

Swedenborg, Afterlife Eyewitness

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Columbus of the Afterlife

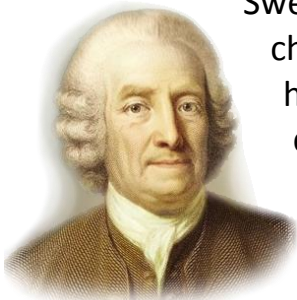
In 1492, Italian navigator Christopher Columbus set sail on Spain's behalf with the aim of finding a westward route to South East Asia, countries then known collectively as the 'Indies'. On his voyage he unwittingly bumped into the Antilles, mistakenly naming it the "West Indies". Columbus was unaware of the immensity of the place he had discovered. Yet his Italian successor Amerigo Vespucci saw at once that the width of the river mouths could only flow from a vast continent and realised that an entirely new continent had been discovered. He promptly announced this to the press, hence America was named after him rather than being called Columbia after his countryman. This was how the New World was found and named.



To celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus landing in the Americas, a world expo was constructed in Chicago. The World Columbian Exposition of 1893 was designed by architects Daniel H. Burnham and John W. Root, pioneers of the skyscraper. The event was dubbed the Great White City due to its white-washed edifices, laid out like a heavenly city on earth. Burnham and Root's design and Burnham's subsequent work incorporated representations of the afterlife as described in the writings of Swedish scientist and seer Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772).



The Chicago event was a showcase for the latest technologies of the world, such as ice cream, the escalator, the Ferris wheel and alternating current power lighting up the streets. Many countries came to present their architecture and culture. Such a unique gathering of countries gave lawyer Charles Bonney the idea to convene a meeting of the world's religions at the expo site. This became the first *World Parliament of Religions*. Bonney was another influential person who was familiar with the afterlife explorations of Swedenborg whose writings promote a universalism across spiritual paths.



Swedenborg was a polymath (having studied mathematics, physics and chemistry) and gifted scientist renowned throughout Europe. As scientist he originally set out with an aim to discover the nature of the soul by delving into the sciences of his day. He was a very practical man who spoke many languages, lodged with craftsmen to learn their techniques and became experienced in many fields. He assisted the king of Sweden, and as an active member of the Swedish parliament he oversaw the country's mining operations. He wrote about his observations and deductions, whether they be about metallurgy, magnetism, biology, or on practical problems and inventions. He is credited by the Smithsonian as being the first

person to design an aeroplane that can actually fly. He built himself a microscope and telescope, designed a musical instrument, and published a magazine on inventions. He visited famous scientist and astronomers like Royal Society members Sir Edmond Halley and John Flamsteed. Swedenborg correctly deduced the formative origins of the stars and planets now known as the nebular theory (the same theory was later echoed by Pierre-Simon Laplace). In Swedenborg's primary search for the soul, he considered the body an expression of the soul and therefore suspected the body may hold vital clues to the soul's structure. So he embarked on a thorough study of anatomy. During that study he discovered the function of the pituitary, the communication between the brain hemispheres, and many other body and brain functions besides. Yet even this remained inadequate evidence for the soul he was seeking. Next he delved into psychology (not yet a separate discipline in his day), noting and analysing his dreams and states between sleeping and waking. This was a period of intense psychological growth for him. Finally, he embarked on mastery of Hebrew to see what the Bible might have to say about the soul.

Like the unexpected arrival on new shores by Columbus while on a search for a different place, Swedenborg's life too changed abruptly while visiting London in 1745. He had been searching for new insights into the nature of the soul, but abruptly hit land somewhere different than expected. That year in London he experienced a major psychic vision in which he encountered the Divine Creator who granted him the ability to experience and explore the afterlife firsthand and talk to people there. All this so that he might document first-hand experiences about that world and reveal the truth about the reality of the afterlife. He was granted an 'access all areas' pass to the country of Spirit (if I might call the afterlife that).

This unexpected and unusual visionary capacity stayed with him for the remainder of his life, while he continued to explore sacred writings and illuminate their forgotten meanings, as if polishing an antique gold lamp to restore it to its former value. What he experienced in the country of Spirit was a guided illustration of the meaning of those scriptures and to enable him to give a complete account of the afterlife's layout, laws and operations, and inhabitants and their lives. He was now also given answers to all that he had sought through his previous scientific endeavours in the foregoing decades.

Buddha of the North

Zen Buddhism was well represented at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Zen master Soyen Shaku met the scholar Paul Carus there as Carus happened to be looking for someone to help translate some important Buddhist texts into English. Shaku recommended one of his best students, D. T. Suzuki.

Suzuki came to live and study for some years with Carus while translating Eastern spiritual literature from ancient Chinese for publication in the West and also then began his Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism. Suzuki became one of the greatest exponents of Zen and Mahayana Buddhism in the West.



While in the USA, Suzuki met Buddhist scholar Beatrice Lane who had studied philosophy and religion. Her teacher had been William James, who, like his father Henry James Sr, was well versed in Swedenborg's writings. Lane and Suzuki married four years later.

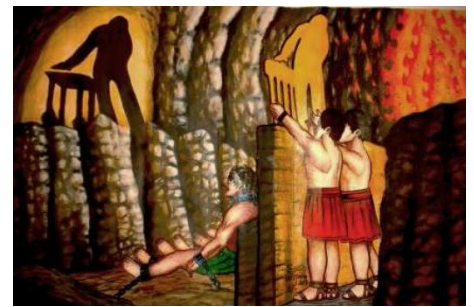
Suzuki saw many similarities between the teachings of the Buddha and Swedenborg. This led to his book entitled *Swedenborg, Buddha of the North*. Both teachers have overlapping insights about fulfilling our potential, on the necessity of cultivating wisdom which combats egoism, on the importance of expressing love through active service to others and engaging with this world. They also both teach that people of any religion can end up in heaven so long as they acknowledge a Divine Being and faithfully practice their religion with a focus on living a good and useful life.

Suzuki sums up Swedenborg as: "Theological revolutionary, traveller of heaven and hell,... great king of the mystical realm, seer unique throughout history,... clear-minded scientist,... all these make Swedenborg".

Plato of the Afterlife

As a result of the migration out of Constantinople, Neoplatonist interests in Europe grew in strength as people saw Plato's ideas as being able to liberate the stuffy intellectual and political climate of the time. Plato offers a fitting illustration for the difficulty of appreciating the afterlife by those who have not been privileged to enter its borders personally in a near death experience.

His *Allegory of the Cave* is the story of a group of people chained to a cave wall their whole life, unable to turn their heads. The blank wall they face displays shadows from things passing behind them as those things are lit by the bright fire at the rear of the cave. They start giving names to the various shadows. The shadows are as close as these prisoners get to seeing reality. A 'philosopher' (prisoner set free from the cave) begins to understand that the shadows on the cave wall don't make up reality at all, because he can perceive the true form of reality instead of seeing only the shadows that the prisoners can see.



The chains represent our senses which respond to forms of things in the world outside. The cave is our world, the fire our sun. The path of the freed prisoner is our soul's path to enlightenment. Our world of sight is our intellect's world of opinions, which are at the bottom of the ladder of knowledge. Our world of inner sight is a higher world of understanding which allows us to 'see' things which go beyond natural things, such as a perfect circle (that's also where mathematical ideas live). These higher realities are abstract realities based on the knowledge that comes from reasoning. And abstract reality eventually leads us to understand the forms and the ideals of all things (the world outside the cave).

Swedenborg too regards the chief difficulty as our love and attachment of the world (and of ourselves in it), which prevents us from reaching higher levels of understanding in us. The rational mind needs to be exercised in us if we are ever to become open to a full appreciation of the afterlife and its language and operations. The rational mind deals with abstracts, concepts which relate to the things experienced by the senses but which are at the same time not of the senses and removed from them. Concepts are the 'objects' of the

mind ('mind' is by Swedenborg equated with our spirit). Opening up to these higher levels of thought is part of our spiritual growth.

As Georges Ivanovich Gurdjieff, teacher of esoteric wisdom once said, if we want to escape from the prison of self we must first realise that we are in prison. Then we must make significant efforts and sacrifices and work with others in order to tunnel under the wall so as to escape. And we are incapable of succeeding in that unless we accept the help of those who have escaped before, because only experienced escapees can say in what way escape is possible or send tools, files and other necessary equipment.

Escape from being chained to a purely outer and sensory world reality is an important idea in Plato's allegory. It suggests another reality, that of the country of Spirit, which Swedenborg explored and described so thoroughly.

Rosetta Stone of the Language of Spirit

When Gemistus Pletho brought an influx of interest in Greek literature from the East, he reawakened the wisdom of ancient Greek culture for a Renaissance Europe. So too, Swedenborg, in his thorough search of Biblical texts through the lens of its original Hebrew was given through his spiritual experience to see an ancient meaning, which became due to it having been lost also a new meaning.



Swedenborg found that the country of Spirit is populated only with people who have first lived a planetary life. The inner history of all people who have ever lived has been retained in the afterlife. The earliest people were in direct personal and constant communication with that afterlife. Since they were given knowledge whenever they needed it, they never felt scarcity or lack. They felt and trusted the ongoing providence of the one Divine Creator. These were the people of the Golden Age of most ancient times, who lived a life of goodness and usefulness and of friendship with their fellow beings regardless of differences of opinions that may have existed. These people are referred to as angelic.

The language that these early people understood (people now in the afterlife) was a language of their inner nature, of their soul, their spirit. This language was dream-like and consisted of a representation of external and natural things to illustrate spiritual principles indicating how to live. Swedenborg calls this representational language of the soul 'Correspondences'. For example, the sun emits light and heat. Its light illuminates our environment so that we can see the things in it with our eyes so that we might understand it. The heat provides warmth, which provides a feeling of comfort and helps seeds to grow towards the soil surface and then upward into the sky toward the sun. The sun's light 'corresponds' to truths (knowledges) that we can understand while the sun's warmth 'corresponds' to the good that it provides that we can feel and experience.



When the ancient Egyptians wrote their hieroglyphs, their pictorial writing often expressed itself in such correspondences. As people became more intrigued and preoccupied by the world and worldly things and possessions, status and egotism, the early knowledge left them, although they still exercised kindness toward each other. To retain the knowledge now required symbols or

representations, reminders in the form of rituals and ritual objects, architecture, sculpture and art. The 'flood' refers to a period of history when people lost contact with the charitable kindness toward their neighbour and would do them harm if their knowledge or belief disagreed with their own. A love of control and dominating others and worldly things set in, as well as a growing love of possessions. This is the Representative period of people because they had representations. Over time however, even these representational things attracted false beliefs and false interpretations, and they became the objects of superstition and magic, or symbols of personal power and wishes for personal power.

Knowledge and understanding of the Egyptian hieroglyphs faded and was lost. More recent people puzzled over their meaning, mostly in vain. Until 1799 when a soldier in Napoleon's expedition to Egypt found a large stone near the town of Rosetta which was inscribed with a decree from King Ptolemy V (196 BC) who lived during the Greek reign of Egypt and wanted to make his decree known to all people and therefore commanded several stone stelae in the three languages which were then still in use. The newest of the three languages is Ancient Greek which we are now still familiar with, the oldest is Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, and the middle section was in the transitory language between them called Demotic script.

This gave translators a key or bridge linking modern word meanings back to the old language of the hieroglyphs that they were written in. All the extensive knowledge we have today of the ancient Egyptian language has grown from the clues provided on a single stone. Our knowledge of their hieroglyphs gives us a window into their culture, practices and thinking, which has the potential to influence our thinking (just as happened when Greek language influenced European thought at the birth of the Renaissance).

In the same way Swedenborg's extensive writings on the ancient and sacred language of correspondences revealed to him provide a wonderful key to a better understanding of sacred ancient texts including the Bible, but also helps us to make deeper sense of mythology, even of some fairytales, and of our dreams. In this way, Swedenborg has served us as a Rosetta Stone to uncover the language of our spirit.

Afterlife Influencer

Swedenborg met many people living in the other world. He indicated that death is merely a transition in our experience of life, but that life continues much like here. We retain of our personal individuality (mind) and have a fully functioning body, and so our experience of living life there will seem familiar with our experiences here. Some people regarded the after-death experience as so similar that someone had to inform them that they had died and are now in another realm of experience. Swedenborg spoke with some people in the country of Spirit for only a few hours or days, but with others he conversed with for years. He even met and talked with such famous people as Aristotle, Isaac Newton, as well as Martin Luther. In fact, Martin Luther came to find Swedenborg, shared many conversations with him, some of which changed Luther's views.



What Swedenborg wrote is vast in its detail and profound in its quality. His treatment of the country of Spirit remains consistent and coherent across the decades of his explorations. For me this dismisses any notion that he was tapping into self-generated fantasies, as these often become inconsistent over such long periods of time. Swedenborg experienced considerable personal hardship and put in an enormous effort to pursue his role as explorer of the afterlife. He demonstrated courage and a willingness to stop if he felt he was not on the right path. Some of his earliest works were stopped by him despite considerable effort he had already put into it. His earliest works he published anonymously, he paid for much of the publishing using his own funds, and gave away many copies of his works. Not the sign of a praise-seeking egotist. The powerful accounts of Swedenborg's writing has influenced a considerable number of bright minds who came after him, who read his works before making significant contributions of their own to society. But more on that below.

Eyewitness Account

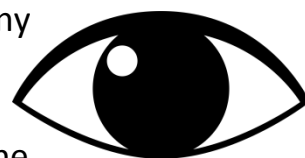
Before the birth of the internet, smartphones and Twitter, many families used to gather around the television set to absorb the Eyewitness News.

What does the perspective of an eyewitness add to a news report? A person on the scene helps highlight the reality of a described situation, it becomes more real and personal, more believable. The viewer vicariously sees the event through the eyes of the witness bringing the action closer. The next best thing to seeing it for yourself.

Before I travel to a new country, I like to read travel brochures and books written by those who have been there or hear accounts from friends who have visited there before me. It gives a feeling for the history, culture, language, habits and customs, highlights, beauty and places to avoid. These preliminary activities help me to be better prepared and get the most out of my planned trip. It helps select and prioritise destinations and activities, and reduces the likelihood of unwanted surprises. And of course my travel agent informs me about getting there, getting around, expected costs, luggage limits, immunisations, accommodation, customs requirements and passport and visa needs.

The point I'm making is that informed eyewitness accounts and experienced travel accounts are a useful source of information when assessing and preparing for a new journey. So seeking them out makes sense for me also when preparing to visit the country of Spirit. Not having yet been there yet, but certain that one day I am emigrating there, I decided to interview a number of people who've had Near Death Experiences (NDEs). I also read and watched a number of accounts from survivors from an episode of clinical death.

The difficulty with this country of Spirit is that there are not very many detailed maps available to us of what to expect there, although there are quite a number of 'maps' describing ways to go there: yoga, the eightfold path, the gospels, the path to Jannah, the Sufi teachings of the poet Rumi, etc.



I found a very comprehensive and useful map describing much of Spirit country (as well as the roads to it) in Swedenborg's writings. As one of the handful of men whose IQ is estimated to have exceeded 200, it is no wonder that his clear and honest descriptions

influenced many famous minds such as Carl Jung, Goethe, Emerson, Dostoevsky, William Blake, Helen Keller, Australian prime minister Alfred Deakin, Coleridge, Jorge Luis Borges, Arthur Conan Doyle, Henry James, Dr Eben Alexander, Franklin D. Roosevelt, the composer Strindberg, Abraham Lincoln, and many more. His writings were so treasured that they were sent to Australia on the First Fleet. The grand tour of the spirit world he undertook taught him much about the purpose of our natural human life, besides learning how to prepare for the full enjoyment of the afterlife.

"People who have had near-death experiences peek through the door of the after-life, but Swedenborg explored the whole house." - Dr Kenneth Ring, author of *Life After Death* (co-founder and Past President of IANDS)

One of the reasons that Swedenborg's account of the afterlife is valuable is because it is presented directly from his own pen from a single point of view of the entire afterlife realm as he experienced it. His 'map' is therefore extensive and thorough and has only one legend for interpreting his tour experiences using the language of the spirit world, namely the language of *correspondences*. Swedenborg did not rely on conveying his experiences through discipleship or organisations but through the press. He himself wrote out every word for the printers and personally supervised much of the printing efforts. We find many writings about the afterlife by others in a single work often originate from several historical periods from multiple points of view which can vary widely in their geographic and cultural backgrounds (the Tibetan Book of the Dead and Egyptian Book of the Dead come to mind). Swedenborg's accounts are a marvel of detail of the numerous experiences given to him to illustrate aspects of life as a spirit. His whole body of writings is extensive, giving us plenty of opportunity to assess their sanity and coherence, showing they present a very consistent and sane account of the spirit realm.

"I have been permitted to speak with almost all whom I had ever known in the life of the body; with some for hours, with others for weeks and months, and with others for years, and this principally in order that I might have proof, and that I might testify it." - Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell* 437



I came from a mainstream European spiritual background, from which I understood spiritual life to be at a rather pedestrian pace, restful but without much variety. Instead, Swedenborg paints the picture of a place which is very dynamic, vibrant and fully alive, very much like our own natural world with lots of variety. People are full of the joy of doing things they probably already loved doing when they lived in their natural body, as they continue using similar skills as before to provide uses and benefits to the whole community there.

Swedenborg mentions that people's place of residence in the afterlife is based on the quality of their internal states and intentions, i.e. what a person loves to pursue the most. This makes his writings a very worthwhile study to see why and how the quality of our motivations and actions can be worked on before we reach the moment when we finally cast off our body.



Our attention to this self regeneration ought to assist with finding ourselves a more agreeable place there.

For Swedenborg what was paramount for an abundant afterlife was to develop a positive close relationship with the Divine Creator, while expressing regard for fellow human beings by practicing what we know, turning our knowledge into acts of usefulness and kindness, without seeking merit for such actions but performing them purely for the joy of doing something good.

The warning contained in Swedenborg's account of the afterlife is that there are locations, regions, and communities there for those whose chief love and motivation was mostly self-centred. They live away from those who love to use their skills to serve others in their community. Yet, all people no matter which end of the spectrum they belong, feel that for them the place they live in the afterlife feels heavenly as it is suited to their main love.

"Swedenborg wasn't trying to scare the reader, he was just reporting, and that is what makes it more frightening and convincing... The possibility of cheating one's way into heaven dims when the internals are opened up in the second state of the world of spirits. This is the way the eternal judgment comes." - Dr Wilson Van Dusen, *The Presence of Other Worlds*.

Some NDE accounts, like that of Dr George Ritchie described in his book *Return From Tomorrow*, are extensive, but still only touch the borders of the country of Spirit compared to Swedenborg's long tour of the entire realm. Our contemporary pioneers of NDE experiences still express their debt to Swedenborg, e.g. Dr Raymond Moody (drawn to study NDEs after hearing a lecture by Dr George Ritchie) in his book *Life After Life* includes material on Swedenborg in which Dr Moody stated that he had discovered striking parallels between contemporary near-death-experiences and what Swedenborg had written. Further, he added that none of the people with whom he had talked when compiling his book were even aware of Swedenborg's writings, and asks how is it that Swedenborg's revelations agree so well with the narratives of today's individuals who have come so close to death.

Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote and lectured considerably on NDEs and has gone so far as to say that "We now know beyond all shadow of a doubt that there is life after death". She was familiar with what Swedenborg had written and she is basically in agreement with his teaching on life after death.

If you would like to know more about Swedenborg there are many helpful resources available on this website or on the websites of various other publishers of Swedenborg's works around the world such as the Swedenborg Foundation at www.swedenborg.com. Swedenborg's most popular work is *Heaven and Hell*.

There are excellent introductions to reading Swedenborg's works and ideas. Dr Wilson Van Dusen's books are a fine introduction. See this website or contact the Swedenborg Centre for publication details.