

Spiritual Journey Series

PART 4 (of Six)



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

Part 4 - Emanuel Swedenborg the Philosopher

It was in his work with the Swedish Board of Mines that Emanuel made his greatest contribution to science and the Swedish economy. Many of his other discoveries, anticipations and inventions simply remained in manuscripts on shelves gathering dust. Some of the items which he did have published possibly influenced those now generally credited with proposing them. Perhaps the best example is the nebular hypothesis for the origin of the universe which Emanuel outlined some fifty years before Laplace and Buffon. The same applies for the atomic structure theory.

Yet, it matters not for Emanuel's stated aim as a scientist was not in the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake or to make a name for himself. It was to see if it could lead him to understand and find the connection between the physical realm of existence and the spiritual realm in which he firmly believed through his life. As the years went by, he began to realise that science by itself did not hold the key. He turned his attention more and more from the sciences of nature to a study of anatomy with the expectation that our soul - that connecting link with the higher realm - could be located in the body itself. Whilst this seems a very strange notion to us, it was not so to those living 250 years ago. This work did enable him to draw a number of conclusions about the activity of the body and the compilation of some of its constituent parts, conclusions which have only been "discovered" in the last 50 years. Again, the works he wrote and published mainly remained unread.

This direct search for the location of the soul in the body also failed to produce an answer for his inquisitive mind. It did, however, enable him to extrapolate many psychological hypotheses which direct experience would later fill out.

So, at age 55, Emanuel had reached a point in his life where there was not too much to show for it - no marriage and family and a quest which had seemingly reached an unsatisfactory conclusion.

(This life of Swedenborg to be continued in Part 5)

Divine Providence

Do you see life as a series of chance happenings or as a whole involving a purpose? Think of some significant events in your life. With hindsight, can you see some worthwhile things which have flowed from these events?

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The role of free will and the freedom to choose our own spiritual destiny is a key issue in terms of appreciating our relationship with the Divine creative source. The reason free will exists and its extent can be discovered only from the use which the faculty serves in our spiritual development. Only in this way can we bring free will into relation with the concept of a divine personal God.

We need to know something of the aims and methods of that Divine Providence which uses human free will as its means for achieving individual eternal happiness. In general, Divine Providence can be defined as '*God controlling the universe for the benefit of every individual*', caring for us,

training us, and giving us all we need for our spiritual well-being and development.

Of course, many people deny that there is any such thing as providence. They believe that life is just haphazard: that if anything does come out well, it is through luck or their own cleverness. Such people inwardly deny God. Others concede that providence may perhaps be controlling the big events of history, but not the little things of everyday life. But big things are made up of little things!

Another general idea is that if something happens unexpectedly in our favour, it is "*providential*," whereas the general run of events is not. Yet all things of life fit together; so if a single event is providential, everything must be providential.

Swedenborg in his work "Divine Providence" makes the startling assertion that "*the Divine Providence is the government of the Divine Love and Wisdom.*" The idea of government at once suggests the related ideas of law and order, since there can be no government in the absence of either. No one who believes in a Divine Creator of the universe can doubt that what is created is also sustained.

In order that anything may be sustained, it is necessary that provision should be made for its sustenance. This leads us to a radically new conception of Providence, although the word itself implies it. Providence is provision. The Divine Providence is the means provided for the maintaining in existence of all things that are created.

The means provided by the Divine for the maintenance of the natural universe are what we call the laws of Nature to which our body and this bodily life are subject. The laws of Nature are, therefore, the laws of Divine Order in the universe; they are laws of the Divine Providence.

In the spiritual realm, the moral laws as we call them - the laws of life set forth in the Ten Commandments, summarised in the Two Great Commandments which enjoin love to the Lord and the Neighbour - are the Divine Laws of order for the government of a human's life as a spiritual being. Here again, conformity to these laws brings with it spiritual health. Disobedience brings with it spiritual ill health.

Since the Divine Providence is the government of Infinite Love and Perfect Wisdom, there can be no such thing as chance or accident. What appears to be so in any given case is not so in reality, and, if we knew and understood all the facts and influences involved, we should see clearly that this was the case.

Being finite, we cannot comprehend everything that is involved in the operations of the Divine Providence. Swedenborg's spiritual writings, though, provide certain broad principles which take us far on our road to an intelligent apprehension of how the Divine Providence does, in fact, operate:

1. *The Divine Providence is the government of the Divine Love and Wisdom.*

2. *Providence is general and it is particular.* It is operative in least things as in greatest.

3. *Infinite Love*, because it is Infinite, *looks towards what is spiritual and eternal*, and only to temporal things in so far as they help achieve the higher purpose in view. We need to remember that God has a different end in view than we might expect or wish.

4. *People think and act in freedom according to reason.* In the normal course of events, nothing is permitted that will diminish our freedom of choice in spiritual things, or to reason about them.

5. *Divine Providence works in all things*, and in particular, in human life, *by appointment and by permission*. God appoints, or desires, only good for us, for God's nature is Love. Evil, and its consequences, is permitted because in no other way can our spiritual freedom be preserved inviolate. The remarkable thing is that when troubles do occur, God

overrules them for good, and actually uses them to strengthen us in our growth towards angelhood, yet in a way not to take away our freedom.

It has been only possible in this brief account of Swedenborg's teaching concerning the Divine Providence to outline its nature and the general principles within which it operates. It is hoped that the general principles will be at least sufficient to provide the means of a lively faith and an intelligent belief in the fact of Divine Providence, even when we cannot always see its merciful goodness in the multitudinous events of human life.

We can be assured that nothing is outside the scope of the beneficent government of the Divine Love and Wisdom of God and that, in all things, our eternal happiness and well-being is sought. This applies equally to those good times in our lives as it does in those periods of misfortune and trouble as will be examined later.

The Existence of Evil

Reflect on the term 'evil'. Do you believe it to be a reality or merely the absence of good? Can you think how the existence of evil can serve a use in our spiritual growing?

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Evil is not a word that finds its way into the average person's terminology these days but the existence in the world, and to a larger or smaller degree in individual lives, of what the word represents, is recognised by most people. If we accept the existence of human free-will/free-intention, and consequently the possible existence in each person of a selfish, negative,

evil intention, a world where action was never permitted to follow an evil purpose is inconceivable. It would be a world in which intentions would be constantly frustrated, making individual existence impotent.

Such a restraint would be altogether harmful, creating a pent-up love of evil, which we can liken to poisonous conditions of the blood which are prevented from discharging themselves through the skin via ugly boils and ulcers. Without the safety valve of action, evil would be more malignant and destructive to spiritual nature than it is. So in the overall context of human life, the existence of evil can be seen as a palliative. Tension is relieved and the mind restored to equilibrium to review its acts with more impartiality than was possible under the immediate stress of passion.

Whilst evil intentions might seem harmless, we become more aware of their true nature when they are brought forward into action; actions are sourced in the affections which generate them. The toleration of evil is a means of enlightening a person as to his or her spiritual state, an indispensable condition for beginning that inward struggle, upon which salvation depends, against the domination of selfish desires.

If we do not know something of our selfish desires, we cannot fight and overcome them. Swedenborg sums this up in this way "*Evils are permitted for a certain purpose, which is salvation.*" - coming into a heavenly way of life.

This does not mean that all evils which are latent in a person's hereditary nature are allowed to come into action. The evil intention may be cherished but social influences, the fear of the law, etc. may come into play. On the other hand, the evil intention may simply not be recognised as such. Whether in intention or action, it is only through deliberate indulgence in known evil that a person is ultimately responsible.

The Permission of Evil

In a world where there are so many accidents, catastrophes, hunger, etc. causing innocent suffering, can you put yourself into the mind of God and find a reason(s) why, out of love for what you have created, you would not stop all this happening?

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The permission of evil for the sake of salvation involves only the necessity that some evils should be allowed to express themselves in acts, so that we can know and avoid them as evils. Our spiritual state is largely determined by the relation of our will and understanding to the inner tendencies which we recognise as wrong. If this is true, the permission of spiritual evil and of acts which flow from it ceases to be an enigma. It is seen to be an inevitable consequence of the part which Divine Love and Wisdom have in the spiritual recreation of an individual.

Similar considerations may enable us to understand why impulses toward wrong, out of which evil intentions arise, are themselves permitted. It is a mistake to think that impulses, both good and evil, are self generated. They all come to us out of the spiritual world and from beings there whose affections correspond to our own.

Little as we realise it, innumerable streams of spiritual influences converge on us. Association with spiritual beings, by means of which these influences reach us, varies from moment to moment. That association is the means by which the Divine Providence provides the conditions necessary for human freedom. Impulses toward evil are permitted to act upon us because of our natural mind which is structurally disordered and

cannot receive the influx of good without perverting it. We are unaware of this condition but the impulses towards evil from the spiritual world awaken us to what is wrong within.

Though the permission of evil may be in agreement with justice if the consequences were confined to the individual, the reality that others are affected needs to be considered. The bad conduct of one person excites bad passions in others, which might otherwise never have appeared. One vicious boy may corrupt a whole school. But to have them disclosed and recognised is conducive to being able to deal with them healthily.

God does not will evil but permits it, not because of any desire to see people suffering and hurt; not because in theory anything can be done about it; but because without it we would be mere automatons/ puppets and could never be truly human.

The Presence of Evil

Having considered spiritually the role that the existence of evil can play as a permission of God to preserve our true freewill, we can turn more directly to its activity at this level of existence.

- ▶ *'If God is Love, why does he allow people to suffer?';*
- ▶ *'Where was God in this . . . accident, disaster or catastrophe?'*

These are two of the most common questions asked by people when confronted with events and situations leading to human suffering and misery. Today, when viewed dispassionately, loss of life and injury from natural events could be significantly prevented through proper risk assessment and appropriate action in terms of population location, building construction, etc. We can no longer simply blame it all on God - the so called 'Acts of God'.

A lot of other suffering occurs from situations involving human decisions - lack of knowledge, errors of judgement or downright disregard for fairness and the rights of others, this latter involving selfishness or evil. We can strip aside these factors which come into play and for which

responsibility can be attributed to individuals and groups of people. Yet, we still have to address the particularly perplexing questions such as:

- ▶ *'Why do bad things happen to good people?'*
- ▶ *Why are so many afflicted with physical or mental illnesses?'*

The presence of evil, either through negative influences coming generally from hellish realms, or via individual motives and acts which spring from an impulse to gratify self at the expense of others, or to indulge our lower appetites, is the cause of all human suffering and apparent inequities.

The result impinges on us all at some time during our life. The bodily and mental sufferings which we endure constitute a problem because of an element which they have in common - pain. The problem does not exist for the person who regards pain as the result of chance or of natural laws, the operation of which cannot be completely observed. For the spiritual thinker, the issue is complex.

The Purposes of Pain

How do we reconcile the concept that the universe is governed by a Being of infinite goodness, wisdom and power, with apparently purposeless suffering seen all around? Yes, a large part of it is the direct or indirect result of human wrongdoing. Also it is one of the chief means by which people are awakened to some perception of the true nature of evil. At the same time though, the fact cannot be disguised that much suffering seems to be useless and even calamitous. It seems to make people complaining, selfish, hardhearted, and sometimes openly uncaring.

Swedenborg's teaching in this area forces the problem on our attention in its most pressing form. If fully accepted, an accident can no longer be regarded as really accidental as the majority of people tend to do, even those who are religious. In the divine sphere of action there are no accidents. Everything is ordained or controlled for the best, in view of all the spiritual conditions involved. We have, therefore, to put the question in this form:

- ▶ *Is there a purpose in all the pain that exists in the world?*
- ▶ *Does it always accomplish something in the preparation of individuals for their eternal destiny?*

1. *Pain provides contrast*

Would we if we could, choose to live in a world totally devoid of pain? Perhaps our initial response might be a resounding 'Yes', but further consideration should bring the realisation that such a world would be a far less happy place. The atmosphere of sympathy and love by which we are all more or less surrounded even when we are not suffering, and which adds so greatly to our happiness, would not exist. There would be nothing to generate it, for it is largely the result of pain felt and witnessed.

If we had not endured pain, we could not sympathise with others because we could not imagine what it was like. If we were deprived of the discipline of pain, we would have no regard for the feelings of others because they would have none that could be hurt.

2. *Pain is an element in pleasure*

Strange as it sounds, pain seems to be an indispensable ingredient in many of our pleasures, particularly the more intense ones. The privation of pleasure is pain, but how greatly it adds to our enjoyment! If we never felt hunger would we enjoy our dinner? Fear has an element of pain, and yet it is the salt which gives zest to all our sports. If we did not fear to lose, we would not care to win. Would runners enjoy a race as much if they ran without exertion so strenuous as to bring them to the verge of collapse?

3. *Pain instructs*

Pain is evidently the first experience which teaches children that they are living in a world of fixed laws which cannot be trifled with. The laws of nature operate unfailingly and cannot be disregarded with impunity. What would be the use of a world of order if there were nothing to enforce

the necessity of learning and obeying its laws? This applies from young childhood through all the stages of life, moving from natural laws to spiritual ones, if this is the desired pathway.

There opens up the conception of joy in God and in obedience to the Divine will which, while not excluding any lower joys, consecrates and purifies them all. This higher perception is also enforced by pain when we become aware of faithlessness to that nobler goal of existence which has begun to open up.

4. *Pain develops endurance*

When a little child suffers it can at first do nothing but cry. But the germs of self control soon begin to show themselves, and are encouraged and fostered by wise parents. Crying is often a relief, and should not be too strictly repressed.

In later life, though pain itself causes no change in the essential spiritual life of men and women, it may be the means of initiating such a change. Swedenborg teaches that no one is reformed in states of affliction, suffering or the fear of death, because at such times the mind is not in full possession of its freedom and reason. Yet such states often lead to a real reformation which, but for their aid, could not have been brought about.

When we are suffering from severe illness, pain, or bereavement, or from the loss of worldly prosperity, a lull often comes in the eagerness of our worldly desires. In the darkened chamber where a loved one lies dead, or when death seems not far off from us, and when our ambitions have been shattered, things present themselves in a different light. The world for a moment falls away from us. We see things in something like their true proportion and perspective. We feel the worthlessness of many of the aims we have been pursuing with so much eagerness.

This is an introduction to reform which will become effective and actual only if on restoration to health, or when the sense of loss has been blunted by time, a new path is persevered in. This is not always the case. The states of penitence often vanish with returning health and the old states return. This is something we do need to beware of.

It may be confidently stated that there is nothing in the widespread human suffering we witness which is irreconcilable with the existence of a Divine Providence guiding everything towards a good outcome. Any enlightenment beyond this is in the nature of things impossible. We must be content with the assurance that human suffering sets no obstacle in the way of belief in a Divine Providence which controls all things for good.

We may be able to see why the Divine Providence is so deeply hidden behind the series of apparently natural events. For it consists of a perpetual assault on a person's natural self love, not merely with a view to suppressing its manifestation in thought and act, but to its dethronement and its replacement by a ruling affection of a totally contrary character.

If we clearly perceived the aims and methods of the Divine Providence, how deeply would we resent them! It would seem to us as if it were seeking to deprive us of everything we held most dear. A quarrel would exist between us and God if we knew from the first what God was aiming at. We are therefore kept in ignorance of what is going on in us except that sometimes, when the change has been to some extent accomplished, we are able to look back and understand events that seemed inexplicable when they happened.

We should also view misfortune and trouble as blessings in disguise. We can often learn far more from pain, disappointment, failure and loss, than we can from prosperity and success. When people admire and praise us, and we get everything we want, we tend to become like spoiled children. Self love and love of the world flourish in us unchecked. No one gets converted and regenerated that way! But when things go badly, and people ignore or insult us, or 'take us down a peg', then our self love can more easily be broken and we can be made humble - which may be the best thing for us.

Poverty, hunger and loss - these can all help us to develop spiritually if we respond to them appropriately. On the other hand, these ills may have the opposite effect, making us bitter, resentful and indignant with God and others; then they are bad for us. One of the most important lessons we can learn is to be thankful for our misfortunes, and accept these things that fall upon us; then our troubles will help us to mount the steep upward path to Heaven.

If we think along these lines, we will eventually come to realise that the circumstances of our outer lives are not really very important. The important thing is our response to them. Whether we are rich or poor, lucky or unlucky, strong or weak, clever or not-so-clever, there will be plenty of opportunity in our environment for the building up of an angelic disposition.

It is as if we were placed somewhere on an enormously high ladder. The vital thing is not where on that ladder we happen to have been placed, but whether we take a few steps upwards, or a few steps downwards, from the rung where we began. It is what we do with ourselves that finally determines our lot. But actually we are never left entirely alone. The Lord is always with us, doing everything possible to encourage our spiritual growth. But only what we do 'as of ourselves' will have any permanent effect on us.

Reflect on one or more times in your life involving painful suffering and try to determine whether subsequently you can see something worthwhile for you which flowed from it. Particularly take into account effects on relationships.

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**Tributes to
Emanuel Swedenborg**

As a moralist Swedenborg is above all praise.

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

*Swedenborg's message . . . has been my strongest incitement
to overcome limitations.*

HELEN KELLER



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