



Tweens Hunger for Biblical Food at the Almont Spring SPLATz Retreat

BY KURT FEKETE

Fourteen SPLATz (Super Powerful, Loveable Almost Teens) aged 10–13 gathered for the first weekend in May at Almont Retreat Center in Michigan to learn about foods of the Bible, arriving on a very blustery Friday afternoon. Several trees in the area had fallen, including some blocking a road to the Retreat Center and one very near the Almont Retreat Center chapel! Fortunately, no one was injured, and the tree near the chapel was guided down by angels and did not cause any damage to the chapel. Once we all settled in, the wind died down, and we began our discussions about biblical foods.

After a fun icebreaker, we began our sessions on Friday evening by talking about how people in ancient times ate. We learned that unhealthy overly processed fast food, junk food, and sugary breakfast cereals are a relatively

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The Biblical Foods Group Do they look hungry?

SCYL Teens Find Friendship in the Bible

BY KURT FEKETE

Seventeen teenagers descended on Almont Retreat Center over Memorial Day weekend to learn about biblical friends. The Swedenborgian Church Youth League (SCYL) selected this interesting theme at winter retreat.



The SCYL teen group taking a break in the spring air

I began Saturday morning by presenting an overview of friends and friendship in the Bible. One of the earliest reference to friendship was in

Exodus 33:11, where we read, “The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.” I emphasized

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The Editor's Desk



The Tragedy of Suicide

The media recently reported that two celebrities committed suicide within a single week. Kate Spade, a successful designer, and Anthony Bourdain, a successful restaurateur, food critic, author, and world travel media personality, have joined the list of suicide victims in America, which number close to 100 per day.

News articles on the subject inform us that suicides in America are up by twenty-five percent since 1999—an alarming statistic. Any suicide is a tragedy, of course, but we pay little attention unless it presents itself in our own families or close friends, or unless we are reminded of its enormity by the suicides of celebrities.

Suicide has touched my life. My best childhood friend killed himself when I was fifteen and he was sixteen; I don't know why. My father committed suicide a few months before I graduated from high school, and my mother, apparently, took her life with sleeping pills when she was seventy-nine. They both suffered from depression, but I don't know why they did it when most depressives don't. I do not relate

these incidents in search of shock or sympathy. Instead, I want to be part of the movement to remove the stigma of shame that often afflicts family members and friends of suicide victims.

We felt the pain of loss from suicide in our Swedenborgian family as well when one of our teenagers committed suicide several years ago.

Although we can never know all the reasons for, or all the events that led up to a suicide, we can separate our feelings of sadness from feelings of shame or responsibility.

It is hard for loved ones left behind not to wonder if the tragedy could have been prevented if they had just acted differently. Why didn't I do this or why didn't I do that questions run through our minds on a continuous video loop. With time, the video reruns less often, but it is always there.

Setting those feelings aside, we also are confused by shifting and conflicted feelings about the loved ones we've lost. They are both victims and perpetrators. We feel sad and compassionate because the person is a victim. They had lives to lead and joy to experience, even if they did not realize it at their desperate moment. At the same time, we feel anger; after all, this person committed a murder, even if it was themselves they

killed, and they left behind a terrible legacy of damage to loved ones.

Much research focuses on finding ways to predict suicide and ways to prevent suicides. The small piece of wisdom I can add to the search is that I have found great solace and support in loving communities to which I belong, and foremost among these loving communities are my overlapping church communities—the Cambridge Society, the Massachusetts New Church Union, the General Convention, and the Center for Swedenborgian Studies. I feel safe and hopeful among these friends.

—Herb Ziegler

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Church Calendar

- **July 1–5:** Swedenborgian Church Annual Convention, San Jose, CA
- **July 15–21:** Camp Paulhaven, Alberta, Canada
- **July 21–30:** Almont Summer School, Allenton, MI
- **August 4–19:** FNCA Family Summer Camp, Fryeburg, ME

the Messenger

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Letter from the President



2017–18—The Year of the New Jerusalem: The emergence of a new world

Dear Friends,

The Annual Convention is just around the corner, and I am excited. We have a strong attendance this year from the West Coast, and one third of the attendees are first timers.

Fifteen teens will keep youth leader, Kurt Fekete, on his toes, and five of them are first timers. I am already looking forward to the creative way these teens will lead us in worship, a highlight of annual conventions.

Ten younger children will be attending also. Two young women, Charlie and Holly Bauer, whom we have watched grow up through attendance at conventions and retreats as members of the Youth League (SCYL), will be leading a structured children's program called "Survival Toolkit: Physical and Spiritual."

Churches, associations, Women's Alliance, our financial advisor, Swedenborg Foundation, Wilmington Trust, and generous individuals have stepped up to help with the costs of this convention, including scholarships for children and youth, with donations totaling over \$14,000.

Even the business meetings have a major role this year with voting on the changes to our supporting structure that we hope will energize and enhance the role that volunteers serve in our denomination. We would not survive without the

many hours of volunteer help with our denominational committees, churches, associations, camps, retreats, and varied ministries. The new bylaws give clear definition of the responsibilities of the proposed standing committees.

We have squeezed the agenda to make room for four time slots for mini-courses, with three choices in each slot. Topics include a virtual tour of Swedenborg's Sweden, a comparison of creativity and regeneration, discussing the use of the Swedenborgian Church, and the Old and New Jerusalems. EdSU chair Karen Feil has put together a wide variety of choices; you will be spiritually and theologically fed.

Every day opens with a stirring worship service, and every evening will close with vespers. Rev. Junchol Lee (San Francisco), Rev. Dr. Jim Lawrence (CSS), and Rev. Thom Muller (Hillside) will lead our informal worship services, and Rev. Kit Billings is this year's convention preacher for the inspiring closing worship service.

We are delighted to welcome our keynote speaker, Curtis Childs, from the Swedenborg Foundation online program, *Off the Left Eye. Off the Left Eye* will broadcast live during the Center for Swedenborgian Studies annual corporation meeting, with professors Dr. Devin Zuber and Dr. Rebecca Esterson. Curtis is also leading a mini-course.

Val Brugler and Samantha Johanson will preview our new denomination's website. Val has been instrumental throughout the process, faithfully working many hours to bring the work of the Digital Presence Working Group to fruition.

Another highlight of the annual convention is the ordination service. We will gather in the Methodist Church near campus for the ordination of Rachel Madjerac and Cory Bradford-Watts. Rachel found her way into the Swedenborgian church through offering childcare at the Portland church,

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When Thoughts and Prayers Don't Matter (and When They Do)

BY REV. THOM MULLER

As you may suspect, the title of this piece is a reference to a debate, or maybe the better word is lamentation or outcry, that's been a theme in both social media and mainstream media. There is a sense of frustration with the phenomenon of "sending thoughts and prayers" when a tragedy strikes, and then not actually doing anything to that leads to change.

I find that the topic of prayer is a particularly interesting part of Swedenborg's writings, and he challenges a lot of the traditional views on what prayer is. I think he addresses a major problem in many common understandings of prayer—something with which I've always struggled.

Let me illustrate my issue with prayer from a Swedenborgian theological perspective on the idea of intercessory prayer. Say someone whom someone in my community or I cares about is sick in the hospital. And we go ahead and pray for this person,—for their healing, their recovery, their state of mind, etc.

Next to this sick friend is a homeless person who does not have anyone who bothers to pray for them, or even think of or empathize with their suffering.

Do we think or expect that God will choose to magically heal this particular person because we chose to say a prayer, and thus choose to bless and heal them more than the homeless person next to him? This seems to be in complete opposition to Swedenborg's idea of God, who cannot do anything *but* bless us, and does not withhold that blessing from anyone or anything. Some people cherish the notion



that God turns his face away from people, spurns them, and casts them into hell, and is angry against them because of their evil. Some people even go so far as to think that God punishes people and does them harm. They support this notion from the literal meaning of the Word where things like this are said, not realizing that the spiritual meaning of the Word, which makes sense of the letter, is wholly different. So the real doctrine of the church, which is from the spiritual meaning of the Word, teaches something else. It teaches that the Lord never turns his face away from anyone or spurns anyone, never casts anyone into hell or is angry.¹

The same then, as one may assume, goes for asking God for forgiveness. In the Lord's prayer we ask God to "forgive us our debts." But there really is no debt that we have before God. God cannot and does not choose not to forgive us, because he was never in a position to forgive.

There is no need for us to list our sins before the Lord and no need to beg that he forgive them. The reason we do not need to list our sins before the Lord is that we searched them out within ourselves and saw them, and therefore they are present before the Lord because they are present before us. The Lord was leading us in our self-examination; he disclosed our sins; he inspired our grief and, along with it, the motivation

to stop doing them and begin a new life.

There are two reasons why we should not beg the Lord to forgive our sins.

The first is that sins are not abolished, they are just relocated within us. They are laid aside when after repentance we stop doing them and start a new life. This is because there are countless yearnings that stick to each evil in a kind of cluster; these cannot be set aside in a moment, but they can be dealt with in stages as we allow ourselves to be reformed and regenerated.

The second reason is that the Lord is mercy itself. Therefore he forgives the sins of all people. He blames no one for any sin. He says, "They do not know what they are doing."²

Now, the seeming irony of this is that Swedenborg was known to pray the Lord's prayer daily, like a mantra.

So what's up with this? If God doesn't magically intervene in our lives or absolve us from some kind of perceived debt, what's the point of prayer? I believe that Swedenborg's writings point to two distinct layers of prayer: its function, and its benefits.

First, prayer is a tool for self-reflection. In fact, Swedenborg goes at length into the inner meaning of the different kinds of prayers and offerings described in the Old Testament. He identifies a universal need to express gratitude, remorse, change of heart, and humility. It truly is a practice that is for our sake and for the sake of our regeneration. It is an acknowledgement of our own limited-ness and the reality of divine love and wisdom.

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¹ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Heaven and Hell*, §545. Translated by George F. Dole, Swedenborg Foundation, 2010.

² Swedenborg, Emanuel. *True Christianity*, §539. Translated by Jonathan Rose, Swedenborg Foundation, 2010.

Thoughts and Prayers

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By anthropomorphizing God, we enter into a relationship that we can connect to our own humanity and humility, and that opens us up to divine influx. It is in a very real sense, a psycho-spiritual self-help tool.

The Lord does not demand humiliation, adoration, or thanksgiving for His own sake, for the Divine has no glory from our humiliation, adoration, and thanksgiving. In the Divine, anything from the love of self is utterly inconceivable—that such things should be done for His own sake; but they are for our own sake, for when we are in humility, we can receive good from the Lord, because we have been separated from the love of self, which is the obstacle; and therefore the Lord wills a state of humility in us for our own sake, because when we are in this state, the Lord can flow in with heavenly good. The case is similar with adoration, and with thanksgiving.³

Prayer is transformative, because it enables us to “get off our high horse” so to speak, to get off the pedestal of our *ego/proprium*, that which we claim as our own. And I can personally attest to the power of this kind of prayer. Rather than magically fixing or intervening in things, prayer, among other things, enables us to be vessels of the divine, distributors of love and wisdom, which is how God moves in the world and blesses us by means of each other.

With all of us, God flows into our concept of Him and brings us true acknowledgment of Him. He also flows into us and brings us his love for people. If we accept only the first inflow but not the second, we receive that inflow with our intellect but not our will. We keep our concept of God without arriving at an inward acknowledgment of God. Our state is then like a garden in

winter.

If we accept both types of inflow, however, we receive the inflow with our will and then our intellect—that is, with our whole mind. We then develop an inner acknowledgment of God that brings our concepts of God to life. Our state is then like a garden in spring.

[Lovingkindness] makes the connection, because God loves every one of us but cannot benefit us directly; he can benefit us only indirectly through each other.⁴

This idea was instrumental in drawing me to Swedenborg’s writings. I remember a friend of mine who shared about the existential crisis the family went through after the tragic death of a loved one. To them, as perhaps to anyone, this crushed the meaningfulness of an idea of a God who intervenes, blesses, and curses. Their belief in God, in the Swedenborgian sense of the word was renewed when they reflected on the love and the wisdom, the care and concern, the compassion and generosity they experienced in the wake of these unbelievably painful and challenging events.

But there is a second element to a Swedenborgian approach to prayer, which takes us back into the metaphysical realm. Swedenborg’s writings teach that in the spiritual world, which transcends but includes this realm and lies at the core of our experience of consciousness, there is no time and space, only the appearance thereof, and that closeness as well as distance, spiritually, are matters of affection, not physical location.

This means that we are, according to Swedenborg, constantly connected with the spiritual world and, thus, each other while simultaneously under the appearance of an exclusively material, earthly presence. We are in constant connection with spiritual

communities, based on our internal affections and the states of mind and spirit we choose to inhabit. This puts a different spin on intercessory prayer.

I have actually heard the argument made from fellow Swedenborgians that one should not engage in this kind of prayer since it assumes a notion of God as somehow unjust and interventionist. I’d like to respectfully challenge this position.

Let’s look at the hypothetical example from earlier. Our friend is in the hospital, doing really crappy, and the family is in a dark spiritual place. While we are physically apart, we can be spiritually present with them by expressing our solidarity and empathy and our wish for them to feel better. And if we buy into the notion of spiritual closeness being a matter of affection and spiritual state, rather than physical location, I believe there is a case to be made for the notion that this kind of spiritual exercise creates a very real connection, which can be incredibly tangible and helpful.

But once again, it is our choosing to express love and wisdom, to open ourselves up to divine reality, that lies at the core of the process. We are not the doer, but we are the vessel through which God manifests. Too often, a reliance on overly theistic ideas of God leads us to inaction, and prevents us from embodying the Divine, rather than simply evoking it.

As we engage the complexities of human life and human relationship, including the major social and political and cultural issues we are wrestling with these days, let’s remember that we are called to be the hands and feet of God. And that union with God is union with each other, not some kind of religious practice or belief.

God is love and love is God. And it is through the embodiment of that love that we unite ourselves to Her, and as we read in the Psalm 17:5, “. . . when I

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³ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia*, §5957. Translated by John Faulkner. Potts and John Clowes, Swedenborg Foundation, 1998.

⁴ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Heaven and Hell*, §457. Translated by George F. Dole, Swedenborg Foundation, 2010.

SCYL Retreat

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the importance of thinking of God as someone you can talk to like a friend. In a couple of other mentions about friendship in the Old Testament, especially in Deuteronomy and the Prophets, we learn that we should be careful and choose our friends wisely so as to not be align ourselves with an enemy or with someone who may steer us astray.

Friends are mentioned in nine of the 150 Psalms, and most of them talk about the loss of friendship and how disparaging this is, such as in Psalm 88, "You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape; my eyes are dim with grief." The teens could really relate to this feeling of grief and self loathing. One teen spoke up and said, "How did you get a copy of my diary?" In King Solomon's Proverbs, we read several passages about friendship, such as Proverbs 22, "Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn their ways and get yourself ensnared." And Proverbs 16, "Gossip separates close friends." And in the New Testament, Jesus humbles us in Matthew 7 by teaching us about how to treat our friends, saying, "Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. How can you think of saying to your friend, 'Let me help you get

rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye."

SCYL chaplain, Rev. Renée Machiniak, led the Saturday afternoon session. Renée presented the book of Job. She started with an activity to illustrate perseverance by having the teens read a lengthy Bible passage around in a circle, one word at a time without pause or fault in less than twenty seconds. It was very difficult, and the exercise took many



Lauren, Gillian, Ivy, Joey, and Jack

tries to get it right. Some teens complained and wanted to quit. Finally, after twenty minutes, the teens prevailed and celebrated their ability to overcome adversity. So went the introduction to Job, a story of perseverance, faith, and



Rev. Renée gets a henna tattoo from Scout, with Joline and Julia.



The 3 J...s with Ivy (Jack, Joey, and Josh)

trust when all was lost. Job lost his family, livelihood, and friends yet persevered and was rewarded in the end with twice as much as he had before.

Renée did a great job bringing this meaningful message to the teens. She could not stay for the whole retreat, but she had time in the afternoon to just hang out with the teens and talk and listen. The teens gave her a Swedenborgian henna tattoo on her ankle as she lay in the warm sun, out on the lawn. It was wonderful just to have her at the retreat being present with the teenagers.

Rev. Jenn Tafel did two retreat sessions and had the teens read the story of Ruth and Naomi from the Book of Ruth and portions of the story of David and Jonathan from 1 Samuel.

Throughout her sessions, Jenn had the teens look for where the qualities of loyalty, sacrifice, compromise, and trust were demonstrated in the friendship story. It was nice to just take time to read the Bible together as a group of friends.

My second session was on



Renée's tattoo

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SCYL Retreat

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Jesus and the disciples. There are many popular cultural references to Jesus Christ, and I chose to compare the life of Jesus and his ministry with his



Supreme staff chefs Heather and Jenn cooking up a pot of yumminess!

disciples to the My Little Pony series, “Friendship is Magic.” The mission of Twilight Sparkle and her relationship with Princess Celestia and her friends is similar in many ways to the life of Jesus Christ and his disciples, whom he

called friends.

But what would a retreat on friendship be without friends! The teens had ample time to just hang out, laugh, and celebrate being friends. They played Frisbee, tennis, and catch outside, and Catchphrase, Spoons, and card games inside. They sat on the sofa and made up silly memes together. They went on an outing and played mini golf, ate ice cream, and drove go-carts. They sat on the lawn and gave each other henna tattoos. Ava found an old birthday book in the library from the 1880s, which had a quote from Swedenborg for each day of the year. She passed it around and had everyone sign it on their day. The teens searched as a group for glowing fruit in the evening in the classic banana-hunt activity. The teens did everything together; they were friends in holy community.

We closed the retreat with a beautiful communion worship service led by Rev. Jenn. In that service, we heard words from the Bible that exemplified our church friendships and



Impromptu SCYL officer meeting on the lawn: Joey, Ava, Scout, and Gillian

relationships. From Proverbs 27, “Wounds from a sincere friend are better than many kisses from an enemy. A person who strays from home is like a bird that strays from its nest. The heartfelt counsel of a friend is as sweet as perfume and incense. Never abandon a friend—either yours or your father’s. As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend.” And as Jesus said to his disciples so long ago, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” ☪

Kurt Fekete is youth director of the Swedenborgian Church.



Woman Who Saw Rainbows

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with utter delight, “Look at her face; it’s shinning at me; did you see it?” I said no, I wasn’t looking but could feel it. He asked me to play the same song again, and I did. Richard cried as they deeply communed together again, and he was very thankful. He took down the picture of a bluebird that she had painted from the wall and showed it to her. She was utterly delighted.

Afterward, the nurse came and gave her some morphine, and Richard reported that she froze and didn’t speak again. That night, Richard said their smallest dog, Ripple, woke him up in the middle of the night, and he went in and checked on her. He said she was still warm and must have just passed. They had adopted Ripple as a rescue;

Ripple’s former owner had passed away. Richard felt this dog knew from experience something was wrong.

A final note: Richard spent quality time with his brother, and then they drove together to Eleanor’s burial in Guerneville, California. They took all the dogs with them, as they couldn’t be left at home. Without any signs of illness, Eleanor’s own dog died in the car on the way. Richard felt that the dog must have wanted to go with her owner. Her beloved dog was buried near her in Guerneville. ☪

Rev. Steve Sanchez is a Swedenborgian pastor in the Bay Area. He has been a hospice chaplain and part-time minister for the last eight years. He is a full-time chaplain at Suncrest Hospice in San Francisco. He recently self published a book called, *Rethinking Redemption: Revitalizing our Relationship (with Jesus)*. He also has a popular blog at influxdivine.com

Thoughts and Prayers

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awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.” ☪

Rev. Thom Muller is pastor at Hillside, an Urban Sanctuary/Hillside Swedenborgian Church, in El Cerrito, California, and co-editor of *Our Daily Bread* (<http://spiritualquesters.org>). His passions include the intersection of religion and psychology, interfaith spirituality, comparative mysticism, and the Western esoteric tradition. He was ordained into the ministry of the Swedenborgian Church of North America in 2016, upon receiving his theological education at Bryn Athyn College of the New Church and the Center for Swedenborgian Studies / Pacific School of Religion at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California.

SPLATz Biblical Foods

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recent invention. We talked about how our species, Homo Sapiens, has been around 200,000 years, and almost all of that time we've been hunter-gatherers. We used to spend almost all our time on finding food and shelter. We ate fruit, greens, and what we could catch. Mostly we ate plants. Only 10,000 years ago (five percent of the time span of humans' existence) did agriculture begin. Around 8000 BCE, which relates to the earliest Biblical time, did humans begin growing wheat, barley, legumes, and other grains. Around the same time, livestock, cattle, goats, sheep, and pigs were domesticated. Such was the way of life in biblical times, and our lifestyle remained quite similar to this right up to recent times.

We started off Saturday morning by discussing kosher law. Kosher refers to a set of Old Testament biblical rules regarding food and food preparation. We learned about what foods are and are not kosher, and why. We discovered that the primary idea behind kosher laws is self-control, discipline, and knowing your food and respecting it. Next we began looking at specific foods from Biblical stories starting with unleavened bread from the Passover feast found in Exodus 12. We talked about why the Israelites could not use yeast or take the time to allow the bread to rise.

Next, we heard the story of Manna from heaven in Exodus 16. After crossing the Red Sea and escaping the Egyptians, the whole community of Israel was in the desert. After forty-five days

we pick up the story. The Israelites were starving and they grumbled to Moses. Moses spoke to the Lord who said, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you." This Manna had to be gathered each morning and we learned that it



Ellie, Zsa Zsa, and Bella

represents our heartfelt delight in practicing acts of goodness. This is spiritual food that sustains us": Give us this day our daily bread." Manna fed the Israelites for forty years, but it was work for them every day. It is hard work to be kind and loving, but this is the way that we spiritually nourish our soul.

Saturday afternoon we turned our attention to the fruits of the Bible. Starting with the date palm, we discussed how both the tree and date fruit were extremely useful. In 2 Samuel 6, we celebrated the Lord with dates by hearing the story of King David bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. King David leapt and danced before the Lord, blessed the people in the name of the Almighty, and then gave a cake of dates to each person in the whole crowd of Israelites, both men and women. Jerusalem represents



Bella, swinging for the sky!

the highest or holiest place. When we bring God's commandments into our life and make them our highest priority, then we can celebrate with joy and delight. Others who don't understand may make fun of us or tell us not to celebrate because we don't look right or act right, but we should stay strong and continue to celebrate the Lord with dancing and joy!

Next up was the fig. We read Luke 13:6-8:

Jesus told a story. A man had a fig tree. It had been planted in his vineyard. When he went to look for fruit on it, he didn't find any. So he went to the man who took care of the vineyard. He said, "For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree. But I haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?"

"Sir," the man replied, "leave it alone for one more year. I'll dig around it and feed it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down."

This story, we learned, is about a person not bearing fruit, a person not living up to their potential. Digging around the tree would serve to prune its roots and hopefully shock it into producing fruit. When you dig at a person's roots you are shaking their foundation. You are getting them to really consider what they are doing and not doing. Then you feed the person. You provide reasons for them to do good deeds. However, you cannot save everyone. If a person is too toxic to you or you cannot get through to them, you cannot force them to produce fruit. This is the cutting down. Hopefully when you help someone who is not doing useful things, they improve and bear fruit.

Then we looked at olives. The olive tree is one of the most familiar and interesting trees in the entire Middle East. It can live 1000 years! Olives might be the most important food

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Church Membership Statistics

Article I, Section 3, of the Constitution of the Swedenborgian Church states that it is composed of “Constituent bodies . . . which . . . unite with the Swedenborgian Church in performing the distinctive uses of a church.” The constituent bodies are the associations and groups listed in the table below. The constitution continues, “The members of the Swedenborgian Church shall be those persons who are

adult, active members of a constituent body or who have been accepted as members-at large through Rite of Confirmation and by vote of the Swedenborgian Church.”

Article IV, Section 2, states, “Every constituent body of the Swedenborgian Church shall be entitled to two delegates and an additional delegate for every ten members.” The table below displays statistics as of December 31, 2017.

Association (Conference)	Churches		Ordained Ministers		Licensed Pastors	Members			Number of Delegates
	Active	Inactive	Active	Retired		Active	Inactive	Total	
Eastern Canada (ECC)	2	0	0	1	0	74	47	126	9
Illinois	2	0	2	0	1	72	0	72	9
Kansas	3	0	4	1	1	141	108	249	16
Maine	4	0	4	1	0	74	54	128	9
Massachusetts	1	0	3	0	0	62	25	87	8
Michigan	3	0	3	1	0	95	35	130	11
Middle Atlantic	4	2	1	2	3	56	25	81	7
New York	2	0	1	0	0	30	0	30	5
Ohio	3	0	3	3	0	52	13	65	7
Pacific Coast (PCA)	5	0	15	3	2	226	131	357	24
Southeast	2	0	2	0	0	21	2	23	4
Western Canada	3	3	1	1	0	82	32	114	10
At Large	na	na	1	0	na	6	0	6	2
SCYL	na	na	na	na	na	6	na	na	2
Unknown Affiliation	na	na	14	0	0	0	0	0	na
Totals	34	5	68	13	7	997	472	1468	123

SPLATz Biblical Foods

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in the Bible because of their versatility. Although not important as a solid fruit, olive oil was essential. It had four main uses in Biblical days: food, ointment, soap, and, most importantly, fuel.

We read the parable of the ten bridesmaids in Matthew 25 and learned all of the correspondences and what it means for us today. “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour!”

On Saturday evening, we ended our sessions with an exploration of grapes. Grapes are definitely one of God’s miracle foods. They are sweet, satisfying, and require no preparation. Grapes are frequently mentioned in the Bible and often are used as examples of bounty.

The tweens had plenty of time to

enjoy the beautiful weather and retreat grounds. They took walks around the pond and loved playing on the swings. At each session, we sampled different fruits from the Bible. I even took a stab at what manna may have been like, (Exodus 16:31 “It was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey.”) One of the teens, Joline, commented, “It was kind of cool to eat things that you usually don’t eat, like dates and food that people ate a long time ago.” We closed with the beautiful biblical parable of the Vine and the Branches from John 15.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that

An Invitation to Collaborate

Rev. Julie Conaron and Rev. Ros Taylor are planning a Women’s Companion to Swedenborg’s book *Conjugal Love*. We want Swedenborgian/New Church women from around the world to contribute their responses as we read through the book over the next two years. We invite women who want to be part of this project to contact Julie (julieconaron@hotmail.com) or Ros (hrtaylor@temple.edu) with their email addresses so we can share the Google doc with them.

your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ☺

Reflection

The Woman Who Saw Rainbows

BY STEVE SANCHEZ

Richard and Eleanor rented the second floor of an old Victorian house in the Haight Ashbury section of San Francisco that had never been remodeled; it had become cluttered. In Eleanor's room there were tables, filled with plants, and shelves of little toy figures, dolls, and books. Richard said that, at the end, Eleanor pretty much became a hoarder. They had four beloved dogs that were always part of our visits. Richard and Eleanor were the nicest old hippie couple you could ever meet. Eleanor had lived in a house with Janice Joplin somewhere in Noe Valley for a while in her younger days.

On my first visit to Eleanor, she lay in her bed, covered with blankets, the four small dogs lying around her, two of which were getting old themselves. She smiled brightly, delighted with my presence as with an old friend. She shooed a couple of the dogs off the bed and asked me to sit by her. Eleanor spoke very well and always responded to questions and interacted without hesitation. She had the innocence of a child and the intelligence of a woman.

The first day, I played songs for her, and it was a wonderful spontaneous time. At first I played old songs, but when I saw how she loved the tone and affection in the music (as I do), I played some of my own compositions. She didn't just listen; she closed her eyes and meditated on the music, and she was part of it. She said the songs were beautiful and that they sustained her through the days. She sometimes shared images and memories that came



to mind after hearing the songs.

I also talked to her about her relationship with God. She had some Christian background and believed in God and heaven. She believed in a spiritual path connected to nature, art, and life. On some vis-

its, Richard brought out a book that featured great artists' paintings of dogs, animals, and nature, and we all looked through them together. During each visit, I said a prayer with Eleanor.

On many visits we sat in the long narrow kitchen at the table, which had various colored items of art (like a dream catcher), rocks, and plants on it. Eleanor sat in her wheelchair, I sat nearby, and Richard would sit with the dogs on the floor, giving them treats. Richard participated in the visits: made coffee and made sure Eleanor was comfortable. Richard also loved music and sometimes requested songs, like "Hallelujah" by Leonard Cohen. One day when I came to the door, Richard told me that Eleanor asked him eagerly the day before, "When is the man with the Green Rainbow above his head coming back?"

Often, Eleanor's statements didn't make linear sense, and Richard helped to interpret what these meant, or whether they were something real or imagined. This was because she sometimes had "hallucinations: "In her room there was a little tree and she would ask me if I saw the birds in the tree." Richard said that at night she often became paranoid and upset over the things she imagined, and for a while this was a stressful burden on Richard. She often imagined there were intruders. During

my visits, she sometimes cried suddenly. Richard said she was crying more toward the end, which is not necessarily a bad thing. I thought this was like kids that act out in a family; in many ways it's healthy because they feel safe to experiment, be themselves, express their feelings, deal with consequences, and forgive. Eleanor's tears quickly passed, and more often than not she expressed joy and care for others.

I talked to her about the things she imagined and tried to reframe them in a healing light, and she was receptive to these suggestions. (Richard thought that her hallucinations were caused, at least in part, by their days of taking LSD.) Because she had such a quality of innocence and a creative spirit, she accepted these ideas with ease and affection. When she said there were birds in the tree, I asked what kind, and she said they were bluebirds like a picture on the wall that she had painted a long time ago. I suggested the birds were messengers from heaven and that the bluebirds were like angels, just like in the song "Somewhere over the Rainbow," which I had sung to her on my first visit. She loved this idea. Her paranoia with the hallucinations gradually became better over the time of our visits. I wrote a song about Eleanor and our visits called, "The Man with the Green Rainbow." We had great fun with this.

I visited on the day before she passed away. She lay in bed and could barely move but she could talk. She smiled and looked right into me—the same as always. After we had talked and prayed, Richard asked me to play a song. I wanted to play something suited to both of them, and played "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" because it has such beautiful imagery of heaven. I played my best for them. Richard said

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Bearing True Witness

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what comes to us from heavenly love, or in other words, what comes from God, who is divine love. For a commandment that is just telling us not to lie, it may not seem this way on the surface, but love, or what Swedenborg calls “the good of love,” is a core part of bearing true witness. In fact, you can’t have truth without it.

The Lord comes into sight through good, but not through truth devoid of good. . . . He is present in truth to the extent that it leads to good and to the extent that it emanates from good. . . . The truths of faith regarded without love are mere sounds devoid of any life; but through love, and so through being joined to the good of love, they receive life. (*Arcana Coelestia* §§3863:14; 10153:4; 4352:2)

What does this mean for my own states? Well, it behooves me both to question those states that are out to attack me, or others, and to consciously adopt a perspective that has the warm color of mercy. Yet the grooves of a false witness mind are ingrained. The outer, or earthly, level of our mind is built to function in appearances—which allows us to live in the natural world—but if we make spiritual judgments based solely on these appearances, we will be misled.

The earthly self makes judgments based on appearances and resulting false impressions, when in fact these run directly counter to the truth. . . . Sense impressions mean things that impinge on our physical senses and are experienced by those senses. . . . When our thinking rises above sense impressions, it enters a clearer light and eventually comes into the light of heaven. From this light we get the awareness of truth that constitutes real intelligence. . . . If sense impressions have the highest priority, . . . truths are not visible to us except as if they were in a fog or in

the dark of night. (*True Christianity* §§470; 402:12, 16, 18)

Thoughts based on appearances often betray the love that is alive in all things.

What It Takes

The false witness perspective will always be there. We must choose daily, and moment to moment, to lift our minds to the true witness. It takes repeated effort and requires choice.

What we are trying to do is expand the place within ourselves where the Lord can live. And what we are grasping onto and holding so tightly to—namely, our old self—is the very thing that is preventing that from happening. . . . We have to become . . . a vessel [so that] the Lord can live in us and also be active through us. The Lord has given us that potential.¹

A friend once suggested making the effort into a phrase that will help reach for the true witness in any difficult moment: “What is the most loving way I could hold my circumstances?” Hear the message as if it’s coming from someone who for you encapsulates total love. Another avenue is to use the practice of *metta* (or loving-kindness) meditation, which consists of the conscious cultivation of the experience of loving-presence. Either by imagining holding someone dear to you in a loving gaze or by being on the receiving end of a loving gaze from someone who embodies total, ecstatic love for you, the perspective gained from being in this love-filled state is one of true witness.

It is an act of strength and courage to live in alignment with true witness. And it is a monumental feat because it means going against the tide of the world of appearances, against the strong current of either our false

¹ Peter Rhodes. *Observing Spirit, Evaluating Your Daily Progress on the Path to Heaven with Gurdjieff and Swedenborg*. Edited by Jody Bramel and Ruth Zuber. P. 170 Swedenborg Foundation, 2005.

Letter from the President

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attendance at the Fryeburg New Church Assembly summer sessions, and involvement with SCYL. Cory attended the St. Louis Church of the Open Word.

We are all looking forward to the outing planned by Dr. Rebecca Esteron and Dr. Devin Zuber, both professors at the Center for Swedenborgian Studies. We will take a scenic bus ride to the Redwoods for strolls and swimming and then a steam train ride through the redwood forest.

If you can’t make it to this year’s convention in San Jose, we hope you mark your calendar for Convention 2019 at Valparaiso University, outside Chicago, hosted by the Midwest Association and the LaPorte (Indiana) Church, June 26–July 3, 2019.

—*With care and a look to the future,*
Rev. Jane Siebert

witness mind on an individual level or worldly appearances in society—reputations or expectations. It is exactly what is needed to transform our world, both inner and outer. By bearing true witness, in our own minds or in society, we can trust that we are adding to the ocean of genuine truth that the Lord operates through to lead us to love and that “he does not rest until love takes the lead” (*Secrets of Heaven* §63). ☦

Chelsea Rose Odhner is a writer for the “Swedenborg & Life” show on the “OffTheLeftEye” YouTube channel <http://tinyurl.com/OffTheLeftEye>.



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About the Swedenborgian Church

Emanuel Swedenborg was born January 29, 1688, in Stockholm, Sweden. Although he never intended a church denomination to be founded or named after him, a society was formed in London fifteen years after his death. American groups eventually founded the General Convention of Swedenborgian Churches.

As a result of Swedenborg's spiritual questioning and insights, we as a church exist to encourage that same spirit of inquiry and personal growth, to respect differences in views, and to accept others who may have different traditions.

In his theological writings, Swedenborg shared a view of God as infinitely loving and at the very center of our beings, a view of life as a spiritual birthing as we participate in our own creation, and a view of scripture as a story of inner life stages as we learn and grow. Swedenborg said, "All religion relates to life, and the life of religion is to do good." He also felt that the sincerest form of worship is a useful life.

Bearing True Witness to the Warm Color of Mercy: A Parable of "Fake News"

BY CHELSEA ODHNER

The Lord said through the prophet Isaiah, "You are my witnesses!" (43:10,12; 44:8).

In the age of "fake news" and the #MeToo movement, it seems as though we have reached a cultural tipping point around the importance of bearing true witness. Having access to media on a global scale, we can sometimes feel powerless in the face of all that we witness; our power, though, remains in how we bear witness. Bearing true witness is the beginning of transformation, for ourselves as individuals and for society.

The Real News

Why is it so valuable that the truth come out in either society or in our own heads? Because it allows us to reckon with what is genuinely aligned with love and what isn't. It can be just as painful to admit to the true circumstances of our own mental state as it is to acknowledge the grossly maligned boundaries of a relationship, but to notice is to begin to carve a way toward a state more

rooted in love.

We know what the commandment not to bear false witness means on an outer level: be honest; don't lie. But if

we peel back a layer from this by taking its implications into the realm of an individual mind, asking ourselves, "What kind of a witness am I to my own life?" we realize that we each have both a false witness and a true witness mind.

I've come to learn that the "fake news" in my head—the false witness—is anything arising from selfhood.

When truths are derived from the self, they have as their end in view rank and prominence over everyone in the world, and also earthly possessions and wealth above everyone. Consequently they hold within them self-love and love of the world, thus all evils in their entirety. . . . Products of the self or self-intelligence are called truths, but they are not really truths; they look like truths solely to outward appearances. (*Arcana Coelestia* §8941:2)

What, then, is the real news? It is

