

Notes from Swedenborg – Being Useful

Transcripts of YouTube clip https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_d6-nUQJcY
based on the insights Emanuel Swedenborg experienced as recorded in his writings.
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At first glance, being useful doesn't really seem to be a very spiritual idea. Most of us know that being useful matters, it helps others and it helps ourselves, it gets things done, and in communal life there is always a lot of scope for being useful. For example, volunteering is very popular.

So why does Swedenborg, a writer on spiritual things, keep emphasising that being useful is a primary function in spiritual life? Let's first throw in a few actual statements he makes about this: "Angelic life lies in being useful, and angelic happiness too, in putting into life the good that is in loving and kindness."

Another: "In the next life everyone must be useful because no one is ever born for any other reason than being of use first in the world and then in the next life by God's good pleasure."

Another: "Everything in our body to the last detail carries out a use to the whole, even excreting."

Finally, "Heaven itself is a kingdom of use."

All this suggests that just being alive is connected to serving some use or other, and maybe several, and some of these we might never even know about. It also suggests that an idle wasteful life goes against the idea of usefulness, and eventually makes us pretty unhappy and bewildered. Just do something and do it for someone else...!

It's not that we are meant to always be going around busily doing good because that isn't that good for us, and other people can get irritated by it. "Here, let me do that for you" "No, leave me alone!" This kind of approach can also lead us to want some reward for doing things or feel that we are meriting a special place in heaven! But all this misses the real point that heaven is us being fulfilled through serving others and serving God's purpose.

So, let's run through a number of ways in which people can be useful to each other.

Some people are good at feeling things, empathising, supporting and so on. They're good at encouraging and reassuring people.

Some people are good at thinking and expressing ideas. They're good at explaining and helping people understand things.

Some people are good at doing things; they're pretty organised, efficient and know how to solve things.

And perhaps some people are a mixture of these and have a balance in their make-up.

Here are some less-obvious uses:

Some people don't say or do that much but they are quietly very present, maybe observing things or giving a vibe which can steady a group and calm things down.

Some people are good at relating things to their own experience and share that without pushing it too much. I knew someone who always said, "Have you ever thought about it like this?"

And truly, most of us remember something someone said just in passing which has always stayed with us, and who knows, maybe we've done that for someone else but wonderfully we'll never know.

Let's move on to an interesting connection between being useful and being spiritual. Swedenborg tells us that everything is a correspondence, an "as above so below", a symbol or representation of inner states and processes. This is a big subject, but for now just imagine you are digging the garden or washing up or mending a bicycle chain. Surely there's nothing spiritual about these. But on another level, yes there is.

Digging the garden is bringing what was underneath up to the surface, so it symbolises examining ourselves, looking at how we are.

Washing up cleans off food and stuff so it symbolises choosing to now not leave old attitudes in place but put them away.

Mending a bike chain might mean many things, like keeping connections, living in a good rhythm, perhaps going places and having a goal in view.

Over all this is God who creates everything and also each of us. Our existence is intended and has a unique part and purpose which we discover primarily in being useful.

And underneath all this is us, and us with other people. Giving, receiving, sharing, caring. Here and in eternal life. It doesn't get better than that.