

Metamorphosis

Brian Kingslake

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1. Spiritual Body

A college class of African girls, studying to be nurses, had no idea that tadpoles turned into frogs. They supposed that tadpoles died in the pond, like any other water bug; and that the frogs leaping and croaking in the reeds were a separate creation, made that way. We smile at their ignorance and lack of observation.

But how few of us, with all our advanced know how, really believe that human beings undergo a metamorphosis at death, and become spirits or angels inhabiting the lush lands surrounding our little pond?

St. Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians 15 "*There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body*".

And he reveals the "mystery", that the natural body can be changed into the spiritual body "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye".

The whole of this chapter, from verse 35 to 57, merits careful study. But Paul was mistaken in supposing that the process of human metamorphosis, which he so well describes, will be delayed until the end of the world. His idea seems to have been that, at an unspecified future date, the Lord would come again in the flesh, the Last Trumpet would sound, the graves would give up their dead, and all the "elect" would be gathered together in this physical world, which would thereafter become a paradise.

However we know, that the "trumpet blast" will awaken each one of us individually immediately after our death. Just think of that bit in the Messiah, when the bass singer booms out "the trumpet shall sound:" and Handel's trumpeter gives us a fair rendering of what we might each of us hear after our own death, as we arise incorruptible in our spiritual bodies on the other side of the veil "O Death, where is your sting? O Grave, where is your victory?"

Well maybe the croaking of frogs is a rather grotesque analogy of our joyous resurrection from the dead! Most people prefer to think of the caterpillar's metamorphosis into a butterfly. The caterpillar crawls about on a leaf, nibbling with his big mouth making hole after hole in the leaf. What does he know of his future life? What does he care? Present survival is all he bothers about. Then after growing bigger and stronger, he suddenly becomes weaker again, stiff with rheumatism in every joint. Fearing the worst, he prepares around himself a little sepulchre of silk and dies. And that's the end of him.

But we know it is not the end of him. Soon there is a tiny earthquake. The sepulchre bursts open and out comes a New Being, a resplendent Butterfly; Whereas before he had been "of the earth, earthy," now he "bears the image of the heavenly" beautiful in hue, free of limitations, no longer confined to a single leaf in a dark corner of the garden, but able to fly hither and thither from blossom to blossom, sipping sweet nectar and basking in the sun.

2. The Divine Surgeon

Emanuel Swedenborg, having enjoyed over a period of years the freedom of both modes of life, physical and spiritual, tells us of the resurrection, from personal experience. At first, of course, there is a state of complete unconsciousness, which may last for two or three days by earthly reckoning (though in cases of violent death it may be less). The Divine Surgeon has, as it were, administered an anaesthetic while He delicately removes the spiritual body, with all its sense organs, from its damaged physical wrappings, and

reconnects the millions of minute filaments from the brain to activate the new body. This is a complicated surgical operation, and is presided over by "nurses" from the highest angelic heaven. But when at last the resuscitated person returns to full consciousness, the transition has been so smooth that he is at first unaware that anything unusual has taken place.

This is because, in the spiritual world, one's immediate environment is produced as a kind of projection of one's thoughts and feelings. Spiritual substance responds instantaneously to spiritual stimuli. Therefore, what one expects to see one sees. For example, if the patient had been killed in a car crash, he still seems to see before him the smashed-up car. Or if he had died in bed at home; he seems to see his familiar room, the rows of medicine bottles, and so on. However soon an angel receptionist comes to him and explains the true position. At first he will be sceptical and will make tests; but eventually (unless he is a confirmed materialist) he will accept the situation that the metamorphosis has actually taken place. After that, everything in his environment that he was merely "hallucinating," disappears; and he begins his new life, feeling freer than he had ever felt before. Eventually he ends up, either in heaven or in hell, as his state of mind dictates.

So far I have been speaking of man's entry into the spiritual world. But physical death is not our only experience of metamorphosis. There was to begin with, our birth from our mother's womb. What a transformation: a big healed foetus in the warm darkness, changed into a breathing, self-conscious, squalling baby! But let us think now of a subtler transformation, a spiritual metamorphosis, which can and should and generally does, take place in our souls during our time on earth.

Most of us commence our adult lives interested primarily in possessions, pleasure and our own security. We are egotistical and grasping, which has given rise to the saying; "Human nature is pretty vile." Well maybe it is pretty vile at first, not surprisingly when one considers the human predicament, each one of us feeling that we are the central focus of the universe, each desiring to be honoured and served by everyone else. Yet the other familiar saying; "Human Nature cannot be changed:" is definitely FALSE. Of course human nature can be changed. It can be, it must be and (by and large) it generally is changed, several times during life, and hopefully always for the better.

3. Conversion and Regeneration

At the beginning of every major change comes CONVERSION, turning around and reversing one's direction: heading upwards to God instead of downwards to the world, outwards to others instead of inwards to one's self. Conversion can take place in a brief moment, as when John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed during a sermon in church. Or it may take place gradually over a period of years. (The driver of a car suddenly realizes he is heading for the cliff top. Either he jams on the brake, reverses and manoeuvres the car in the opposite direction, which is like instantaneous conversion; or he steers around in a half circle without actually reversing, which is like conversion over a period of time).

If we are thinking of the analogy of physical birth, Conversion corresponds to the act of conception, after which there is a long period of gestation. Spiritually, this consists of the thousands of moral choices one has to make, day by day, year by year; the persistent shunning of evils, and the opening of one's heart and mind to the inflow of life from God. There are bound to be back-endings: mistakes, sins followed by repentance; but if all goes well, the whole personality is "reformed", leading at last to rebirth or REGENERATION. Here then, is the true spiritual Metamorphosis. The caterpillar within us, crawling aimlessly in the leaf, is transformed into a beautiful butterfly, with outstretched wings, rising upwards to God in heaven.

Has that change taken place yet in you? Have you received the New Life, which Religion (especially Christianity) offers to us all? A famous professor, with a "Sir" in front of his name, once said to me: "I've reached the top of the ladder; I'm rich I suppose; I have a beautiful wife and a good home. I ought to be content, but I'm not, there's a vacuum in my life. I realize that you Christians have something which I lack. Perhaps I've been too busy making a name for myself. Perhaps I'm just a selfish old b-----. What can I do about it? I wish I knew:"

Wasn't Nicodemus just such a man? What did Jesus say in answer to Nicodemus? "You must be born again!" Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God" (John 3 : 5) Conversion, Reformation, Regeneration and New Life. There is no other path to satisfaction and peace. It is the way to which God calls us all.

The following are extracts from Swedenborg's 'New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrines". The numbers refer to paragraphs.

The man who does not receive spiritual life that is, who is not being born (generated) new from the Lord, cannot come into heaven; this, the Lord teaches in John:

"Verily, verily I say unto thee, Except a man be born generated anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God"
John 3.3.

174. We are born by our parents into an earthly life, but not into a spiritual life. A spiritual life is loving the Lord above all and loving our neighbor as ourselves, and doing so by following the precepts of faith that the Lord has taught us in the Word. In contrast, an earthly life is loving ourselves and the world more than we love our neighbor, and in fact more than we love God himself.

175. We are all born from our parents with the evils of love for ourselves and for the world. Every evil that has become part of someone's nature as a result of habitual indulgence is passed on to his or her progeny. Therefore we receive accumulated evil passed down from our parents, grandparents, and ancestors in a long chain going back into the past. The evil we derive from them has over time become so great that all our intrinsic characteristics are nothing but evil.

This continuous accumulation can be broken and changed only by a life of faith and caring from the Lord.

176. We constantly tend toward and lapse into what we have received by heredity, so we ourselves reinforce this evil in ourselves and also add even more to it.

These evils are absolutely opposed to a spiritual life. They destroy it. So unless we get from the Lord a new life, a spiritual life-unless, then, we are conceived anew, born anew, and raised anew (that is, created anew)-we are damned, because we want nothing and think about nothing but loving ourselves and the world, just as the people in hell do.

177. We cannot be regenerated unless we know the kinds of teachings that lead us to a new life, a spiritual life. What we must be taught in order to gain a new, spiritual life are the truths that we need to believe and the good things we need to do-the truths that need to become part of our faith and the good actions that need to become part of our caring.

There is no way any of us can know these on our own, because all we take in is what strikes our senses. From this input we gain the light that is called earthly, which makes it possible for us to see only what has to do with the world and with ourselves. It shows us nothing that has to do with heaven or with God. This we must learn from revelation.

It is only from revelation, for example, that we learn that the Lord who is God from eternity came into the world to save the human race; that he has all power in heaven and on earth; that everything that has to do with faith and caring, that is, all truth and goodness, comes from him; that there is a heaven and a hell; and that we are going to live forever-in heaven if we have led a life of goodness and in hell if we have led a life of evil.

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