

# Lying Down Anyhow: An Autoethnography

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## **Abstract**

Where lying down is a simple physiological act, lying down among people is a far more complicated thing. When my own body requires me either to lie down in public places or absent myself from the social world, I face complicated questions about who I am and who I want to be in a world where I do not conform. Interweaving diaries and memory with conversation, observation, secondary research, and reflection, this autoethnographic text is a celebration of the rebel body and of a search for a more curious way of being. Unfolding a collective need for courage to break rules that cry out to be broken, *Lying Down Anyhow* begins with my body but is, more truthfully, a tale for every body.

We sip from glasses of orange juice and half-pint lagers on a cool afternoon in autumn, a gentle rise and fall of conversation, and I nudge off my shoes to lie upon the cushioned window seat. From behind the bar, the landlord hurls himself toward me, his face as livid as the velvet beneath me. "Get up, get up, get out. This is a respectable establishment."

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When I lie down, it is clean mountain air, cool water in blistering summer, soft rains of release. Sit up, and I am fragile as ice, a light breeze might shatter me. Sitting up, I am beyond my body; lying down, cradled by gravity, I creep back in to occupy my self.

In the privacy of home, I move from bed to sofa, sofa to floor, pillow, rugs, and hardwood boards. I lie down wherever I happen to be, with the ease of 20 years' practice, freely.

But in the world outside, I am censored. I seek out-of-the-way spaces: corridors and empty classrooms, fields and first aid rooms and once, even, a graveyard. I wait to be alone, tuck myself from sight and then, only then, as though it is a thing of shame, I recline.

To be a part of the social world, I must sit: brace myself, block body from mind, steel will. To lie down is to absent myself from ordinary spaces. I wonder how many of us there are skulking in the in-between spaces. And I wonder at how such an everyday action, a simple thing born of necessity, became something to conceal. What taught us our shame?

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“Lie down on the job” and we purposely neglect our work. “Let something lie” and we decline to take action. A “lay about” slacks and skives and shirks. The English language tells me my shame. Is that why, when I look around, I see lying down in public places only in the merest snatches and swatches of life, as though those of us who lie down have been written out?

Work hard enough, and I may recline, guiltless, in the green of summer parks or bake on sun-kissed beaches. With degrees of censure, young enough, slim enough, pretty enough, I can enter a young love's tryst, entwined on grassy banks. I can child's play Sleeping Lions and make angels in the snow, or pose as death on a yoga mat until body and self dissolve. Ill enough, and I can lie down on doctor's couch or in hospital bed, a properly licensed space. In extremis—grand mal and hypo, knife attack and heart attack—I can make the street my bed; although, mistaking me for drunk or overly dramatic, my savior might just “let it lie” and cross over the road.

Human beings do not, apparently, much lie down and, if they must, then they tempt accelerated demise. In the annals of research, lying down is all let-this-be-a-warning treatises on the dangers of bed rest, of bone demineralization and blood clots. Yet for me, lying down is my holding together; far from demise, this is my way to life.

In well-earned leisure, in pleasure, play, and extremes, we may lie down in public places. In carefully controlled circumstances, we will not be judged for idleness and sloth. But why is it, as adults, to lie down among others, we must either be productive or chasing death? It is as though, in permitting ourselves to lie down in carefully sanctioned spaces, we have become convinced of our autonomy, when all we have proved is the strength of its prohibition.

Out in the urban jungle, edgy young designers create street furniture to dissuade the populace from lying down: benches divided by armrests, rails for perching, seats which revolve to prevent extended idling (Lockton, 2008). New laws in multiple cities around the world make it an offence to lie down in public places. If Westminster Council prevails, lying down could cost me £500 (Bullivant, 2011); in San Bruno it could earn me 6 months in jail (San Bruno, 2011). This is not, you understand, a bid to address the social costs of homelessness, just to move on, design out, that which does not conform. Lying down in public spaces is no longer merely invisible; it is to be disappeared.

It seems it will take a brave woman to undertake public lying down. I intend to be her. I will not be disappeared.

I vowed to write lightly because I am writing of something so simple: of stretching out my legs, reclining my body, resting my head, among people. Lying down, for me, is lightness. But this is not light. To lie down, in social spaces, is not a simple act of physiology; it is a statement. In the midst of codes that say you do not do this, to lie down in public is confrontation.

Perhaps if it did not matter so much, it would be easy.

Still, I worry about the small things.

To lie down in front of others feels so exposed. The bed exists in private space; it is sleep and sex, intimacy and guard let down. In public, reclined, I have so much body; it unfolds and unravels on the horizontal plane, taking up more than its share of space. It flaunts itself, "look at me," and eclipses face and mind. I watch myself through the eyes and ideas, the anxieties and judgments of others; danger lurks in being misread. And I wonder: shall I keep my boots on or tuck them neatly to one side? There is no guidebook.

Lying down in public places demands portion control, dress sense and, in summer months, attention to the calluses on my feet. If I am to become a poster girl for the disappeared, I'd like to look my best.

The absence of a guidebook could yet become my freedom.

If the rules cannot be kept, then they are there for the breaking. And so I shall search for better ways.

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Tying my bootlaces by the front door, I glance up and see anew a picture that has hung so long it had blended to invisibility. A black-and-white engraving from the 1893 Graphic celebrates the fashionable seaside resort of Brighton where wealthy society brought ailments for salt-water cures. A gentleman, pale faced in bowler hat and waxed moustache, reclines upon a bath chair. His arm rests languidly upon the furs that swathe him and his fingers grip tight upon a cigarette.

Well-wishers smile and hang upon his every word: a lady admirer takes him by the hand, a gentleman rests an arm tenderly on the hood of the chaise, and a large dog stands sentinel. He is, the title tells us, An Interesting Invalid, and, though the chair's canopy frames him like a halo, he better describes a more fabulous, dissipated, dolce vita of invalidism. Perhaps this is a sensibility to aspire to.

Closer to nirvana, the Reclining Buddha rests his head upon a lotus flower. He lies feet together, long toes aligned, adorned in offerings of oranges and marigolds. In Thailand, the Buddha lies vast in stone, wrapped Christo-like in saffron folds (Visbeek, 2009), which billow in the breeze.

There are four "respect-inspiring forms" (Tophoff, 2006) in Buddhism, and the fourth of these is lying down. A lighter expression of being, it shifts us "out of the way of the Way" (Vassi, 1984), so that we may more readily find the path to an authentic self. Is there revelation in this for me? Lie down and I am freed from the distraction of physicality to reoccupy my self; transcending the tethers of the social world, I find there are other ways to be.

The reclining figures of Henry Moore survey the landscape with a gaze that is far-seeing. Rooted in this earth, organic, monumental, they cast aside the myth of beauty to embrace the energy, barely contained, of the static form. His figures rise from stone so embodied, so absolutely present, they almost breathe. I read of the themes of the sculptor's work—truth to the material, form-knowledge (Wilkinson, 2002), resurrection (Wright, 1947)—and I smile. Responding to my own materiality, I shape myself to its truth and find, for me, that lying down is life restored.

And, just as the figures echo the contours of the Yorkshire in which they belong, when I lie down, I come home. Moore would “give everything” (Wilkinson, 2002) to chisel figures “more alive than a real person” (Wilkinson, 2002), though few could ever outdo the cojones of Frida Kahlo. All passion and flesh, she painted her very self. From her bed, reflecting her gaze in a ceiling-mounted mirror, she described the play of gravity on the contours of a body lying down. I see her now, muddying the bed sheets with oil and turpentine, lust and rebellion hand-in-hand.

Always one for the grand entrance, she is photographed lying in state at the opening of a solo show, the paintings hastily rearranged to accommodate her bed (Herrera, 1983), until Frida herself became a work of art. No fears holding her back. Even after she had left the room, her bed remained.

When he was ill, Christopher Newell would have his bed wheeled to the front of the tiered lecture theatre in Hobart Hospital, from where he would address future-doctors on the ethics of their profession, urging his audiences to “dare to encounter the muckiness of everyday ethical decision making” (Newell, 2002). As associate professor, he lay down with authority, and he lay down knowingly. He unfolded and unraveled his body among people in a bid to move his students from “other to us” (Newell, 2006), to bring them to a point of knowing, deep down, the humanity of those they would meet in their later professional lives. He lay down for both his comfort and his campaign.

In the sand dunes of Kijkduin, on the North Sea coast of the Netherlands, lies a crater, 30 meters across, entered through an underground passage (Frank, 2011). At its core lies a bench of stone built for lying down, in a sculpture that can only ever be appreciated prone. Supporting the whole of the body, it tips the head back until your gaze is cast upwards, beyond the circle of the crater's rim, from where you fall up up up into a canopy of sky. We believe we know the sky, arched above us in the

everyday, but Turrell's sculpture of light wraps it, traces its edges, and the world looks different from here.

I vowed to write lightly because lying down, for me, is lightness and Turrell's Celestial Vault begins to uncover a lighter way. When I gaze up, does his sky fall in upon me, or does it fall away? Does it threaten to come hurtling down, or can I reach up to touch it? When I lie down, transgressing my society's norms, should I brace myself for disapproval or shall I lean toward it in curiosity and embodied exploration?

Is lying down an act, or is it a process of discovering the people who surround me? There are many ways to be in the world.

And now I remember. I lay down another time in public. In Covent Garden, cobbles unyielding, I dragged a large foam cushion behind me. Oh, this time it was good. We were a festival of artists with rebel bodies and an outsider view. For that day, we occupied the space, discovering who we might be in a world that was ours. I lay down among people and it felt just fine.

So here is my choice: I can absent myself from the social world, or I can lie down anyhow. If there is no guidebook, I shall write one for myself. I will not "take this lying down." My guide is not about managing shame or the troubled body. My guide is about seizing some small courage and breaking rules that cry out to be broken. It is about laughing with the results and going back for more. And it's about realizing that, when I push the boundaries, others find their courage too: that time, that conference, where I sat on the floor and, way days later, amidst sighs and wry smiles, at least half the people there had made themselves more comfortable too.

My guide shows me that lying down is not a simple act of physiology but my marking out a place in the world.

Sitting up is about my body, but lying down is a declaration of liberty, the soft rain of release.

And so, I see it now; here is my freedom: I shall be fabulous in my dissipation, delight in the earth-mother voluptuousness of a Henry Moore, get out of the way of the Way

in my drapes of gold and protest from the very heart of body and soul. I shall be Frida Kahlo, has she no shame, brazen hussy, wearing her wounds with pride. And my boots I shall tuck neatly to one side.

And every time I venture out and lie down, it will be a fanfare for the disappeared, a toast to the rebel body, and I will say, we are here and we are here and we are here .

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