize that falling asleep in church or in other formal settings is not the worst thing one can do; it may just mean that one has been led into peace. Let me illustrate.

For many years I had season tickets to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Though sometimes it was hard to get out to the loop in the dead of winter when the wind whistled barbarically through the streets and alleys of downtown Chicago and parking was hard to find, I always went. And my tickets were for Friday nights after a busy week of work. If I hadn't made the financial commitment, I would have been tempted to do something easier and probably far more trivial. However, each time I entered the beautiful lobby of Orchestra Hall and made my way down the carpeted aisle in the splendor of that vintage auditorium, I was glad I had made the effort. My seats were in the third row on the right, an area considered less than ideal because of its proximity to the front, but a place I came to love for the feeling of practically being in the body of musicians, surrounded by the sound of music, good music.

Of course, in the scheme of things, not all the concerts were favorites; some music was too modern, too cacophonous, or too busy. These are matters of preference. Nevertheless, through the years, I heard my share of the best violinists and pianists, brass, and percussionists, all led by well-known conductors. One of the odd realities of those years was the times (certainly not always) when I fell asleep for fifteen or twenty minutes during an extended passage of music. The sleep was unlike any other I have experienced—sweet and deep. I'd awake, sometimes at the end of a movement, sometimes to the clapping around me, sometimes in the middle of a musical composition—but always I was at peace, utterly relaxed. At first, I felt a bit guilty, inappropriate, less than intellectually engaged with the experience. One thing, however, I consistently noticed was that I was far from alone in that large auditorium.

Recently, I had a similar experience in church. For two Sundays I visited a church, not the usual one I attend. I knew almost no one in the service; I came in and sat in the back by myself. The first thing I noticed was the quiet of the setting, a quiet which continued throughout the service to the end. Parents managed their children; there were no verbal bridges between sections of the service; everything proceeded organically. The music, led unobtrusively by musicians whose voices were lovely and subdued, whose instruments were appropriately and skillfully played, made one want to pay attention to the words which were intelligent and thought-provoking. Several readers read from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the Epistles, and the Gospels. The celebrant led the people in prayers; then the pastor gave his teaching. As the service moved on, I found myself more and more relaxed though not inattentive. I prayed every word of those prayers, thought about the songs. That sweetness I had known years before came over me, and yes, halfway through the sermon, I slept for five or ten minutes but not because I was bored. I awoke with the feeling that I had been visited with peace, a peace that lingered with me for hours.

This is not a defense or promotion of sleeping in church, but it does occur to me that there are a lot worse things than being led into that kind of quiet, into that kind of peace. In both cases, in the concert hall and in the church sanctuary, God had quieted my spirit, perhaps one of the great needs in a noisy world which too often invades the church. Just my thoughts today. For Moody Radio, this is Rosalie de Rosset