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A personal reminiscence of Michel Jouvét: the poet of paradoxical sleep



Jouvét (right) and Guillemainault (left) Narcolepsy Meeting in Switzerland, Fall 2006

Others will surely write about the scientific accomplishments of Michel Jouvét, his appointments to many scientific academies, his time in the French underground movement during World War II, as well as the awards he received from around the world. However, I would like to present another side of one of the great figures of our time. He was born in Lons-le-Saunier, a town in the eastern part of France, and died in Villeurbanne, which borders Lyon. Michel Jouvét's teenage years were spent under Nazi occupation. But after France's liberation in 1945 he became a neurosurgeon. He went and worked with Professor Magouin at UCLA. There he studied brain structures involved in arousal and wakefulness. During these early days he met William C. Dement, who would grow to be his long term friend. Dement and Jouvét believed that sleep study required understanding of the cognitive components which occurred during sleep as well as investigation of biological mechanisms. Neither adhered to the Freudian theories on sleep but hypothesized that sleep was associated with a specific mind activity, particularly with dreams. Jouvét proposed that brain activity during sleep was in part what set man apart from other species, and was associated with development of the mind. For years Michel Jouvét began his day by analyzing his dreams, and he thought of them as *songes*, which in French refer to an inner thought, a genetic passage of acquired knowledge. He believed that sleep was a state where knowledge was increased.

When affected by a personal tragedy Jouvét frequently traveled, often to Bill Dement's laboratory; where he would meet with the research team, particularly with graduate student Steven "Steve" Henrikssen. They shared a curiosity for understanding the role of ponto-geniculo-occipital waves, as well as a love for the cat, an animal which could sleep for hours while being monitored during experiments. The basement of an old Stanford anatomy building was the location for many late night

scientific discussions. One particular night, Steve drew a small square on the blackboard and called it "the house of the neuroscientist sleep researchers" and next to it drew a very large square labeled "the house of Jouvét". That drawing stayed on the blackboard for weeks.

I was able to sympathize having grown in the same culture as Jouvét. After long scientific discussions, we would go to places that stayed open late at night where one could "enjoy" a glass of beer alongside a tasteless hamburger. There, besides sleep, we spoke on many topics, such as the merit of small wines from Jura, long before they were discovered by the public at large, and how to deal with crayfish in the marshes of the Dombes, where he would later choose to live. Often we would discuss travel, as both of us liked to "go places".

Life went on and visits to the old anatomy building became much less frequent. For a time I would see him at the annual APSS meetings. During these gatherings, Steve, joined by post-doctoral fellow, Dr. Barbara Jones, Jouvét and I would still have long discussions. Barbara and Steve understood Jouvét's quest to unravel the underlying secrets of paradoxical sleep and the human sleeping brain better than most.

One of our last US encounters took place after the APSS meeting in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Jouvét wanted to see the national park. In the back of a Dodge van I had placed a fridge and a bed in such a way that the bed's headboard could recline into a bench as needed. We took a day trip exploring the national park, each of us seated in one of the van's two seats while two ladies sat on the very uncomfortable makeshift bench which lacked anything to hold on to for support. The Dodge's unaligned wheels only enhanced the experience. One of those two ladies who suffered a lot during this tour later became the mother of his four children, and the other the mother of my two sons. Going back to the scientific meeting at the end of the day, Jouvét recommended that I fix my wheels before departing on my next expedition to the dirt roads of Alaska.

After that trip we would still see each other during conferences, where at times Jouvét became irritated by what he considered to be the commercialization of sleep research. He held me responsible for this shift, due to my goal to establish a Sleep Medicine as a separate discipline. He would grumble that "sleep was not a machine for breathing" or "for cutting people's throats" to which I would respond that there would always be "merchants in the temple"; and then we would go on chatting about his next trip to some far-away place. Jouvét was eternally enthusiastic at the possibility of a new discovery or voyage. Throughout our friendship he was always "Monsieur" to me, and I, "Guillemainault" to him. Despite our differing beliefs and ages he understood my goals. The voyage was something that both of us appreciated, and we knew that the "voyage" never really ends. Bon voyage Monsieur Jouvét.

Christian Guillemainault
Stanford University, Redwood City, CA, USA
E-mail address: cguil@stanford.edu.

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