

## **Growing Older And Growing Old**

One of the things that is said to characterise western Society and culture, is the cult of youth which is cultivated amongst us. Often our customs, outlook and attitudes to age are contrasted with those, say, of Japan and China, where age is revered and the very elderly are those looked up to. It surprises us, for example, that when the Japanese set about choosing a Prime Minister the search is restricted to candidates from amongst the most senior members of the ruling political party. They, apparently, would not have it otherwise. Then again, everyone was amazed when on the eve of being seventy Mr. Reagan was elected President of the United States. It was all so out of character. Asian, and particularly Japanese, leaders, are very frequently in their 70s when in power. It is most unusual where the West is concerned.

We can, and of course, we do laugh about it, but there is no getting away from the fact that the cult of youth is very much alive amongst us. The general idea seems to be that a person is, as is said, 'over the hill', once they turn 30. Some time ago there was a newspaper report about an 'elderly' man who had been injured in an accident. It turned out that the elderly man was all of, not 82, or 72, but 62: And it is interesting that there is a vast, rapidly growing, what might be called 'industry' where cosmetic surgery is concerned. People are turning to cosmetic surgery to try to postpone as long as possible the inroads of the aging process.

It is, in fact, not too much to say that in our Western culture we have become psychotic about growing old. Many people are embarrassed to look at the process in the face, as it were. Some simply dread it, and resent the fact that things are arranged this way, that they have to grow old. Why couldn't it be otherwise? Why can't we always be young and active and strong?

Months and months ago, now, we had a religious leaflet dropped in our letter box and it spoke about the tortoise, one species of which, at least, is known to live anything up to 300 years. It went on to suggest that we could and should be doing the same. If only we could recover the innocence of the Garden of Eden all would be well again. It's amazing how deeply and how unconsciously this idea has influenced thinking, that old age and death are part of the price to be paid for that original disobedience.

The truth is, though, that they are not. And the Genesis story of the Fall is not saying

this.

In the teaching given through Emanuel Swedenborg we are shown that the purpose of creation is a heaven of angels from the human race. God is Love; and from Love He wishes to bless the lives of others, outside and apart from Himself, with happiness, happiness, that is, in heaven, to eternity. In His Wisdom He causes us to be born into this world that we might, ourselves, and in freedom, come to love the ways of heaven. Though, therefore, the circumstances of death may not always be ideal, yet death itself is as orderly an experience as birth is. As birth was the means of our entrance into this world, so death is the way of entrance into the spiritual world. God planned it this way. This is how it is meant to be. We were never meant to live here forever.

It's important that we hold in our minds the concept of progression. Because this is what is very much involved. Life has been planned as it has been for a purpose. We progress through different ages. We are first babies, then children, young people, adults, and then old people. And that's the way it is intended to be.

"Human life is nothing but a progression from the world to heaven, and the last, which is death, is the passage itself." (*Arcana Caelestia* 3016).

What is more, and this is something we will look to again in a couple of minutes time, each of the ages passed through has its own delights. Once again, from the Writings of Swedenborg:

"It is known that a man's state is of one kind in infancy, of another in childhood, another in youth, another in adult age, and another in old age. It is also known that a man puts off his state of infancy with its toys when he passes into the state of youth; that he puts off his state of youth when he passes into the state of young manhood; and this again when he passes into the state of mature age; and at last this state when he passes into that of old age. And if one will consider he may also know that every age has its own delights, and that by these he is introduced by successive steps into those of the age next following; and that these delights were serviceable in bringing him thereto; and finally to the delight of intelligence and wisdom in old age."

(*Arcana Caelestia* 4063).

There is something special about being a baby. There is something special about being a child. There is something special about being a young person. In the same

way there is something special about being an adult. And there is something special about being an old person. Each age has something the other hasn't got. Each age has its own special pleasures. Each age has its particular challenges and responsibilities. Each age has its use. And we miss the point by emphasising and glamourising, as Western Society does, one of those ages at the expense of the others. What we should be doing is utilising the rich contribution that each can make, and which each can bring, for the good of the whole.

I have just mentioned, **the use that each age has**; the use that each age is intended to be. And how true that is. What is more, the use talked about is a two-sided thing. There is the use served at different ages where the human family is concerned; or where the community as a whole, is concerned; and there is **the use that each age is**, or the way in which each age is utilised by the Lord, where our own eternal well being is concerned. I repeat: there are these two things; these two areas of usefulness.

With regard to the use of the different age groups where the human family is concerned this is well worth thinking about and remembering. We need the innocence, the joyfulness, and the spontaneous ways of little children. We need the earnestness and probing questions of children. We need the visions and idealism of young people and young adults, and we are refreshed by their brusque challenges to the ideas, traditions and ways of the past. We also need the maturity of older people and the wisdom that only years of experience can bring. If we could, in our particular age group, recognise the value and importance of the contribution each can make, indeed, which each under Divine Providence is intended to make, what a happier and more tolerant world it would be.

Concern has been expressed recently about the way Australia, in particular, has, and I quote, "isolated and abandoned" its aged people (see "Consultant attacks care of the Aged", 'The Sydney Morning Herald', July 11, 1981). We are too often impatient with their slowness, physically and mentally, and are inclined to reinforce the sense of uselessness that hovers there with them. We complain that they live in the past and talk about things that don't interest us. And yet, in that they are people who have largely left behind materialistic and worldly goals and ambitions, are drawing closer to the Lord, and have learned love and gentleness and forgiveness and understanding, they can be a unique and very precious influence amongst us and bring us very close

to the sphere of heaven itself.

Apart, though, from the use the different age groups have where the human family as a whole is concerned, those ages we pass through are, as we noted, intended by the Lord to be of use where our regeneration and spiritual well being is concerned. And that's not too difficult to see.

The open, sponge like, uncritical mind we have as children is, for example, to enable us to learn and to absorb as much of the truth and teaching of the Bible as possible. In youth we set out our goals and ideals and map out our expectations of life. As adults, and in the hurly burly of life and the demands it makes of us, it is a matter of putting into practice those things we are so sure we believe in. But what about old age?

It's as well for us that there is a slowing down and that the illusion we have when we are young that we are to live in this world for ever grows thin. The fact that we are not able to do as much and have to rest more often, sit longer after meals, and be content with accomplishing less in a day, is so that we might have more time to think more deeply and to probe life's currents more carefully. Thankfully, the natural world and material possessions begin to lose their compelling attraction for us and to mean less, while the things of the spirit come to mean more. It's a time when we are intended to learn a new humility and, as the body slows down, we are brought to the clearest possible realisation of our dependance on the Lord.

"Man is so created that when he becomes old he may be in internal innocence, and therefore, when man becomes old he dwindles in body, and becomes again like a little child, that is, an angel, for an angel is a wise child in an eminent sense." (*Heaven and Hell* 278).

Thus it was appointed. So man is created. There is a wonderful .... grand .... purpose behind it all. Here is something that is not to be despised, but it is to be welcomed for the use it can be to us.

As in the Book of Proverbs: "The hoary (or grey) head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness." (16:31).

"Both young men, and maidens; old men, and children; let them praise the name of

the LORD; for His name alone is excellent; His glory is above the earth and heaven."  
(Psalm 148:12).

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