

Spiritual Journey Series

PART 2 (of Six)



**Drawn from the spiritual writings of
Emanuel Swedenborg (1688 - 1772)**

Part 2 - The Education of Emanuel Swedenborg

It was at the age of eleven that Emanuel began his formal education when he enrolled in the faculty of philosophy at Uppsala University (this was the usual age for privileged young men to begin studying within the sphere of a University but life was regimented and restricted). Latin, Greek and Hebrew were core subjects, something which helped him greatly in later life, as these were required for studying the classics. Branches of natural science and mathematics were added as time went on. He also developed a love for writing poetry.

Four years later, Emanuel's father, stepmother and most of his brothers and sisters left Uppsala to take up another country appointment. Emanuel remained with his elder sister and her husband, the university librarian. Living in this household for the next six years deeply affected the course of his life. His brother-in-law was an ardent follower of René Descartes, convinced that the future of learning lay in the realm of the sciences. He pursued his interest by staying in touch with the newest trend of thought and talked much with Emanuel about it all.

June 1709 saw Emanuel's "graduation" although this involved no granting of a degree in any modern sense. All students were required to read before an assembled company, a thesis they had written. Emanuel's was well received but his presentation of it disclosed a problem which would remain a lifelong difficulty for him. His speech was impeded by a noticeable stutter.

After a period of twelve months, Emanuel began one of a number of visits to England and continental Europe. Disaster nearly befell him though. Due to an outbreak of plague, ships arriving in London were quarantined. Emanuel broke quarantine and was apprehended. Shortly afterwards, the authorities imposed the death penalty for quarantine breakers!

(This life of Swedenborg to be continued in Part 3)

Spiritual Growth

What does living a spiritual life mean to you? Can you identify any specific attributes which are obvious to you indicating progress is being made?

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The word that Swedenborg used more often than any other to describe the process of spiritual self fulfillment, the goal of one's ethical quest, is regeneration. He discusses it frequently throughout his writings, from many different vantage points and in a variety of contexts. We can look at the subject on three basic levels using definitions from Swedenborg's writings:

1. *"Regeneration is the disposing of all things in a person into order"*

In its goals, this closely parallels the stated aim of clinical psychology which is dealing with the integration of personality. It is a useful and uncluttered definition, for it avoids all the confusing overtones that surround the words "good" and "evil" by using the terms "order" and "disorder". It seems fair to say that everyone would admit that a greater or lesser degree of disorder is characteristic of every human being's life. Most of us would likely agree that a desirable goal of life would be to replace our areas of disorder with order. Swedenborg, though, does equate good

(life focused on welfare of others) with order and evil (selfish) with disorder.

2. *"Regeneration is a plane for perfecting one's life forever"*

The difference from the first definition lies in an implicit spiritual outlook by the single word "forever" - the survival of personality. Without the word "forever," the phrase might have been found in a psychologist's notebook. *With* it, the reference has a clearly spiritual orientation.

3. *"Regeneration is conjunction with God"*

This leads specifically to what Swedenborg conceives regeneration to be. To bring one's life into harmony with God is a widely accepted axiom of the goal of a religious person's life. However, it is one of those things that seems easier to talk about than to apply effectively.

What is involved in coming into closer relationship with God, in putting one's life in order, in becoming regenerate? What kinds of changes are called for in personality structure, in outlook, in outward actions? It is impossible to compile an exhaustive list nor would it be especially useful. Each person must find their own individual areas of disorder and work more or less systematically at correcting or changing them.

Swedenborg though, presents certain typical indications as to where one may stand; there is a kind of yardstick by which to measure oneself in general. The essential distinguishing mark of those who are regenerating is that they have a conscience of what is good and what is true; and from conscience do good things and think true thoughts. They feel joy when they act according to conscience. They have a new (that is, spiritual) will or intention, and a new understanding or discernment. Inner dictates take precedence over prompting toward worldly satisfaction, holding these lower desires in reasonable restraint. This is possible because people who are regenerating are conscious of their higher self and it's more worthy motivations.

People who are not regenerating not only lack all the above named qualities, they in fact exhibit quite contrary ones. They really have no

conscience. What may appear outwardly to be the result of conscientious prompting is only a manifestation of that love which takes into account just selfish ends which Swedenborg calls 'False Conscience' - it causes anxiety instead of the joy of true conscience.

Sense appetites control such people, they are prone to a great variety of evil desires, they lack true understanding, and they indulge frequently in rationalization. In short, their lives are governed by their lower selves, and they are scarcely aware of having any higher potentialities.

Can you recall a time when an inner prompting resulted in you changing a thought or action? Can you source its origin?

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It must be remembered that the real lives of real people are made up of infinite shades of grey. We all start our adult spiritual life at a midpoint - as a sort of neutral grey - and then by our significant choices and decisions, move *toward* the light, or *away* from it.

Spiritual growing - the learning need

Can you think of reasons why the search for true ideas and principles is vital in the process for developing a spiritual life?

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How can we move upward on the spiritual scale?

First, we must be convinced that it is worth the sustained effort involved. Swedenborg says that this effort, this degree of motivation, can come through a knowledge of truth. On the practical plane of life, we are left in no doubt that knowledge assumes a much more dominant role than we might have imagined; it gives a definitive direction and shape to any love or desire we may have.

For everyday spiritual living, truth seems to supersede good but only because its role on this natural plane is dominant, although those who know the truth need not necessarily follow it. As spiritual growing involves everyday living, regeneration will *never* take place unless we are properly armed with the necessary truth.

The required truth includes coming to some form of understanding of the Divine, ourselves, our relationship with the Divine and our purpose for living. Gaining a knowledge of truth in these areas enables us to develop in the first place a faith, a cornerstone for living.

As each truth is received into our memory, our intellect immediately “sees” whether it is in agreement with, or tends to confirm, a good desire in our will. If it does, a firmer faith follows. If we are regenerating, we contemplate the potential good which can flow from the firmer faith, develop a love for it, think about it, and - when opportunity comes to do so - speak and act according to it. When this happens the truth, which up to that time had been only in our outer or natural memory, becomes implanted in our inner or spiritual memory as a truth of faith that has been experienced. It becomes a source for good in our inner life.

Greatly simplified, Swedenborg outlines three stages regarding the development of spiritual living:

1. Relates to a period before the process begins when we are relatively indifferent about right and wrong.
2. Early in the actual process with a sense of obligation to do what is right, and not what is wrong. (*‘ceasing to do evil’*).

3. Far into the process when there is no longer self compulsion to do right and no desire to do anything else (*'learn to do good'*).

Accepting the difficult times

While this might give the impression that once the process of regeneration starts, all will progress smoothly and confidently to the completion of the program, common experience tells us that this is not the case.

Swedenborg was evidently aware of this also, for early in his first spiritual work he wrote that it is usually the case that before anything is reduced to a state of order, the immediately preceding state is likely to be one of chaos. He further pointed out - believe it or not - that this very confusion is an aid, rather than a hindrance, in the process. The use of such periods of mental chaos is in enabling us to distinguish within ourselves mental elements that do not readily cohere.

The time factor

Another thing we must be realistic about is the time factor. Once begun, according to Swedenborg, the process of regeneration continues for the rest of our earthly life. There is no recognised happy terminal point at which we may feel with complete confidence that we are "saved" (to use a common term of conservative Christianity).

We all live the greater part of our adult lives in a state where our intention or will is composed of a blend of natural desires and spiritual desires - affections for things of the world and affections for heavenly things which exist in the mind side by side, often with no clear cut priorities. What we certainly need to do in our lifetime here is to tip the scales in favour of heavenly things.

Spiritual growing model

Swedenborg presents this regeneration process in several different models. One breaks it down into seven parts, patterned on the Biblical seven days of creation. He is adamant that this account was never intended to be anything other than an allegory or parable, not relating to

the creation of the physical universe at all, but symbolically to the creation and development of every human being into an image and likeness of God.

Space does not permit a full presentation here of Swedenborg's description. Suffice it to say that the first phase is a preparatory one, marked by the coming of "light", or the dawning of spiritual consciousness, moving through to the seventh and last stage of this process, a state of complete fulfillment, at-oneness or complete harmony between a person and God.

If you are acquainted with the Bible, can you think of other stories or incidents relating to the regeneration process? If not, can you bring to mind some story in other sacred writings, a myth, fable, etc.?

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Swedenborg correlates regeneration and washing in a number of places in his spiritual writings; one being the Old Testament Biblical story of the ritual washing of hands and feet by Aaron and his sons in the basin placed between the tent of meeting and the altar within the Tabernacle.

It was arranged in this way, Swedenborg says, so that there might be represented purification of the heart and regeneration, which in its essence is the joining of good and truth. This is also meant by a person's being regenerated "*by water and the spirit*"; '*water*' denoting the truth comprising the person's faith, and '*the spirit*' a life according to it. Swedenborg also specifically links this washing with the ritual "*washing*" of baptism, the Christian symbol that regeneration is effected by the Lord by means of truths of faith and a life according to them.

Where do we go from here?

Briefly record your thoughts on the question of life after death - what happens to us when our physical body stops functioning?

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For those wishing to advance on the spiritual pathway, this is the most important question to be answered in terms of an ultimate incentive. Anyone open to the value of spiritual processes has an innate perception that this physical life is not the totality of our experience. The extent to which the details of a higher realm of existence are recognized and elucidated will certainly vary.

It is important for us to have some picture of the spiritual world and its place in the divine cosmology so we know what we are preparing ourselves for. One of the foundation stones of Swedenborg's spiritual philosophy is the existence of the spiritual dimension in which men and woman live, for the most part as unconscious citizens, during life here. Swedenborg directly experienced this otherworldly level during the last third of his 84 years of earthly life span which provided him with a unique opportunity to appreciate the dynamic nature of life not limited by the material or physical.

In a letter written a few months before his death, Swedenborg wrote:

"He (the Lord) manifested Himself in person before me, His servant, and sent me to do this work. This took place in the year 1743; and afterwards He opened the sight of my spirit, and thus introduced me into

the spiritual world, granting me to see heaven and many wonderful things there, and also the hells, and to speak with angels and spirits, and this continued for twenty seven years. I declare in truth, that this is so."

The universe in which we are now living comprises physical or material objects - the natural world. Speculation by earlier generations that a spiritual world exists '*up there*' or '*out there*' beyond the extremities of the natural world does still surface from time to time.

However the spiritual world is on an entirely different plane of being and is made of a different kind of substance altogether. It is not made of matter but of a spiritual substance. Therefore our eyes, which are made of matter, cannot see it, nor can our hands feel it. We can walk right through its most solid objects.

Because of this, some people have doubts whether the spiritual world exists. Yet we are part of it just as we are part of the natural world. When our physical bodies cease functioning - when we are said to '*die*' - consciousness slips over into the spiritual body which has been part of us all our life, a body adapted to life on the spiritual plane.

At first after death there is no awareness of any change; newly awakened spirits find themselves in a body closely resembling the former body, with all the organs and limbs complete but all made of spiritual substance and responding to spiritual stimuli.

For Swedenborg, the Spiritual World consists of three great divisions:

Heaven

The World of Spirits

(an intermediate region)

Hell

It is in this *World of Spirits* that a person lives as an unconscious citizen during life on earth and, after a brief period of unconsciousness which usually accompanies physical death, is the region into which a person awakes.

There are innumerable subdivisions of each of these great primary divisions, but the central fact is that they are essentially states of the individual and collective human mind. Heaven is constituted by a

confirmed love of good and of the truths which support, enlighten and direct it, and hell, by a confirmed love of self and of the falsities by which it is supported and justified.

The world of spirits is a state in which influences from both heaven and hell meet in the same mind. During a person's life on earth, a choice is made between them, and after death the results of that choice are fully disclosed.

The Spiritual Realm - a new experience?

If it is your belief that on physical death you will experience a continuing existence, do you anticipate that it will have similarities with what you are currently experiencing or be something completely different?

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Swedenborg's statements about the spiritual world often raise two difficulties of an opposite kind. On the one hand, life in that world is so like life in this that his teaching seems to reduce it to something commonplace. And on the other hand, the fundamental facts of that world seem so remote from human experience that it is difficult to conceive of a real, stable and vivid human existence subject to such conditions.

Whether there is any ground for these difficulties remains to be seen. Every bodily and mental faculty is intact in the spiritual level of consciousness. Hearts beat, lungs respire, there is eating, drinking, and sleeping, recreations of every kind and talking with others. There is working and studying according to wishes. A man remains a man and a woman, a woman. Scenery and surroundings closely resemble those of the world left. There are hills and valleys, streams, lakes, seas, animals, plants, houses, cities, and people. In fact, on moving into the spiritual

realm, a person is surrounded by objects so familiar with those experienced here that there is no immediate apparent difference whatever.

Swedenborg, indeed, repeatedly states that the similarity of the other world to this is so complete that a person does not know, unless reflecting on the subject, that they are not still living in a physical body and in a material world. Here, however, in the external appearances of things, the similarity ends.

The dissimilarity is great and not so easily described. Though objects in the spiritual world appear to be separated by space, like objects in the natural world, space is of an entirely different order. The objects perceived are spiritual objects, though presented under appearances like those of natural objects, and the space in which they are seen is spiritual space. It is not fixed as material space is because there is no matter or physical sensation to constitute such fixity.

The objects of the spiritual world, regarded as a whole, are all the infinite varieties of goodness and truth, and of the perversions of these, which are the substances and forms that constitute it. In other words, angels and spirits experience spiritual qualities as objective forms. Their sensory state is just the opposite to that of people in this world who perceive material objects, while spiritual *qualities* outside their own minds are not evident to them, except so far as they learn to discern them through the veil of matter.

The concept of the spiritual world as devoid of fixed space, and consequently of measurable time, is fundamental in Swedenborg's spiritual philosophy. Unless we can believe that there may be a real realm which is not in space and time, it is impossible even to conceive the nature of his experiences.

The spiritual realm, considered as an object of sensation, is created by God through the minds of angels and spirits and is in correspondence with their states, individual and collective. That realm is real because it is his creation and because it embodies the supreme realities of human existence, which are spiritual.

The difference between the state of consciousness of angels and our own is that whereas we perceive objects as external to and independent of ourselves, and see little in them that is germane to our spiritual states,

angelic consciousness is primarily fixed on the states of mind from which the sensible objects are generated. The idea of a realm devoid of fixed spatial conditions can be difficult to grasp. Yet if we accept, as most religious philosophies do, that the supreme Source of all being, reality and power is not in space and time, why may there not be realms of real and orderly beings, created and sustained by the Creator, which also are not in space and time?

If the reality of a nonspatial spiritual world is granted, and that a person as a creature of the spirit lives in it even during life on earth, Swedenborg's experiences become intelligible. The only condition needed to qualify him for those experiences was that those faculties which normally remain quiescent till after death should be quickened into activity so that he might be fully conscious of the spiritual world. If those faculties quiescent inside of us were to be now quickened into activity we would likewise appreciate that the spiritual world is all around and within us - not 'up there' - and is a realm not alien to our earthbound experiences.

The Spiritual Realm

Having left the physical state of being, what do you think you will experience and when? What would you like to experience?

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From the Swedenborgian perspective, there is no sudden break in our condition at death, merely a losing of material consciousness and the full activation of spiritual consciousness. There is no delay in this process - no state of limbo or any waiting for reunion with the physical body. All our essential qualities that made us an individual human - being remain intact.

There is an initial period after the 'awakening' into the world of spirits to enable us to adjust to this new state of being, to learn about and explore the nature of the spiritual world, to be reunited with all those who have preceded us - partners, parents, children, friends, etc. Whether the

associations continue is dependent on their true nature of mutual love and support.

Then comes the opportunity for self discovery when we examine the interiors of our memory in order to understand the true motives and intentions at the centre of thought and actions during life on earth. This enables self judgment on the essential quality of our earthly life and the choosing of the type of life to be pursued from that point on.

There are no "Courts of Judgment", no sole arbiter except ourself. The law of affinity prevails. We are not judged by the acts done in this world, whether they have been good or evil, for these are often but remotely related to the essential states of our mind. It is the love for good or evil, truth or falsity, underlying our actions which are the critical factor although that is a compilation of innumerable choices made and ratified during life on earth.

Should earthly existence have been based on life being eternal with a starting out along the spiritual pathway of regeneration, this choice will be for heaven and kinship with angels. Alternatively, because human nature is not changed in this process of transition from the physical level of consciousness to the spiritual level, a predominantly selfish approach to earthly life inevitably leads to a choice for the hellish state. Such is the extent of the love and mercy of the Divine Creator in protecting all freely chosen states of being, both here and in the spiritual realm.

Tributes to
Emanuel Swedenborg

Swedenborg's theocracy is sublime He alone brings man into immediate communication with God.

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

The only light that has been cast on the other life is found in Swedenborg's philosophy.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING



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