

What happens, when I die? - part 2.

In the first talk on life after death, we stressed two things. We stressed the immediacy of a person's resurrection into the spiritual world, and the fact that they appear there as completely human in form as they appeared here. Above all else a person is a spiritual being and cannot die. At the death of the physical body we lose consciousness of this world and withdraw from it. But at the same time we awaken to consciousness of the spiritual world, with which in fact we enjoy an unconscious association for the whole of our life here.

By way of a definition we spoke of the spiritual world as another dimension of consciousness. It is, nevertheless, a totally real world, and like most people, if not all, we shall not know at first that we have died.

"When a person arrives after death in the spiritual world", wrote Swedenborg "which generally happens on the third day after they have breathed their last, they seem to themselves to be alive as they were in the world, living in a similar house, room and bedroom, with similar dress and clothes, and with similar companions at home. If he was a king or prince, in a similar court; if a farm labourer in a similar cottage; the one in rustic surroundings, the other in magnificent surroundings. The reason this happens to every person, after death is so that death should not seem like death but a continuation of life, and so that the last act of natural life should become the first of spiritual life."

(The Five Memorable Relations 4).

Swedenborg also spoke of the death-experience and likened it to a deep and pleasant sleep. He wrote of the presence of angels with people at the time of their transition, and of the reunion in the spiritual world of those who had known and loved each other in this world. He movingly describes the happiness of people at finding themselves alive when they had not previously expected to be. *(The Last Judgement 15).*

And he assures us that where ties of affection have been strong and deep ones, especially as between married partners, the companionship of spirit continues, even though one be in the spiritual world. *(Conjugal Love 321).*

And that in fact raises a point which has been mentioned before - that the spiritual world is not distant and far away. Those who have died are not distant and far-away. Occasionally we sense their presence with us, though as a rule we do not enjoy and should not seek open communication with them.

The Lord desires that all people of whatever religion, rich or poor, wise or simple, should find a home in heaven and be happy there. This is why He created us. But what He desires cannot be forced upon us. Hence the order of things, whereby we are born into this world where the choice can be made and our character formed. And the person we have chosen to become here is the person we remain for all time. People think that death changes all this. But as to the type of person we basically are, no, it doesn't. Inevitably therefore, once the novelty of the new experience has worn off we shall seek out people, good or evil, who are like ourselves; who think as we do and with whom we feel most at ease.

"The newly-arrived spirit" wrote Swedenborg "is conducted from place to place, and is introduced to various societies, both good and bad, and observations are made of their reaction to good and truth, and to evil and falsity. If they are responsive to good and truth they are led away from evil and introduced into good societies . . . and then (at last) they are raised up into heaven".

(True Christian Religion 281).

But what of those who are not responsive to good and truth? To whom goodness and unselfishness has no appeal?

Clearly, from what the Lord Himself said in the Gospels, as much as from anything else, hell also exists; not the place of fire and brimstone with which preachers used to frighten their congregations in times gone past; but nevertheless a place where people go who have no interest in the life of heaven. We cannot gloss over realities, sobering as they are. Evil is a reality. Selfishness in human nature is a reality. And the fact that people love evil is reality also. Our understanding of life after death is incomplete if we don't take into account this aspect of things and the reality of hell.

Heaven, we may be sure, is open to all people. But those who go to heaven are those who have something of heaven already in themselves before they go. And to have something of heaven in ourselves, what is required is that we genuinely endeavour to live our lives according to the truth as we know it. We do not have to have belonged to a particular religion and it is not asked of us that we make monumental sacrifices or withdraw ourselves from the normal pleasures of life.

"There are" says Swedenborg, "some who believe that to live the life that leads to heaven, which is called spiritual life, is difficult, because they have heard that people must renounce the world, shun bodily pleasures, spurn legitimate honours and go about continually in meditation about God, salvation and eternal life . . . On the contrary, to receive the life of heaven a person must live in the world and engage in its duties and employments, and by means of a moral and civil life receive the spiritual life." (*Heaven and Hell* 528).

All those who have lived in this world from the beginning of time, and have died, are now in the spiritual world. And, as with the cells of the human body which are also virtually countless in number, each has their own particular function to perform. People have in the past tended to idealize heaven and to think of it in terms of a fairy-land. The general idea has been of an unreal existence which in fact no normal person could endure. Heaven, however, is a kingdom of uses, and there are countless opportunities for rendering service there. Obviously it is not all work but there are things to be done, and people thrive on it as they do here when their minds are occupied and they have a useful contribution to make. As to personality and needs, death does not change us. And one of our needs as is widely recognized, is the need to have a useful part to play. We cannot long tolerate inactivity. We tire of endless recreation and know the need for a proper balance. So, too, in the spiritual world in which, it is said, there are activities needing to be carried out "beyond number". (*Heaven and Hell* 387).

Though it can occur in tragic circumstances death itself is not a tragedy. Even where a young life is involved the potential which we sense was there will still be developed. Death, it is true, is a very final thing, but it is not the end, as it invariably seems to be. Death is the death of the body only; of the physical component. The person within goes on living in the spiritual world and if children are involved they will mature and grow up into adulthood.

In the case of the elderly, on the other hand, the inroads of old age are laid aside with the physical body. Physical incapacity of any kind no longer applies in the spiritual world, and a whole new life opens up in front of people. One of the best remembered things which Swedenborg wrote of life after death concerned those in heaven "continually advancing to the spring-time of their youth; and to a more gladsome and happy spring the more thousands of years they live." He went on to speak of women "who have died in old age and enfeebled with years", coming "more and more into the bloom of their youth and early womanhood. (*Arcana Caelestia* 553).

The late Dr. Helen Keller, a keen reader of the theological Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg and believer in them, once wrote that "it should never be forgotten that death is not the end of life, but only one of its most important experiences." We do well, indeed, to try to remember this, and to take this higher view of it.

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