

Notes from Swedenborg –What happens when we die?

Transcripts of YouTube clip <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zm1-pvBkyAY>
based on the insights Emanuel Swedenborg experienced as recorded in his writings.
Produced by the Swedenborg Association of Australia (SAA) www.swedenborg.com.au
May 2021

The very fact that people live and then die along with the prospect of our own death brings up the awesome question of what happens when we die? There's a whole range of beliefs, and many religions include immortality, living on, in their teachings. So did Emanuel Swedenborg, who says that every person lives on after they die, and their transition is usually so smooth, that some people don't even realise they've died! He says that "death is simply the continuation of life" which is quite a profound way of putting it.

Let's hear a helpful quote from the French philosopher, Teilhard de Chardin. He says, "We aren't human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a human experience." Whatever Teilhard de Chardin meant by that, it catches something very close to Swedenborg's understanding of death and immortality. We are essentially 'spirits', spiritual beings who are currently housed in a physical body, living in this physical world.

One of the striking features about dying is the way it looks to us that... that's that. Dead body. The life in it...just gone. Soon...it starts decaying. Every physical sense we have tells us that this is now all over, even while we might have beliefs or hopes about still existing somewhere, or maybe something. But we also know that the way things look are sometimes not how they really are, like the sun crossing the sky each day is what we see, but we know that that's because the world is rotating. It's an impression, an appearance.

This is the same with dying. Death looks like our worn-out body can't hold the life it had in it so everything ends. But Swedenborg actually looks at this from an opposite idea. He says that during our life here, we live in two worlds at the same time, the physical world (our body and the world around us) and the spiritual world (our loves, desires, thoughts, hopes, intentions, feelings and everything that animates us). And he says that when we die it isn't that our body gives up, and so there's nothing of us left; he says that our spirit gets rid of our body and moves into, or pulls back completely, into the spiritual world.

Death, then, is "this continuation of life". But it's our spiritual life. Those loves, desires, thoughts simply carry on. We haven't "gone" anywhere; we are in a different dimension, totally spiritual. Swedenborg says that we are not suspended thoughts either, but living beings in a spiritual body which mirrors the kind of person we are, being individually and collectively active, busy, happy and fulfilled. And this is how it is for ever. We inevitably move towards what we dearly love - whether that is good or not! - and we inevitably move to be with others with whom we feel like-minded, including those we loved and who loved us here.

The main point with all this is that our present level of life, with our bodies, time, space, place, status, reputation, information and so on...disappears and our spiritual, or our personal life, continues in this other dimension and becomes more and more sure of itself and what it wants.

A very important part of becoming more sure of what we love is that when we die, we will almost certainly have what we can call misinformed ideas, biases or distorted views (even about ourselves!), and ... obviously these can hold us back. Swedenborg says that when we die there is an initial period where we are helped to sort out any issues we have so that (perhaps for the first time) we see how things actually are.

One of the ways this readjustment happens is by re-meeting people we have been with in our life in the world. Swedenborg says that in the fully spiritual world we only have to think of a person and they become present with us. Amazing! Interestingly, this doesn't mean that they have been whisked away from what they were doing, like it would be here. In this fully spiritual world we can meet up in different ways because we are spirits. Meeting up, and now being spiritual, we begin to display more openly and outwardly our real selves as we are inside. And it is this greater transparency which forms the basis of people - spirits - wanting to be together, and be in community. Love, and truth shape and direct everything in our lives in this fully spiritual world.

Swedenborg also says that the overall appearance of the spiritual world closely resembles our present life in this world. There is the sky above, the earth below, apparent distance, mountains, rivers, every kind of living thing, and it's like this because these all represent our spiritual loves and desires. It's like seeing ourselves mirrored. Think about thoughts being like birds flying overhead, doves, larks...vultures. These representations or symbols reinforce our understanding of everything.

Finally, we need to see the reason why we have to have our present life here before we move into this exclusively spiritual world. It is here where we start our existence, where we can personally work things through without publicity, where we choose what we love and want to be like, in a personal "learning situation" where we come across both beauty and cruelty, joy and pain, and have our reactions and feelings. And we firm up on what matters most to us, so that when we die we will follow our strongest desires and be deeply content.