

Spiritual Journey Series

PART 1 (of Six)



**Based on the spiritual writings of
Emanuel Swedenborg (1688 - 1772)**

Part 1 - The Young Emanuel Swedenborg

The birth certificate of Emanuel Swedenborg shows he was born in Stockholm on 29th January 1688. Yet, it needs to be recognised that this date is according to the old style Julian calendar which was still in use in Sweden at that time. When our present calendar (the Gregorian) was introduced into that country in 1747, the date moved forward by eleven days. So, today, perhaps a more accurate date for Emanuel's birth is 9th February 1688.

Born into a very privileged environment, Emanuel was the third child of nine. At the time of his birth the family name was Swedberg, being changed to Swedenborg when the family was ennobled. Emanuel's mother was an heiress of a mining company. His father was an upwardly mobile cleric in the Lutheran Church, the State religion of Sweden, rising from chaplain of the King's Guard to rector, then theology professor and dean at Uppsala University, and finally took the appointment of Bishop of Skara and America (although he never visited this far-flung outpost of the Swedish community). Royal patronage was never far away and Emanuel himself experienced the benefits all through his life.

After a brief period in the country, the family moved to Uppsala and this was the time when Swedenborg became aware of religious thought and practice, something which would shape his life in differing ways. The Swedberg household was devastated in 1696 when a fever struck causing the death of Emanuel's beloved mother followed ten days later by his elder brother. Stability was restored within the year when Dean Swedberg remarried. His new wife, a wealthy widow of great good nature and insight, was devoted to Emmanuel.

So happiness gradually came back into his life and as he moved from childhood to young adulthood, his love for learning developed.

(This life of Swedenborg to be continued in Part 2)

Our Place in the Cosmos

The majority of people today, especially in the western world, take little interest in spirituality, let alone religion. Despite its ups and downs, life is taken at face value with times of happiness and difficulty all being simply a part of it. It is lived within the fundamental principle that changes can only come about through material and worldly circumstances. God, a Divine Creator, or whatever term is used, does not come within the equation of life. Religion, whilst once being the backbone of Society and providing the general understanding of existence, now stands at the periphery.

This outlook has been enhanced by the increasing knowledge of the origins of our galaxy and universe through science. The challenge to the Biblical understanding of creation which came in the 19th and 20th centuries through people like Newton, Darwin and Einstein, has peeled away from what religion has always offered - a Creator who, in seven days, brought the universe into existence and created everything in it. Yet, until recently, even cosmologists could not explain how our universe was created, what set it off so God continued to have that role.

Today, quantum mechanics has determined that matter can actually be created out of nothing. Using laboratory experiments, they have tested and proved their theories against other theories and known phenomena. The scientists say that creation of our universe and human beings did not need a supernatural cause - it was simply one random event in a timeless void. The complexity of the theory is well and truly beyond the average mind to assimilate but all the cosmologists today, including Paul Davis and Stephen Hawkins who are almost household names, have taken it on board.

So is God dead? Is there any room for a Supreme Being?

It would seem that there is, and in a much more meaningful way than that presented in the past by the Church. Whilst quantum mechanics can offer an alternative explanation to creation by a Supreme Being, it has yet to bring forward any evidential theory about the laws which make things happen in the way they do. Far deeper issues arise such as: chance or

design? meaning and purpose; and the existence of thinking beings with values.

Thankfully, modern science has given mankind the ability to replace superstition with knowledge and blind faith with enquiry. We can choose to simply accept:

- traditional religious views; or
- life having no higher significance; or
- a metaphysical universe involving individual meaning and purpose for us which we can come to experience in various ways.

The spiritual writings of Emanuel Swedenborg are based on the latter.

Waking up Spiritually

'*We are spiritual individuals having an earthly experience*' is a declaration which most people accepting a higher dimension to life would acknowledge. The everyday mystical experiences of Emanuel Swedenborg, on which he reported in depth, fully concur with this assertion but go much further in explaining the purpose of our earthly experience, what we need to do to become truly happy and our future existence.

At the outset of this overview of the spiritual teachings that Swedenborg offered to the world more than 230 years ago, it is useful to state what they are not. They do not:

- provide a prescriptive pathway for enlightenment;
- offer a simple set of rules for living in harmony in the world;
- provide simple techniques for achieving instantaneous bliss, salvation or whatever term one uses.

They do provide a framework upon which anyone can build their own understanding of what spiritual life means, and focus on how to use that knowledge positively in their individual lives. The teachings are based on the premise that we are all on an individual spiritual journey, whether or not we are aware of it. In the normal course of events, we are given "wake-up" calls to that fact, involving our motivation for outward action, which if taken on board, begin processes deep within us.

If we are prepared to work hard with these processes over a long period of time, inevitably drawing negative responses from that part of our nature continuing to crave the easy options, benefits in terms of our spiritual welfare will accrue. To use another familiar analogy, it is like undertaking to climb a mountain which stands in front of us to see the view from the top. The energy we start with becomes sapped and the process grows wearisome and we may doubt its worth. However we find the view from the top (the inner contentment) is wonderful, giving us the desire to tackle even greater spiritual heights. At the spiritual level of life, Swedenborg gives us this process in clear, rational terms for which a scientific training prepared him.

Can you recall receiving a wake-up call to develop further your spiritual knowledge and practice? How did you respond?

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Eternity Now

Can you sense an eternity dimension to what you have just written?

At least as long ago as the time of the Greek philosopher Socrates (470 - 399 BC), people were debating the question of eternal life. Socrates himself challenged the accepted understanding about the role of gods in daily life and the migration of the soul from the natural world to another world upon death. For proclaiming views contrary to those of the State, he received the death penalty and was confronted with his views sooner than he would have anticipated! In the 19th century, French author Andre Maurois picked up Socrates' thought and said concisely, "*Either the soul is immortal and we shall not die, or it perishes with the flesh, and we shall not know that we are dead. Live, then, as if you were eternal.*" The first phrase fully resonates with Swedenborg's spiritual philosophy, as it does

with the impressive recent testimonies of near-death experiences which seem to leave little doubt that life continues beyond this plane after the physical body is put to one side. Maurois's last sentence thoroughly encapsulates Swedenborg's position.

It is also worth noting that at the end of his best-known work, "Heaven and Hell", after a brief analysis of possibilities, Swedenborg concluded (paragraph 602) that "*there is an instinctive idea of life after death in every individual*". If there was not, we would not even ask, 'What happens after death?' The physical body's failure would simply be accepted as individual annihilation.

For those with some form of Christian leaning, the most detailed and convincing argument that we are eternal is found in words of Jesus Christ from his sermon on the mount, where the reader is strongly advised as follows:

"Do not store up riches for yourselves here on earth, where moths and rust destroy, and robbers break in and steal. Instead, store up riches for yourselves in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and robbers cannot break in and steal. For your heart will always be where your riches are". (Matthew 6:19-21)

According to this statement, we are all created for heaven and if we choose to live our lives in such a way that we accept this destiny, we will remain in heaven for ever. Swedenborg confirms this basic philosophical standpoint. These are ideas and concepts to which we will return later in this series.

Spend a few moments contemplating on what you perceive to be the most profound aspect to your life right now. Then jot down your conclusion.

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Why the Earthly Experience?

If we are created for heaven, why are we not placed there right away?

There are several answers to this offered in the spiritual writings of Swedenborg. One is to think of this life as a training ground where any accomplishment worth seeking calls for appropriate training.

Closely allied and more basic is a law of divine order. Whatever proceeds from the divine does not stop midway in the process of creation, but continues on until it terminates in a fixed form, that is, its last or lowest form. This natural world in which we are living is a vast collection of such fixed forms. Matter is the lowest form of spirit; it is the fixed, relatively inert form and the basis on which the living and changeable substance called *spirit* rests. The body provides a fixed form for an indwelling mind - the body houses the mind. Without such a basis from which to operate, the mind could not exist.

According to this law of divine order, human beings could not be created solely spiritual. It is necessary that we are born into this natural world before we can become complete creations; it is the plane where we can develop ourselves for our *real* life as a whole being.

Due to its very fixed, rigid and imperfect nature, this life is characterised by trials, temptations and dangers. While heaping up riches on earth we may forget the prime goal of laying up riches in heaven. If we doubt that there is such a danger, we have only to look round us in the world and see. Or, better yet, to look within our own hearts and minds and enquire.

Many people seem to know and believe in general terms that there must be life further on that somehow human life will continue. Yet they anticipate it is a place without form or embodiment. This world still continues to be thought of as reality, with the spiritual dimension as altogether different and illusory. Swedenborg presents an alternate view where the spiritual dimension is reality and this world is only a reflection or mirror of that reality.

Spiritually speaking, '*Heaven*' is a symbol of the spiritual, internal part of our mind where all heavenly thoughts and affections exist. '*Earth*' stands for the external or natural part of our mind. '*Riches*' are knowledges and experiences of goodness and truth. Our earthly experience enables us to make choices about the type of person we want to be, relying on that sense of freedom we would lose if we were fully aware of the spiritual consequences flowing from our motivation and actions.

If we are created for heaven, nirvana, etc., can you see anything happening in your life right now which is being made more whole and useful from having worked with it in your present state of perception?

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Preparing for Eternal Life

Swedenborg emphasises that two things are necessary in this life:

- *an affirmation that everything truly good is from God; and*
- *we are to live according to Divine principles of goodness which come from revelation i.e Ten Commandments in the Judeo-Christian tradition.*

They sound beguilingly simple. But are they really? What is it that prevents us from doing good habitually and at all times?

It is because in the 'state of nature' into which we are born, the low natural state filled with tendencies to self-centeredness, there is disorder, self-love, evil, if you will, in our hearts. Please note that Swedenborg does not say we are born evil which is the general traditional Christian viewpoint. It is a "tendency" which may or may not be fulfilled depending on our later choices. The word 'evil' also needs clarification. Generally, *evil* means simply some state or degree of disorder that is not in harmony with the order of God's creation. We are all born into greater or lesser states of such disorder within our human nature. Equally, we are also born with tendencies for good which place us in a situation of perfect balance.

In our adult, rational years, we can allow this tendency towards disorder, self love, and evil to 'harden' our hearts, make them stiff and unyielding to anything except achieving our own ends. We are out of sync with the

Divine will which always seeks good. Even an apparently good act, done in an evil or disorderly state, is not actually anything of the kind. It may have the outward appearance of such and even benefit others, yet so far as the person acting is concerned, it is not a good act. In reality it is an evil or selfish act done for some self-serving motive, such as hope of praise or reward or some other sort of personal benefit.

We have to beware of such inner motives, pushing them away for higher, nobler motives to take their place. Heaven has to be within us, not outside of us. First and foremost, it must be a state of mind and heart; it is more important for us to look carefully at our inner motives and purposes than it is to be overly concerned with people-pleasing outward conduct.

Reflect on a recent occasion when you went out of your way to be helpful towards another person or group of people. Express in a few words why you think you did it. Was the underlying motive a worthy one?

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Spiritual pathways generally provide one specific requirement for reaching a state of at-one-ness with their particular Divine Being. That is the need of first stopping to consider whether what you are doing is disorderly or evil and, if so, choosing another course of action. In the Bible, it is expressed as follows: *"Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before my eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good."* (Isaiah 1:16)

There is a sound psychological reason why we are told to act in this order - first to cease doing evil, and then learn to do good. To put it clumsily, if we honestly stop doing evil things, there will be nothing left to do but good things! The more evil (i.e. disorderly) things we cease doing and cherishing, the more good things we will begin to do and, probably to our great astonishment, we shall find that they delight us much more than our

old ways ever did. Further, the good that we then do will be genuine, for the doing of it will not be our idea but God's; it will not be damaged by self-love or the craving for merit.

As you read this, are you perhaps saying to yourself, '*It can't be that easy?*' and it isn't. There are two major obstacles:

1. It is very hard for us to become really motivated by the idea of purifying ourselves from disorder; and
2. We tend to see ourselves as being tolerably good, of imagining that essentially we are, or ought to be, quite acceptable just as we are. Good points are easily discovered. Faults are seen as trifling.

But the deep radical disorders of our natures are for the most part hidden. Our eyes are blinded to them. Generally we are not conscious of them. We might not be able to handle the shock if we were. It calls for close self-examination, guided by the light of divine truth, to see the human heart as it is. Swedenborg explains that four loves operate within us:-

1. *Love of the Divine/God*
2. *Love of the neighbour*
3. *Love of self*
4. *Love of the world*

All of them are fine if kept in the right order. There is no divine law that prohibits us from loving ourselves and the things of the world. In fact, many people are in serious psychological trouble because they really hate themselves instead of loving themselves in the right proportion. We do need to love ourselves by taking good care of our needs at all levels of life, and to have enjoyment from the good things offered by the world, to be a whole person. They feed and serve the higher loves, particularly ensuring we can be of use to others.

Why Bring God into the equation?

What are your thoughts on a Divine presence - a God? Can you sense any type of relationship? If so, in what ways?

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It is not uncommon for anyone seeking a deeper meaning to their life and trying to understand the spiritual principles at work, to leave the whole God-question to one side. The term 'God' itself can bring negative connotations from what they were offered by traditional religion. Simply thinking of the Divine as an energy force does away with the need to consider this concept further.

Swedenborg is firmly of the view that our idea of the nature of the Divine Being (God) is the most important, the most charged with consequence, the most functionally significant, idea we can have. In his book "Divine Love and Wisdom" (paragraph 13) we read:

How important it is to have a right idea of God can be established from this, that the idea of God constitutes the inmost of thought with all who have a religion (spiritual pathway), for all things of worship (a life of goodness) have respect to God. Also because God, universally and in particular, is in all things of religion and worship, so without a right idea of God, no communication with the heavens is possible.

Swedenborg is saying that a correct idea of God can bring two important results: (1) alliance with God, and (2) communication with heaven. He also states in his Preface to "Apocalypse Revealed":

All heaven is founded upon a right idea of God; for that idea brings association, and from association comes light, wisdom, and eternal happiness.

What Swedenborg means by 'association' with God is a serious, long term relationship, not in any sense to be entered lightly. Nor is it to be one-sided. To be meaningful, any relationship must involve each party having some idea of the nature of the other. Further, it must be a relationship that is acceptable to both parties. For instance, the sort of stand-off attitude John Donne had in mind when he said *that "the best league between princes is a mutual fear of each other"* does not qualify as an example of an association. The only type of fear that has any proper part in the quest for alliance with God is of the kind the Biblical psalmist had in mind in writing *"fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"*, where 'fear' means a mingled sense of reverence and wonder.

The Judeo-Christian God (Jehovah) has been portrayed as one generally far removed from people, often angry, vengeful, giving favours only when obeyed. A naive approach to the Biblical account of God has generally led to simplistic conclusions. This is the culture in which many have been brought up and come to reject. However, is there a danger of throwing out "the baby with the bathwater"?

While it is undoubtedly better to know the *truth* about anything, it is part of the nature of reality that ignorance of the true nature of any good thing does not destroy its usefulness. It is unquestionably true that people have held, and in many cases still hold, many erroneous ideas about worldly phenomena. But however right or wrong the ideas, the realities remain, with their intrinsic meaning and power.

Precisely the same thing is true of our idea of the Divine, and although it is safe to say that Divine power and love will never be withheld from anyone merely because of an ignorance of God's true nature, it is here that our analogy begins to fall short. For the health and well-being of the human soul have considerably different requirements than the health and well-being of the body. You may have any number of either worthy or unworthy motives for seeking and attaining a trim and healthy body. The motive may be no more than a craving to be attractive to and sought after by members of the opposite sex. Or it may be wanting to gain enough physical strength to become the unchallenged neighbourhood bully. It may

be a high and commendable motive such as developing the stamina to be of great service to others. But whether the motive is good or bad, high or low, all that counts at this level is proper diet, exercise and rest.

Not so in the search for spiritual well being. Here the motive is of paramount importance. To seek a deeper knowledge of God from any selfish motive whatever is bound to be self defeating. Our search for this knowledge must contain within it a desire to serve a more altruistic purpose.

A Personal God

Imagine being in the presence of God. What picture comes into your mind? What form does God take for you when you sense Divine help in your life?

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Swedenborg's teachings tell us that the first and most necessary concept in anyone's quest for a true idea of God is this: only as a person can God be conceived of as a *living* God. To view God as impersonal is a contradiction in terms.

Perhaps we ought to ask ourselves: '*Do we really have any right to want to know God?*' Many philosophers and theologians speak of God as 'the unknowable' or 'the unthinkable'. They are likely to say that the very idea we have of '*person*' is a limited concept, and that it is therefore inappropriate to God, for God must be conceived of as unlimited, as an all-pervading force.

This line of thought leaves the spiritually minded person cold. How can anyone whose soul is hungering for the tender compassion of their Divine

Creator hope to have that longing satisfied by a "force"? God must be a being of mercy and insight - loving and living. The combination of love, wisdom and life are known to us only in people. So, it is only as a *person* that God can be conceived of as a living God.

Still, anyone who strongly feels a need to personalise God cannot simply ignore or deny the arguments about the inherent limitations of the common idea of "*person*". We find ourselves faced with two seemingly irreconcilable conceptions. The weight of the argument for each must be granted and each is right in its own way but is also in part wrong. We must not lose the idea of the personal nature of God, but at the same time not limit God with our usual idea of the scope of a person.

We cannot make God a part of nature - a mindless, non living force. What seems necessary is to try to see God as the one infinite person and since the human mind is not capable of understanding infinity as anything more than a philosophical concept, we resort to symbolism which makes it possible to see and know God to the full limits of our human capabilities.

Swedenborg, from his Christian background, takes forward the idea that the supreme representation of all time was that of God in the person of Jesus Christ (different spiritual pathways embody other individuals in a similar way). In the account of the life of Jesus we are able to see, in a parabolic way, the full complement of the attributes of God.

The idea of God as a *person*, and at the same time as being above person as we are able to know it, can be realised when we recognise Jesus as the perfect representation of God, that is God incarnated in a human body. Conceived of in this way, Jesus can satisfy all seekers with every variety of spiritual need and each may find in Christ a fully satisfying image of God, exhibiting a face that expresses a concept of God adapted to fill the desires of our highest wisdom and purest affections. We will explore this idea in a later session.

**Tributes to
Emanuel Swedenborg**

More truths are confessed in Swedenborg's writings than in those of any other man.

THOMAS CARLYLE

Swedenborg a colossal soul, he lies vast abroad his own times.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON



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