

DEATH
AND
REBIRTH

BRINGING TOGETHER
NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES,
SWEDENBORG'S STAGES AFTER DEATH,
AND OUR OWN SPIRITUAL REBIRTH PROCESS

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INTRODUCTION

In 1975, Raymond Moody published his book *Life After Life*. It became an instant bestseller, sparking an intense popular interest in Near Death Experiences (NDEs) that has continued to grow ever since. Suddenly, there was new light shining on a part of human experience that had been shrouded in mystery before. Suddenly, we had up-to-date reports on the afterlife from ordinary people.

Though Moody's book was the first popular book on NDEs, it was not the first material to be published containing descriptions of what happens to us when we die. Various articles and a few books had already been published touching on the subject of NDEs in the years leading up to Moody's book. There was a quiet buildup of investigation and reporting leading to the wide open door of *Life After Life*.

Even before that buildup, though, there had long been texts containing descriptions of

what happens to us when we die. For example, from the East, we have *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. From Africa, we have *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. In the west, we have *Heaven and Hell*, by Emanuel Swedenborg. In this book I will focus on Swedenborg's descriptions of the transition begun by death, putting them in a wider context and exploring their meaning for our spiritual growth during our lives.

When Emanuel Swedenborg began his career in the early 1700s, he had no thought of visiting the spiritual world or becoming a spiritual seer. Though he was the son of a prominent Lutheran bishop, his fascination was with science and engineering—and that was where he wanted to make his mark on the world.

He did exceptionally well. Soon after his studies were finished, he was appointed to the Swedish Board of Mines, which oversaw the most important industry in Sweden. Swedenborg served faithfully in this post for many years, doing everything from creating mining regulations to descending into the mines

themselves to do inspections and suggest improvements.

When his family was ennobled by the Swedish queen, as the eldest surviving son Swedenborg took a seat in the House of Nobles of the Swedish Parliament. He served in this post for the rest of his life, whenever he was in Sweden. His contributions to the Parliament showed a pragmatic concern for the well-being of his country.

Even with these important posts he was not satisfied. His mind was restless. He wanted a comprehensive grasp of science and human nature. He studied all the sciences of his day, and wrote groundbreaking books and articles on mechanics, engineering, mathematics, physics, cosmology, metallurgy, chemistry, anatomy, psychology, and many other subjects. Due to his scientific work, he was elected to the Royal Swedish Academy of Science.¹

As time went on, he focused his studies increasingly on the human body. By this time

1. *The Swedenborg Epic*, by Cyriel Odhner Sigstedt. (London: Swedenborg Society, 1981) p. 162.

he had set a difficult task for himself: he wanted to find the human soul. He thought he could do this by studying the body. But the more painstaking his researches, the farther he seemed to be from finding the soul.

When he was in his mid-fifties, he went through a spiritual crisis, marked by many vivid dreams and visions. He said the Lord appeared to him and gave him a new mission: to study the spiritual realm. He tells us that God then opened his spiritual eyes so that he could be conscious in the material world and the spiritual world at the same time.

It was a difficult struggle for Swedenborg to give up his hopes for worldly fame and go on a spiritual journey. He knew he would be attacked and ridiculed by many educated and influential people. Still, he accepted God's call, and for the last thirty years of his life he wrote on spiritual rather than scientific subjects.

This resulted in extensive and detailed descriptions of the spiritual world—including an account of what it is like to die and the changes we go through afterwards. Many of

these descriptions are contained in his most popular book, *Heaven and Hell*. Others are scattered throughout the thirty plus volumes of his religious writings.

Swedenborg described several stages that we go through when we die. The chapters of this book take up each of Swedenborg's stages in order. For each, there is a brief introduction, a new, abridged translation of Swedenborg's description of the stage, and my commentary on how this relates to our own spiritual growth. Along the way, I will draw parallels with NDEs as described in the current literature on the subject.

THE EXPERIENCE OF DYING

There is a difference between Swedenborg's experience and the experiences of people who have come close to dying and returned. When Swedenborg described the spiritual world and the process of dying in *Heaven and Hell*, he already had years of regular, almost daily, consciousness in the spiritual world. By the time he wrote his description of the experience of death, he was familiar with the spiritual world, and had a sense of perspective on the dying experience.

Because of this, Swedenborg's descriptions are more analytical than those of many present-day NDEers—most of whom had never experienced the spiritual world before. The descriptions of the death process given by NDEers are probably closer to what you or I might experience as we die. Most of us do not have previous experience in the spiritual world. We will approach death in a state of mind

more like those who nearly die and come back to tell of their experiences.

But here is a description of the process of dying as experienced by a Western mind trained in both material and spiritual reality.

Waking Up From Death
From *Heaven and Hell* #445–52
by Emanuel Swedenborg

When our body can no longer perform its functions in the physical world, expressing the thoughts and feelings of our spirit (which we have from the spiritual world) we say that we die. This happens when our lungs stop breathing and our heart stops beating.

Yet we do not die, but are only separated from the body that had been useful to us in the world. We ourselves continue to live. I say we ourselves continue to live since we are not human because of our body, but because of our spirit. It is the spirit within us that thinks—and thinking together with feeling makes us human.

This means that when we die, we only pass from one world to another. Because of this, when “death” is mentioned in the Bible, its deeper meaning is re-awakening and continued life.

The deepest connection of our spirits is with our breathing and the motion of our heart. Our thinking communicates with our breathing and the feelings of our love communicate with our heart. So when these two motions stop, we are immediately separated from our body. These two motions—the breathing of our lungs and the beating of our heart—are the links. When they are broken, our spirit is on its own. Since our body no longer has the life of its spirit, it grows cold and decays.

The deepest communication of our spirits is with our breathing and the motion of our heart because all our vital motion depends on these two functions—and not merely in a general way but in every single part of our body.

Our spirit stays in our body for a little while after the separation, but not past when the heart has completely stopped beating. This happens in different ways depending on the sickness we die from. Sometimes the heart continues to beat for a while; other times it stops after a short time.

As soon as the heart stops beating, we are awakened—but only the Lord does this. By “awakening” I mean leading our spirit out of our

body and bringing it into the spiritual world. This is traditionally called “resurrection.” Our spirit is not separated from our body until the heart stops beating because our heart corresponds¹ to the feelings of our love, which is our real life. Our vital warmth comes from love. So as long as this connection continues, there is a correspondence and the life of our spirit remains in our body.

I have not only been *told* how we wake up from death; I have been *shown* through experience. I have actually gone through it so I could know exactly what it is like. I lost touch with my physical senses almost as if I were dying. But I still had all of my inner life and ability to think, so I could pay attention and remember what happened to me—which is the same as what happens to us when we wake up from death.

I noticed that my body’s breathing was almost taken away, though my inner, spiritual breathing continued, along with a slight, quiet physical

1. Swedenborg uses the word “correspondence” to describe the living relationship between two different levels of reality—usually the material and the spiritual. In this relationship, “correspondence” is the way spiritual things manifest themselves on the material level.

breathing. My heartbeat started to communicate with the heavenly realm, since that realm is connected with our heart.

I saw angels¹ from that realm, some at a distance, and two sitting at my head. They took away all my own feelings, but I kept my thinking and awareness. I experienced this for several hours. Then the spirits who were around me left, saying I had died. I noticed an aromatic odor like an embalmed body. When heavenly angels are nearby, the dead body seems aromatic. Spirits sense this, and cannot approach it. This is how evil spirits are kept away from our spirit when we are first brought into eternal life.

The angels who sat by my head were silent, communicating only with my thoughts. When we receive their thoughts, the angels know our spirit is ready to be drawn out of our body. The angels shared their thoughts with me by looking at my face. This is how people in heaven share thoughts.

1. Swedenborg saw angels, not as a separate creation, but as human beings who have lived on earth and gone on to heaven after their physical death.

Since I could still think and be aware of things so that I could remember how waking up from death happens, I noticed that the angels at first asked whether my thoughts were like the thoughts of people who are dying, who usually think about eternal life. They wanted to hold my mind in these thoughts. I was later told that our spirits are kept in the last thoughts we had when our body dies. This lasts until we go back to the way we had thought from our predominant feelings in the world. I was especially given to sense and feel that there was a drawing out and pulling away of the inner parts of my mind—meaning my spirit—from my body. I was told that this was from the Lord, and that it causes us to wake up from death.

The heavenly angels who are with us as we are being awakened from death do not leave us, since they love each one of us. But when our spirit can no longer be with heavenly angels, we start wanting to leave them. When this happens, angels from the Lord's spiritual realm come to us. They give us the ability to see. Before, we had not seen anything, but had only thought things. I was shown how this happens.

I saw an angel there seem to roll a covering off my left eye toward my nose to open my eyes and give me sight. It does seem to us as if this is what happens, though it is only the way it appears. When the covering was rolled off, I saw some light, but it was dim. It was like looking through my eyelids at daybreak. This dim light seemed to be heavenly warmth. I was told, though, that this happens differently for different people.

Next I felt something soft rolled off my face, and then I was able to think spiritually. The feeling that something was being rolled off my face was also merely the way it looks. It means that our material thought has now passed over into spiritual thought. The angels are very careful not to let in any ideas about waking up from death that do not have a sense of love about them. Then they tell us that we are a spirit.

After the spiritual angels give us the ability to see, they offer us everything we could possibly want in this situation. They also tell us as much about the other life as we are able to understand. But if we do not wish to be taught, we want to get away from those angels. The angels do not

leave us; no, we leave them. Angels love every one of us. They love nothing better than doing good things for us, teaching us, and leading us into heaven. This gives them their greatest joy.

When we leave them, good spirits welcome us. They also offer us every kind of help. But if we had lived on earth in a way that made it so that we could not be together with good spirits, we also wish to get away from them. This goes on as many times as it takes for us to come together with spirits who are completely harmonious with our life in the world. Then we live with them—and surprisingly enough, we live the same way we had lived on earth.

However, this first stage of our life after death does not last more than a few days. I will describe in the next chapter how we are led from one stage to the next, and finally either into heaven or into hell. I know these things also from a lot of experience.

I have talked with some people three days after they died, when they had already been through the experiences I just described. I have even talked with three people I had known in the world. I told them that their mortal remains

were now being prepared so that their body could be buried. When they heard me say “buried,” they were struck with astonishment. They said that they were alive, and that those people were merely burying what had served them in the world.

Afterwards they were absolutely amazed that when they had lived in their body they had not believed there was this kind of life after death—and especially that practically everyone in the church had not believed it.

People who had not believed in the world that there was any life after physical life are very embarrassed when they realize that they are still alive. But those who had convinced themselves that there was no afterlife get together with people who believe the same thing and are separated from people who had faith. Most of them are connected to some hellish community because they also deny the divine and are contemptuous of spiritual truth. As much as we convince ourselves against the eternal life of our soul, we also convince ourselves against heavenly and spiritual things.

This is how Swedenborg describes the process of dying. Like NDEers, he regained consciousness in this world afterwards so that he could tell people who are still on earth about it. Though his experience happened over two hundred years ago, it is similar in many ways to the experiences of people today who have NDEs. It is also different in some ways.

Before going into the meaning of this experience for our own spiritual growth, I would like to explore some of these similarities and differences. To do this, I will compare Swedenborg's experience with the pattern of common elements experienced by NDEers. This pattern was initially outlined by Raymond Moody,¹ and later studied more rigorously and systematized by such scholars as Kenneth Ring² and Bruce Greyson.³ These writers are careful to

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1. *Life After Life*, by Raymond Moody, Jr. (New York: Bantam, 1975)
 2. *Life at Death, A Scientific Investigation of the Near-Death Experience*, by Kenneth Ring (New York: Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan, 1980).
 3. "The Near-Death Experience Scale: Construction, Reliability, and Validity," by Bruce Greyson; in *The Near-Death Experience: Problems, Prospects, Perspectives*. Bruce Greyson, Charles P. Flynn, Ed. (Springfield, Il: Charles Thomas, 1984).

point out that no NDEer experiences all of these elements. In the same way, Swedenborg did not experience all of them. I will focus particularly on the five stages of the NDE as described by Kenneth Ring, while bringing in other common elements along the way.

NDEers often say that words cannot describe what they have experienced. They sometimes say there are “more than three dimensions” to the experience. In Moody’s terms, the experience is “ineffable.” Swedenborg does not mention this when he describes his death experience, but listen to what he says about some newly arrived spirits in the spiritual world:

There were certain souls recently arrived from the world who, on account of the assumptions they had adopted during their lifetime, doubted whether things of this sort could possibly be found in the next life where there is no wood or stone. They were brought up to [a certain] place, and from there they talked to me. In their amazement they said that it was beyond description, that they could never think of any way of representing how far beyond description it was, and that forms of

joy and happiness shone from every detail—and this in ever-changing variety. (*Arcana Coelestia* #1622)

Even if the people who come back from death cannot completely describe what they experienced, they tell us that it is the most amazing thing that ever happened to them.

People who are dying often hear someone pronounce them dead. Usually it is a doctor or nurse or somebody at the scene of an accident. For Swedenborg, it was the angels who were with him. In his words, the angels with us “tell us that we are a spirit.” For most of us, dying is such a new experience that we may not even realize what is happening. Being told that we have died can help us to understand these strange and new experiences.

A few NDEers experience some kind of sound as they are dying. It may be a loud ringing noise, a banging, buzzing, or whistling noise, or something else, such as music. Sometimes it is pleasant and sometimes it is unpleasant. Though Swedenborg does describe noise and music in the spiritual world, he does not mention it during his experience of dying. He

does talk about an odor—the odor of an embalmed body—associated with his experience. NDEers rarely mention odors.

Usually, though, NDEers describe a feeling of great peace and quiet that comes over them as they are dying. Here is what Swedenborg has to say about the peacefulness of angels:

There are two inmost elements of heaven: innocence and peace. They are called inmost because they come directly from the Lord. . . . These two elements, innocence and peace, come from the Lord's divine love, and affect angels from their very core. (*True Christian Religion* #182)

Swedenborg felt this deep, inner peace when he was with angels. It was part of his experience of dying, as it is for many today who almost die and come back. This sense of peace is the main characteristic of Ring's first stage of the NDE.

A common thread that is present among Swedenborg and NDEers at this point in the experience is a sense of leaving the physical body behind. This body separation brings the NDEer to the second stage described by Ring.

Swedenborg did not encounter this in the way many NDEers do: as an out-of-body experience. NDEers often say they looked down on their own lifeless body, and on the people and things around it—perhaps from some kind of “spiritual body” that was different from their physical body. Swedenborg talks in similar ways about the physical and spiritual bodies, but his usual experience was that when people were in their spiritual bodies, they did not see anything in the physical world.

An interesting parallel to the out-of-body experience is Swedenborg’s conversations with three of his friends who had recently died. When he tells them that their body is being prepared for burial, they are struck with amazement. They are still alive! That body is only something they had used while they were in the world. This type of detachment from our physical body is commonly reported by NDEers. They sometimes speak of looking down on their body as if it had nothing to do with *them*. Others find it confusing to be out of their bodies. Perhaps they are feeling some

of the amazement that Swedenborg reports to be common among those who have just arrived in the spiritual world when they see that they are still very much alive even though they are not in their bodies.

NDEers who lose awareness of their physical surroundings often enter a black void, or “dark tunnel.” Ring calls it “entering the darkness,” which forms his third stage of the NDE. This is a feeling of floating in or moving through a dark space. Not all NDEers experience it—even when they have an other-world experience. In Swedenborg’s case, it is more implied than described: at first he did not have the use of his eyes; only later did he gain the use of his eyes and see the bright world in which he then was.

Once NDEers go beyond the physical world into the spiritual world, practically everything they describe has parallels in Swedenborg’s spiritual world experience. Ring’s fourth stage takes place on the other side of the darkness: “seeing the light.”

The most vivid form of seeing the light is encountering a presence that Moody called “the being of light”—a name that has stuck though, as Ring points out, NDEers themselves more often refer to it simply as a “presence.” This presence or being of light is definitely personal, but not like any person we have ever met. There is a dazzling light coming from it. The light is brighter than any light we have ever seen here, yet it does not blind us or hurt our eyes when we see it. It is as though the light is a sense of radiating love, warmth, and understanding. Meeting this being is such a powerful experience that NDEers often identify the being with the highest spiritual beings they knew of from their own religious tradition: God, an angel, Jesus, and so on. Others see it as all the universe comprehended together.

Swedenborg says two angels from the highest heavenly realm are with us when we die. His description of these angels reflects what NDEers experience as the being of light:

I have seen angelic faces of the third heaven, whose quality was such that no artist, with all

his skill, could impart enough of that kind of light to his colors to capture a thousandth part of the light and life you can see in their faces.
(*Heaven and Hell* #459)

Swedenborg commonly describes spiritual light and warmth as a sense of love and understanding flowing among people and between God and people. This is the light that NDEers experience coming from the being of light.

There is also a tantalizing hint in Swedenborg that perhaps he thinks it is indeed God who meets us initially when we die. He says, “As soon as the heart stops beating, we are awakened—but only the Lord does this.”

As Swedenborg mentioned in his death experience, there is communication with this being, but not in words. He says, “The angels who sat by my head were silent, communicating only with my thoughts.” They did this by looking at his face. This type of direct communication of thoughts goes on as long as we are with the being of light. It is a communication full of love, compassion, and mutual understanding.

The being often asks a question. It may be hard for NDEers to express exactly what the question is. Sometimes they say the question is "Are you ready to die?" Other times it seems more like "What have you accomplished with your life?" These both seem to be the same question, only expressed differently. Swedenborg says the angels kept him in "thoughts that were like the thoughts of people who are dying," which is probably the same thing. It is natural for us to be thinking about our lives and our readiness for death as we are dying.

The being of light does not ask this question about life accomplishments to confront or condemn, but to cause us to think deeply about our lives. Along with the question, there may be an incredibly fast review of our whole lives. Some NDEers say they saw every detail of their lives; others say it was only the high points. It is almost always very fast and very vivid. Usually they see themselves doing things from another person's perspective, not as if they were experiencing it themselves at that moment.

Swedenborg does not describe this process as vividly as NDEers, but he does talk about angels bringing out of our memory what we had done in this life and showing it to us, as in this quote from *Heaven and Hell* #462b.8:

I have even heard the things which a person thought during a month seen and reviewed by angels out of his memory, a day at a time without error—things recalled as though the person were engaged in them at the time they happened.

According to Swedenborg, nothing we have ever done or experienced is hidden from the angels. This agrees with what NDEers say about the being of light. Fortunately, the being of light loves us completely while going through these things with us. There is no condemnation for anything we have done, but an effort to help us learn from it. To the being of light, love and learning are the two most important things.

NDEers who do not meet the “presence” or “being of light” often say they meet people they had known on earth who have died. These people may serve some of the functions

the being of light otherwise would, such as getting the NDEer to reflect on his or her life, and to make a decision about whether to return. Swedenborg also had the experience of meeting deceased friends and relations. He said, "I have talked with all my relations and friends, as well as with kings and dukes, not to mention scholars, who have met their fates" (*True Christian Religion* #281).

Often, people who have this experience of meeting friends or relations in the spiritual world also experience Ring's fifth and final stage of the NDE, "entering the light." This is the deepest stage. When they first "see the light," most NDEers do not become aware of another world around them. Those who go on to enter the light are able to see the scenery of what they describe as another world—what Swedenborg calls the spiritual world. They describe incredibly beautiful fields, lakes, mountains, and forests, and buildings all in such vivid colors and bathed in such clear, bright light that they often say there are no words in our language to adequately describe

what they saw. In *Heaven and Hell*, Swedenborg describes the scenery of the spiritual world in great detail, including its plants, animals, buildings, and human communities.

Swedenborg recounts the process of dying as it would be if we were continuing on into the other life. Unlike NDEers, Swedenborg could stay in the other world even while he was living in this one—so he did not describe what it is like to come back. NDEers do experience this, though. A few of them talk of reaching some kind of visually represented border or limit. It may be a door, or a fence, the other side of a lake, or simply a line. They know that if they passed beyond the border, they would not come back to earth. For others, instead of a visual border, there is a point at which a choice is made, either by the NDEer or by the person or presence he or she met there. Still others simply felt they were pulled back into their body, without any sense of a choice. Of course, those who are still here to tell us about it *did* come back, whether or not it was by choice.

Coming back to earth after visiting the spiritual world can be difficult. Once we have experienced the beauty, joy, light, and love of that world, this world can seem dark and painful. Yet most NDEers come back with a new sense of the spiritual depth within, and a sense that they have work to do here. Experiencing the spiritual world does not automatically transform us into angels. It only gives us a glimpse of the path. That path lies through learning to understand and love each other.



In the final chapter of his book *Broca's Brain*, called "The Amniotic Universe," Carl Sagan says:

Every human being, without exception, has already shared an experience like that of those travelers who return from the land of death: the sensation of flight; the emergence from darkness into light; an experience in which, at least sometimes, a heroic figure can be dimly perceived, bathed in radiance and glory. There

is only one common experience that matches this description. It is called birth.¹

Sagan uses this insight to speculate on whether NDEs are a recreation of the birth experience by the human brain—thus calling into question whether they are actually experiences of an afterlife. People who have had vivid NDEs might reply, “You have not had an NDE. I have. It was real.”

Yet the same insight can lead us in an entirely different direction. As people of many different religious traditions have known for ages, the parallel between physical birth and physical death has a deeper cause. Each is an experience of birth: physical birth is our birth into the material world; physical death is our birth into the spiritual world. Some religions would say that physical death is our birth into the spiritual world preparatory to a new birth back into the physical world, if we have not completed our spiritual growth process.

1. *Broca's Brain*, by Carl Sagan. (New York: Random House, 1974) p. 304.

This connection between birth and death has been a part of our cultural heritage as well. When my son Christopher was born at home in July, 1995, his heart was not beating. The midwives performed CPR on Chris and revived him. A few weeks later, one of the midwives came by for a visit. As we talked about the experience of Chris's birth, she mentioned that midwives used to be present at both births and deaths. The same people who attended new births into this world also attended the transition, or birth, from this world into the next.

Like *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and other accounts of our experiences at and after death, Swedenborg describes various stages that we go through when we die. We can use these descriptions as literal accounts of what we experience when we die. Using a similar parallelism to that between birth and death, we can also take the descriptions as a metaphorical account of our processes of *spiritual* death and rebirth—what we experience on our path of spiritual birth and growth during our life on

earth. This is the parallelism I would like to focus on for the rest of this book.

It might help to pause a moment and consider what our spiritual level is. Our material level, of course, includes our physical bodies and the physical aspects of everything we say and do in the material world. Our spiritual level exists, not apart from, but within our material level while we are living on earth. It is the level of our human relationships and interactions with other people and with God. Our words and the actions are physical, but the love and understanding (or lack of them) that they express are spiritual.

Our spiritual growth, then, is our growth in love for and understanding of other people, and our expression of that growth in our relationships and interactions with them. Our spiritual growth does not happen in isolation from others, but in community with others. As we grow closer to other people spiritually, we also grow closer to God.

Back to the parallelisms I mentioned before. These parallelisms rest on two properties of the

physical/spiritual universe that are present in many religious cosmologies, and especially well developed in Swedenborg: the macrocosm/microcosm and correspondences.

The concept of macrocosm/microcosm states that small things are images of large things, and vice versa. The universe is reflected in each individual human being, animal, plant, and rock, and in each part of each one of them. This means that the whole universe—and any part of it—also reflects an individual human being, animal, plant, rock, and so on. Each part of the universe reflects every other part of the universe. This characteristic is part of the very fabric of the universe. As William Blake says in his *Auguries of Innocence*,

To see a World in a Grain of Sand,
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour.

“Correspondence” is Swedenborg’s word for the relationships that exist among various levels of reality. We live in a multi-layered universe. There are the big levels: God, spirit, and matter. Within each of those, there are other

levels reflecting the big levels of the universe. In God there is love, wisdom, and action. In spirit there are the same levels as in God. And in matter there is substance, form, and action or subsistence. Using the principle of macrocosm/microcosm, we could find each of these levels within anything we cared to contemplate, from the community of all humans on earth down to a single bone cell in our body.

Things on different levels are distinctly different from each other. Spirit is not the same as matter. God is not the same as spirit. Yet they are intimately connected with each other. If they are different, how can they be connected? How can they communicate with each other? Swedenborg describes this as happening through correspondence.

Correspondence is not a mere symbolic link—A equals B. It is a living relationship. It is the way God's character is expressed on the spiritual level, and the way spiritual realities are manifested on the physical level. A hug, for example, is not merely a cultural symbol denoting affection for another person. It is a

direct, physical expression of warmth and caring through affectionate physical contact.

Similarly, physical birth and death are not merely symbols of spiritual rebirth; they are a living, physical expression of the realities of spiritual birth and growth. It is no coincidence that the experiences of birth and death parallel each other. Through macrocosm/microcosm and correspondences, they are both physical manifestations of the same spiritual reality. Let us, then, explore the passage of death and see what it could mean for our own spiritual rebirth.

Using the parallel between death and birth, we will consider the moment of physical death to be the moment of a spiritual birth within ourselves. This may be the time we first turn from a material to a spiritual focus, or it may be a new birth in an already developing spirituality. For now we will look at the experience of dying as a parallel to the first beginnings of our conscious spiritually-oriented life.

Our approach to physical death can come in many different ways. For some, there is a

long and gradual physical decline ending in death. For others, there is an accident or severe illness, and death comes quickly, without much warning. This reflects our various approaches to the transition from a materially-oriented life to a spiritually oriented one. Some of us experience a gradual decline in our sense of satisfaction with a materially-oriented life. Physical pleasures that used to consume us lose their savor. Gradually, the sense that something is missing grows, until we feel that there is very little aliveness left in the way we have been living so far.

For others, the death of our materialistic self comes quickly. A close friend or family member dies, a relationship breaks up, we lose the job we have held for years, and suddenly the material things we had been so engrossed in no longer seem so important to us. Suddenly we find ourselves looking deeper for answers to life's questions.

However we approach it, at some point we realize that we want and need a spiritual level in our life. This, correspondentially, is the

moment of our death in the physical world and our new birth into the spiritual world.

Usually it is not an easy transition. In the experience of physical birth, we are compressed and forced through an opening that seems smaller than it ought to be. The transition of spiritual rebirth also goes through a “small gate and a narrow road,” in Jesus’ words (Matthew 7:14). Like a baby in the womb, we have grown comfortable with our previous way of life. The change can be difficult. But it is a change we must make if we are to move on to the next stage of our growth.

In our experience of death, there may be hard passages. There is the physical pain that often accompanies death, the grief at the loss of our loved ones, and the fear of what might come next. At the moment of death, there are frequent feelings of confusion and emotional discomfort among those who float out of their bodies but remain at the scene of their deaths. There is the common experience of the black void or “dark tunnel,” which can be bewildering. Afterwards, there may come an examina-

tion of our past life—which can be painful if we have lived in hurtful ways, or if we realize that the “good” things we had done in our life came from egotistical motives.

All of these have their parallels in the experiences we may have at the time we move from a materialistic to a spiritual life. It hurts to make changes within ourselves. We grieve the loss of the pleasure we used to get from our old, familiar habits. We are anxious about what we will do next, and where we will go. We are still with our old friends and family members, and though we see them about their normal business, they may not recognize the changes that are taking place in us. We may feel that there is a barrier between us and those we used to know; we can see them, but they cannot see us anymore. We may feel that we are passing through a “dark night of the soul,” as described by John of the Cross.¹ As we look at our past life in a new light, we may recoil, sometimes with a sense of guilt and shame,

1. As found in *John of the Cross, Selected Writings*. Kieran Kavanaugh, Ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

from the things we have thoughtlessly or maliciously done to others, or from harmful and abusive thoughts and feelings we have nursed inside of ourselves.

We may even decide we are not ready for this transition, and go back to our former ways of life for a longer or shorter time. But as with those who come back from an NDE, our life will still be changed afterwards. We will never be able to go back to exactly the way we were before; there will always be that sense that there is something more to life—something that we need to return to sooner or later.

Most of us, though, having started a spiritual path, do not go back. We continue in the new direction. And before long, we receive support and inspiration. At the other end of the dark tunnel there is a new light that is brighter than anything we have ever experienced before. We begin to see new meaning in our lives that had been completely beyond us up until now. We have a new direction, and new purpose.

And we have human and divine support. Some of us have a direct encounter with a “being of light.” This may be an experience of communion with God, or it may be a deep connection with another human being who has developed to a high level of spirituality and helps us in our transition. Others of us see loved ones who have “died” before us—meaning we now have a new and deeper relationship with those who have already begun their spiritual paths, and have been waiting for us to begin ours. We may still grieve the loss of old friendships, but they are replaced by new and deeper ones—sometimes with the same people, but often with new friends.

At this point in our transition, the darkness and confusion has turned into joy and brilliant light. We feel that we have at last arrived at our true, spiritual home. Not so! We have only taken the first few steps on a long spiritual journey. After the initial consuming experience of spiritual birth, we settle back into our life. This may turn into a real anti-climax. We may even think afterwards that nothing has really

happened—that everything is exactly the same as it was before.

This is where it helps to understand the next stages of spiritual growth. There are many ways to look at those stages. One of these ways is to continue with Swedenborg along the stages he says we go through after we die.

OUR FIRST STAGE AFTER DEATH

In his Forward to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, John Woodroffe says:

Life immediately after death is, according to this view, as Spiritists assert, similar to, and a continuation of, the life preceding it. As in Swedenborg's account, and in the recent play *Outward Bound*, the deceased does not at first know that he is 'dead.' Swedenborg, who also speaks of an intermediate state, says that, except for those immediately translated to Heaven or Hell, the first state of man after death is like his state in the world, so that he knows no other, believing that he is still in the world notwithstanding his death.¹

It may seem strange that after such a powerful experience, we could possibly think that nothing had happened and we had not died yet. However, as Swedenborg and others have observed, this is a common phenomenon. Per-

1. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. W. Y. Evans-Wentz, Ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1960) p. lxxiv-lxxv.

haps we may think the experience was an especially vivid dream or hallucination—as many skeptics have claimed about NDEs. Or perhaps we simply forget it in the press of the everyday life we have returned to. It requires a shift of consciousness to comprehend that our lives have changed, completely and forever. This change of consciousness often takes some time.

And so, after our initial experience of death, Swedenborg says we usually go back to a life that is very similar to the one we had left behind.

Living Still Behind Our Mask
From *Heaven and Hell* #491–98
by Emanuel Swedenborg

We go through three stages after death before we come into either heaven or hell. The first is living in our outer self, the second is living in our inner self, and the third is getting ready. We go through these stages in the world of spirits.

Some of us, though, do not go through these stages. As soon as we die we are either carried up into heaven or thrown down into hell. If we have already been prepared for heaven by being spiritually reborn in the world, we will be immediately carried up into heaven. If we are reborn and prepared in this way, as soon as we shed the crude physical aspects of ourselves along with our bodies, we are immediately carried up to the angels in heaven. I have seen people carried up this way an hour after they died.

But if we have been inwardly malicious while outwardly appearing to be good, so that we filled

our destructiveness with deceit, and did good things for deceitful reasons, we are immediately thrown into hell. I have seen some people like this thrown into hell as soon as they died. One very deceitful person went head downwards and feet upwards. Others went in different ways.

There are also some people who are banished to caves as soon as they die to separate them from people who are in the World of Spirits. They are let out and sent back in from time to time. This will happen to us if we have acted maliciously against the people around us while pretending to be good neighbors.

However, there are not very many of these kinds of people compared to those who stay for a while in the World of Spirits. The World of Spirits is where we are prepared either for heaven or for hell in God's orderly way.

The first stage is one of living in our outer selves; we begin it right after we die. Each of us has an inner and an outer part to our spirit. The outer part of our spirit is how we stay connected with our body in the world—especially our face, talking, and movements—so that we can be in community with other people. But the inner

part of our spirit—which has to do with our intentions and the thoughts that come from them—is rarely expressed in our face, conversation, and gestures. From the time we are very young we get used to showing friendship, good conduct, and sincerity, while hiding the thoughts of our own intentions. We get into the habit of living an outwardly ethical and community-oriented life, no matter what we are like inside. Because of this, we hardly know what we are like inside, and we do not pay any attention to it.

Our first stage after death is a lot like our life in the world, since we are then involved in outward things in a similar way. We have a similar face, way of talking, and mind, so we have a similar ethical and social life. This is why, at that point, we do not realize that we are not still in the world. That is, we do not realize it if we do not pay attention to what happened to us when we were being awakened, nor to what the angels said to us then: that we are now a spirit. So one life continues into the other, and death is only a transition.

Since our spirit is like this just after our life in the world ends, our friends and others who had known us in the world recognize us. They recognize us not only from our face and the way we talk, but also from the aura of our life that surrounds us, which they can feel when they come near us.

In the other life, whenever we think about other people, we get a picture of their face in our thoughts, and also many things about their life. Then the person we were thinking of becomes present with us just as if we had summoned him or her. This happens in the spiritual world because we communicate our thoughts there, and there is no space of the kind that exists in the physical world.

So when we first come into the other life, all our friends, relatives, and acquaintances recognize us. We talk with them and get together with them, depending on the kind of friendship we had with them in the world. I have often heard how happy people were when they came from the world and saw their friends again, and how happy their friends were to see them.

Married partners usually get back together and greet each other joyfully. They stay together for a longer or shorter time depending on how happy they had been together in the world. If they had not had a real marital love for each other—a love that united their minds from heavenly love—they separate after they have been together for a while.

If the minds of married partners had clashed, and they were inwardly hostile to each other, they break out into open antagonism and sometimes fight with each other. Still, they are not separated until they reach the next stage, which will be covered in the following chapter.

As I just mentioned, recently arrived spirits live almost the same way they had in the world. They do not know anything about what life after death is like, or anything about heaven and hell, except some things from the literal meaning of the Bible and from Bible-based preaching. They are amazed that they still have a body and all the senses they had in the world, and that they see the same kinds of things. Soon they want to know what heaven and hell are like, and where they are.

Their friends tell them about what eternal life is like and bring them around to different places and introduce them to different people. They show them cities, gardens, and parks—often magnificent ones, since the newcomers enjoy these sights in the surface-level state of mind they are then in.

They are occasionally reminded of how they had thought while they were still in the world about the condition of their soul, about heaven, and about hell. After a while, they become angry that they had had absolutely no knowledge about these things—and that the church had been ignorant of them as well.

Almost all of them want to know whether they will go to heaven. Most of them think they will because they had lived in an ethical, law-abiding way in the world. They do not realize that both bad and good people act the same way outwardly; both do good things for other people, go to church, listen to sermons, and pray in the same way. They are completely unaware that it is not the outer actions and worship that count, but the inner spirit from which the outer actions come.

There is hardly one in a thousand who knows what our inner self is, and that heaven and the church are in our inner self. Even fewer know that our outer actions get their character from our intentions and thoughts, and the love and faith they come from. Even when they are told otherwise, they cannot comprehend that our thoughts and motives are what count, not what we say and do. Most people from today's Christian world are like this when they come into the other life.

Still, good spirits examine these newcomers in various ways to see what they are like. This must be done, since as I just said, in this first stage bad people say just as many true things and do just as many good things as good people. They do this because when they were in the world they had lived an outwardly ethical life, since they had lived in a country with a set of laws. Also, by being outwardly ethical they could gain a reputation for honesty and fairness, winning people over and in this way becoming rich and famous.

The main way to distinguish between good and bad spirits is to notice what they pay atten-

tion to. Bad spirits eagerly listen when people talk about superficial matters, but hardly listen at all when the conversation is about deeper things that have to do with spiritual and heavenly truth and goodness. They do listen to these things, but with very little attention or enjoyment.

Another way to distinguish them is that spirits often turn toward certain neighborhoods. When they are left alone, they follow paths that lead to these neighborhoods. What neighborhoods they turn toward and what paths they take to get there shows what kind of love leads them.

All spirits who arrive from the world are put into connection with a particular community in heaven or in hell, but only in their inner self. This inner self is not seen as long as they are living in their outer self, since their outer self covers and hides their inner self—especially with those who are inwardly bad. Later on, though, when they get to the second stage, their inner self shows clearly. Then their inner self is opened up and their outer self goes to sleep.



We may think that once we have gone through a spiritual birth, things will never be the same—and in a sense, they won't. But life goes on. We still have a job, and bills to be paid. If we were in a troubled relationship before, we will still be in a troubled relationship. We still have the same likes and dislikes.

Within days or weeks of the time we make our first spiritual step, things may go back to just about the way they were before. We may find the familiarity to be comforting, or we may find the lack of change to be disheartening. Either way, we soon realize that our spiritual journey has just begun—and we have a long way yet to go. Some Christian traditions hold that being “born again” is a one-time dividing line between being “saved” and “unsaved.” For Swedenborg, rebirth is a process that begins with the initial spiritual birth and continues through all the stages of human growth.

So here we are back in our everyday life. What has changed? Really, the only thing that has changed is the direction in which we are heading. Whereas before we were headed down a materially-oriented path, now we are heading down a path leading in a spiritual direction. Both paths start at the same place—in our ordinary, everyday life.

As with the first stage after death, initially nothing much changes. We still live the way we did before, with the same relationships and responsibilities. But our inner attitude toward them has begun to change. Though things look outwardly the same, inwardly we are in a “new world.” It is only a matter of time before there will be some changes in our outward life as well. But those come in the next stage.

Meanwhile, one of the main discoveries we make is that spiritual living involves many of the same outward actions as materialistic living does. We do not need to renounce the world and live in a monastery in order to live spiritually. Our everyday life is the stage on which our spiritual life happens. We grow spiritually

within the matrix of our relationships and community life. Outwardly, these may look no different than before.

It is important to establish this for ourselves, since we may think that once we head in a spiritual direction, everything will be taken care of automatically, and we will no longer have to work and struggle. But Swedenborg insists that the heavenly, spiritual life is not a lazy one but an active, useful one. This first stage after our initial experience is like God reminding us, “Yes, you still have work to do.”

Because our outward life is similar, we can resume our relationships with those around us on the same basis as before. Whereas when we were initially going through the rebirth experience, we may have felt estranged, now in this stage of an outwardly similar life we can go back to much of how we were before, and re-establish ourselves as a part of the community. We may not even notice a break—and others almost certainly won't.

Still, even though our outward life looks similar, inside ourselves we know we have changed. And we wonder about exactly what the changes will be. We begin to talk to those who have gone before us on the spiritual path and ask questions about what spiritual living means. We explore, and begin to get a vision of how magnificent the spiritual life can be. But we are still not aware of the deep inner struggles we will need to pass through before we realize that vision.

In this stage, we also begin to take stock of ourselves. Unlike before, as we go about our daily business, we begin to observe the things we say and do, and the thoughts and feelings behind them. We notice what is good about ourselves, and also what needs improvement. This is another reason we needed to return to our former outward life: that life in some way expressed our inner self—both the good parts and the bad parts. Before we can begin to change the bad parts, we need to recognize them clearly within ourselves. So this is a time of observation and learning about ourselves in

preparation for the hard work of spiritual growth that lies ahead.

Before we go on, it might be useful to pause and consider the nature of good and evil. Some people find it off-putting to read of hell as well as heaven in Swedenborg's books. Isn't hell a cruel, old-fashioned idea? Who can believe in fire and brimstone?

For Swedenborg, hell, like heaven, is not a literal location, but a state of mind and life. Heaven is the atmosphere we create within and around ourselves when we love others and wish to make them happy. Hell is the atmosphere we create within and around ourselves when we love only ourselves, and consider others to be merely stepping-stones or obstacles on the way to fulfilling our own desires for dominance and material possessions.

Though Swedenborg does talk of people being "thrown into hell," in other places he explains that this is only an appearance. In *True Christian Religion*, #650 he says:

The Lord is never angry, never takes revenge, hates, condemns, punishes, throws anyone

into hell, or tempts him; thus he never does evil to anyone.

In fact, we throw *ourselves* into hell when we turn our backs on love and understanding—meaning we turn our backs on God and other people. God always wishes to lead us out of our personal hell, but will not force us if we steadily refuse, insisting on remaining in our hellish state of mind and life. This means that hell is not a creation of God, but a creation of human beings. God allows us to turn our heaven into a hell because God values our freedom above anything else.

Why is our freedom so important? Because without it, none of our relationships—either with God or with the people around us—could be real. It would have been easy for God, like a computer programmer, to hard-wire us only to love and never to hate. But as with a marriage relationship, if we do not choose the love, how real is it?

Since all love and all understanding come from God and *are* God, the only way we could have a choice about our relationship with God is for there to be an alternative to love and

understanding. Evil and falsity come when we turn away from God's love and understanding, twisting them into something they were never intended to be.

Ironically, then, evil and falsity exist because God loves us and respects us enough to want us to make our own free choice about whether we will have a relationship with God or not. Choosing a spiritual path is choosing to build a closer and closer relationship with God. In the process, we build closer and closer relationships with each other.

What about those who choose the path of selfishness and materialism? Will they ever turn back again toward a spiritual path? Or will they continue forever in the negative and destructive direction they have chosen? This is a vexing question that has caused great controversy both within Christianity and among the various faiths around the world. Swedenborg came down on the side of an eternal hell. But it is important to understand that if there is an eternal hell, it is because *we* want it that way, not because God does.

In reading Swedenborg's statements on hell, then, we have to make the conceptual adjustment outlined above. We have to see it, not as a place God sends those who break divine law, but as a place we ourselves create if we decide to go in a destructive direction rather than a constructive one.

This places a lot of responsibility on our shoulders, whether we look at it in terms of whether we are going to heaven or hell, or in terms of the course of our life here on earth. Nobody else is going to determine the direction we eventually head in. Even if we choose to blindly follow someone else's lead, that is still our choice—and we can change it at any time. If God is not going to decide where we are going, and no Devil is going to decide where we are going, that puts responsibility for the direction of our life squarely on our own shoulders.

This can be scary; but it can also give us tremendous power. Once we throw off the idea that our fate is in someone else's hands, we can begin the job of determining our own fate. We

can't change the laws that govern the universe and everyone in it. But we *can* decide whether we will live in harmony with or at odds with those laws. Trying to thwart the laws of the universe will lead to our own destruction, while aligning ourselves with those laws will put great power in our hands. We may still be bound by external circumstances, but we can change our inner attitude toward those circumstances—which might help to change the circumstances themselves.

When we go through a spiritual birth, we are making a choice to align ourselves more closely with the spiritual laws of the universe—which are the same as God's laws. However, we still have ahead of us the work of sorting out in ourselves what is and isn't heading in a spiritual direction, and jettisoning those parts of ourselves that are going the wrong way. That is the subject of the next chapter.

OUR SECOND STAGE AFTER DEATH

After we die, we initially go back to an outward lifestyle similar to the one we had before we died. But that doesn't last long. Soon, our outer layers begin to get peeled away one by one, like an artichoke, until we reach the heart. The "heart" is what we really love most of all. It is our true inner thoughts and feelings. It is the real *us* underneath the surface mask. Depending on how well we had covered our true self, this process of unmasking may take a shorter or longer time.

Near Death Experiencers who have a life review as part of their experience gain a taste of this. They relive the passages of their lives, but from an inner view. They see not only what they did, but what they were thinking and feeling as they did it—and often what the people around them were thinking and feeling, too. This unmasking of the deeper levels within our

everyday conversations and actions is the next step in our spiritual growth.

Removing Our Mask

From *Heaven and Hell* #499–511

by Emanuel Swedenborg

Our second stage after death is called our inner stage. We are then introduced to the inner parts of our mind—our motivations and thoughts. The outer parts of ourselves that we were aware of in our first stage go to sleep.

Anyone who thinks about our life, what we say and what we do, can recognize that we each have an inner and an outer part. By this I mean an inner and outer part to our thoughts and motivations.

Here is how we can recognize this: When we are involved in the life of our community, we think about other people based on what we have heard about their reputation, or from what we have heard and noticed while we are talking with them. Yet we do not tell them what we really think of them. Even if they are bad people, we

talk to them politely and act in a decent way toward them.

This is especially obvious from frauds and flatterers, who talk and act completely differently than they think and feel. Hypocrites talk about God, heaven, saving souls, spiritual truths, the good of the country, and the people around them as if they had faith and love, when they believe something completely different in their heart, and love only themselves.

We can see from this that we have two levels of thought: one outward and one inward. We talk one way from our outward thought, while feeling differently from our inward thought. These two levels of thought are kept separate. We take care not to let our inner thought spill into our outer thought, so that it will not have any chance of appearing to anyone else.

We are created so that our inner thought works together with our outer thought through correspondence. If we are in a good state of mind we have this kind of single-mindedness since we think and speak only good things.

But if we are in a bad state of mind, our inner thought does not work together with our outer

thought, since we *think* bad things and *say* good things. The normal order of things is turned upside-down, since the good in us is in our outer self, and the bad is in our inner self. This means that the bad parts control the good parts, and force them to become a means toward gaining our goals, which are the things we love.

Since there are bad goals within the good things we say and do, you can see that the “good” we have is not good, but is corrupted by the bad motives inside us—no matter how good it appears outwardly to people who do not know what is inside.

It is different when we are in a good state of mind. Then the normal order is not upside-down. The good things from our inner thought flow into our outer thought, and from there into what we say and do. This is the way we were created. When we are like this, our inner self is in heaven and in the light there. Since the light of heaven is the divine truth coming from the Lord—for it is the Lord in heaven—we are led by the Lord.

I mention these things to point out that we all have inner and outer thought, and that they

are distinct from each other. When I say thought, I also mean motivation, since our thinking comes from our motivation. No one can think without a motive behind it. From this we can see what our outer and inner stages are.

When I say motivation and thought, by motivation I also mean feelings and love, plus all the enjoyment and pleasure that come from our feelings and love. These relate to motivation as their basis, since whatever we are motivated by, we love and feel enjoyment and pleasure in. The reverse is also true—whatever we love and feel enjoyment and pleasure in we are motivated by.

When I say thought, then, I mean everything we use to reinforce our feelings and what we love. Thought is nothing but the form of motivation, or a way that what we want can appear in the light. This form is brought about by various rational analyses that come from the spiritual world, and are a part of the human spirit.

We should realize that we are completely like what we are like inwardly, and not what we are like outwardly separate from what we are like inwardly. This is because our inner self is our spirit. Our life is our spirit's life—that is where

the life in our body comes from. This also means that whatever we are like inwardly, we will stay that way forever.

The outer part that relates to our body is separated from us after death. Anything from it that stays connected to our spirit goes to sleep and only serves as a base for the inner parts.

So we can see what parts really belong to us and what parts do not really belong to us. If we are a bad person, our outer thought from which we speak and our outer motivation from which we act do not belong to us; only what is part of our inner thought and motivation is part of us.

After the first stage is over—the stage of living in our outer self that I covered in the last chapter—we are brought as a spirit into a stage where we are in our inner self. This is a stage of our inner motivation and the thought that comes from it. In the world, we were in this state of mind when we were by ourselves in freedom and without anything bridling our thoughts. Just as in the world, we lapse into this state without realizing it when the thought closest to our words—meaning the thought from which we speak—withdraws toward our inner thought,

and we linger there. When we are in this state of mind, we are in our real self and in our real life. Our real life—our real self—is thinking freely from our own feelings.

As a spirit, in this stage we think from our own motivations. This means we are thinking from our own feelings and from our own love. Then our thinking is united with our motivation as if they were one. It hardly even seems as if we are thinking—only that we are intending things.

It is almost the same when we speak. But there is still this difference: we speak with some fear that the thoughts from our motives will go out naked. This had become a part of our motives through our community life in the world.

Every single one of us is brought into this stage after death, since it is what our spirit is really like. The previous stage was what we were like in spirit when we were with other people, which is not how we really are.

There are many things showing that the outer stage we are in at first after we die is not our real self. For example, spirits do not only think from

their feelings; they also talk from them, since what they say comes from their feelings.

We think the same way in the world when we are thinking within ourselves. When we are doing this, we do not think in physical speech, but only perceive it. Meanwhile we can think more in one minute than we could say in half an hour.

We can also see that our outward state of mind is not our real self or spirit from this: in the world, when we are with people, we talk according to the ethical and civil laws. At these times our inner thought rules our outer thought the way one person rules another, so that it will not go beyond the boundaries of decency and honesty.

We can also see it from this: when we think within ourselves, we also think about how we should speak and act so that we will please people and get their friendship, good will, and favor. We do this by outward means, which are different from what we would do if we acted from our real motivations.

We can see from these things that the stage of our inner self that we are led into as spirits is our

real state of mind. This means it was also our real state of mind when we lived in the world.

When we are in this inner stage, what we were like inside ourselves in the world is clearly visible, since we then do things from our real self. If we were inwardly good in the world, we act sensibly and wisely. We act even more sensibly and wisely than we did when we were in the world, because our link with our body is broken. This breaks our link with the worldly things that had dimmed our thinking as if it were wrapped in a cloud.

But if we were inwardly bad in the world, we act unwisely and crazily. We act even more crazily than we did when we were in the world, since we are free and not under any compulsion. When we had lived in the world, we had been outwardly sane, since that was how we pretended to be a reasonable person. So when that superficial part of us is taken away, our craziness appears.

Bad people who act outwardly as if they are good are like a shiny polished vase covered with a cloth, with all kinds of filth hidden inside. As the Lord says:

They are like whitewashed graves that appear beautiful outside, but inside are full of dead people's bones and all kinds of unclean things. (Matthew 23:27)

If we have lived well in the world, and acted from our conscience, when we come into the stage of our inner self it seems to us as if we have been awakened from sleeping. (When I say "living well" I mean recognizing the Divine and loving God's truth—especially when we use it in our life.)

We then think from heavenly light, meaning from deep wisdom, and we do things from goodness, meaning from deeper feelings. Heaven flows into our thoughts and feelings with a deep happiness and joy that we had never known before, for we are in touch with heavenly angels. We also accept the Lord and worship him from our own life, since we are in our real life when we are living in our inner self. We also accept and worship him in freedom, since freedom belongs to our deeper feelings.

We also withdraw from outward holiness and enter inner holiness, which is the nature of real worship. This is our state of life if we have lived

in a Christian way according to the teachings of Bible.¹

It is exactly the opposite if we have lived badly in the world, with no conscience and in denial of the Divine. Whenever we live in a destructive way, we deny the Divine inside ourselves, even if we think we are not denying but accepting God while we are living at our surface level. Accepting the Divine and living in a destructive way are opposites.

If we are like this, when we arrive at the stage of our inner self in the other life, we will look foolish to others in what we say and do. Our craving for destructive things will cause us to break out into hellish behavior—contempt for other people, ridicule and profanity, hatred, revenge, underhanded scheming, all with such deceitfulness and malice that it is hard to believe anything like it could be inside any person. This happens because we are then free to act out of the thoughts that come from our motives, since

1. Note that Swedenborg was writing for a primarily Christian audience. Elsewhere, Swedenborg stated that both Christians and non-Christians will find their place in heaven if they care about others and do their best to live according to their own religious beliefs.

we have gotten away from the outward factors that had bound and restrained us in the world. In short, we are deprived of our rational ability, since in the world this ability had not been in our inner self, but in our outer self. Even so, to ourselves we still seem wiser than other people.

Because we are like this, when we are in this second stage we are allowed back into our stage of outer life from time to time. Then we remember what we had done when we were in the inner stage. Some of us are then ashamed and admit that we had been crazy. Others are not ashamed. Some of us become furious that we are not allowed to be in that outward stage all the time. But then we are shown what would happen if we stayed in this stage indefinitely: we would think up similar secret plans, and by pretending to be good, sincere, and honest, we would entrap people of simple heart and faith. We would also totally destroy ourselves, since eventually the same fire that is inside us would blaze out into the open and burn up our entire life.

When we are in this second stage, we appear outwardly just as we were inside ourselves while we were living in the world. Whatever we had

done and said in private becomes public knowledge. With no outward constraints, we say openly and try to do openly what we had done only privately before, without the fear for our reputation that we had in the world. We also progress through many stages of our own destructiveness so that angels and good spirits can see what we are like.

What was private is revealed, and our secret actions are exposed, as the Lord said:

Nothing is covered up that will not be exposed, nor hidden that will not be known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the light. What you whispered in someone's ear in your bedroom will be shouted from the rooftops. (Luke 12:2, 3)

And in another place:

I tell you the truth, you will have to give a reason for every casual word you say to anyone. (Matthew 12:36)

We can all judge for ourselves what we would be like if we could live without any fear of the law or for our life, and without external boundaries on our behavior such as the fear of damaging our reputation and then losing status, money, and pleasure.

Still, if we are inwardly destructive the Lord will put boundaries around our craziness so that we do not break out beyond the limits of usefulness. Even when we are like this, every one of us provides some useful function. Good spirits see in us what is bad, what our destructiveness is like, and what we will be like if we are not led by the Lord. Also, by having our destructiveness come out, people involved in similar bad things are gathered together and separated from good people. Plus, the good and true things we had made an outward show of and pretended are taken away from us, and we are brought into our own destructive life, and the falsity that goes with it. This is how we are prepared for hell.

We cannot get into hell until we are living out our own destructiveness and thinking our own false thoughts. In the spiritual world, we are not allowed to have a divided mind by thinking and talking one way while wanting something else. If we are a bad person, we will think false things from that badness, and say what comes from these—both from our own motives, meaning from our real love, and from the happiness and pleasure we get from it. It is just as we were in

the world when we were in our own spirit, thinking within ourselves from our deeper feelings.

This is all true because our motivation is our real self, not our thinking—except when it comes from our motives. Our motivation is our real personality and inner character. When we turn to our motivation, we turn to our real personality and character, and also to our real life. We form our personality by the way we live. After death we keep the personality we had acquired through our life in the world. If we have formed a destructive personality, we can no longer fix and change it through contemplation and understanding what is true.

If we are a bad person, we are punished severely and often in this second stage because we keep breaking out into all kinds of destructive behavior. There are many different kinds of punishment in the spiritual world, and there is no consideration of what our status had been in the world—high officials and menial laborers are treated the same.

Every destructive action carries its own penalty with it; they are bound together. When we

become involved in any kind of destructive behavior, we also become involved in its punishment.

However, in the spiritual world we are never punished for the bad things we had done in the world. We are punished only for the bad things we do there. Yet it boils down to the same thing whether you say we pay the penalty for the bad things we did in the world or we pay the penalty for the bad things we do in the other life. We always revert to our own real life after death—so we revert to the same types of destructiveness. We have the same inner character that we had in our physical life.

We are punished for our bad behavior because fear of punishment is the only way to control destructive behavior at this stage. Warnings do not work anymore. Education does not work anymore. Fear of the law and of a bad reputation does not work anymore. We act from our own nature, which cannot be forced or broken down except by punishment.

If we are good, however, we will never be punished even if we have done bad things in the world, since bad parts of us do not come back.

We are shown that the bad things we had done were different, since we did not do them purposely to oppose the truth, or from a bad heart. It was simply what was passed on to us from our parents, which we fell into from thoughtless pleasure when we were engrossed in superficial things and separated from our inner self.

After we die, we each go to our own community: the one we had been in spiritually while we were in the world. We are each spiritually connected to some heavenly or hellish community. If we are bad, it is a hellish community. If we are good, it is a heavenly one. Our spirit is led to that community step by step, and finally we move into it.

If we are bad, when we come to the stage of our inner self we gradually turn toward our community, and finally face directly toward it before this stage is over. When this stage is over, we throw our own selves into a hell where there are spirits like us.

Good and bad spirits are separated in this second stage; they had been together in the first stage. When we are in the stage of our outer self, it is just like being in the world, so that good and

bad people are together with one another. It is different when we move into our inner self and are left to our real character and motivation.



People who have had Near Death Experiences often feel that a higher and deeper level of human existence has been opened up to them. They no longer think that the material world is the most important or even the most real part of their existence. The spiritual level—the level of love and understanding—becomes central to their lives.

This is exactly what happens to us when we reach the second stage after death as described by Swedenborg. At first, we had lived the same way we did in the world, with the same outward concerns. Now our inner self is gradually opened up, and we realize that it is not our body and our outward actions that make us human, but our spirits and our inward love and understanding. We recognize that these have been the real “us” all the way along. The

outer part was there simply so that we could express what was inside.

However, if our outer expression does not correspond well with our real inner thoughts and feelings, we have a sorting out process to go through until our outer self is in complete harmony with our inner self. In heaven, and in spiritual life, we are not allowed to have a divided mind or a divided life. Everything we do must come from within, and be completely expressed outwardly. Only then can we be in the kind of “flow state” that characterizes deep, full, human life. A contemporary author, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, describes flow this way:

“Flow” is the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake.¹

Swedenborg was talking about this same state of mind and spirit when he wrote:

Divine order is for the Lord to flow through our inner levels into our outer levels, which

1. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. (New York: Harper Collins, 1990) p. 6.

means through our motives into our actions. This does happen when we are governed by good—that is, when we are guided by a love for doing good for its own sake, and not for selfish reasons. When we do good for selfish reasons and not for its own sake, our inner levels are closed, and we cannot be led by the Lord through heaven, but only by self. (*Arcana Coelestia* #8513.2)

The key to this state of mind is that whatever we are doing, we must be doing it for its own sake, and not for some ulterior motive. If we are good to other people not simply for the sake of being good to them, but because we hope to get something from them in return, we have a divided self: our actions are expressing something different from our feelings. But if we are good to other people simply because we love being that way, we have a unified self: there is an uninterrupted flow from our love through our understanding into our actions. And, Swedenborg would say, that flow comes into our spirit from God, so that we are also at one with God.

We can fully experience life only when we are in this kind of flow state. In the spiritual

world, where everything inner flows into outward expression, we will sooner or later come into this flow state if we have chosen to love and understand others. *Our* happiness will become *their* happiness, and there will be mutual harmony. A heavenly community is one where there is free, spontaneous flow of love and understanding among all the members of the community.

If we have chosen to hate and misunderstand others, our pleasure will be their pain; and in the clash of conflicting desires, we will only sometimes be able to experience the destructive kind of pleasure that we have chosen. In a hellish community, there is continual competition for possessions and for dominance; the “flow” is constantly broken. Instead of flow, there is turbulence.

If we have chosen a spiritual path, we are heading in the direction of a flow state. But we have a long way to go until we can be in that flow state for any sustained period of time. We have too many inner conflicts that must be resolved first. The next stage of our process

after death—and of our spiritual path here on earth—is when we work toward that resolution.

In the spiritual world, this sorting out and resolution is helped along by wise angels who perceive what we are like, and help us to see it.

If we have been caught up in destructive behavior even though we have a good heart, we may go through rough passages. If we cling to our destructive behavior we will be dragged down with others who are caught up in the same things until we realize in the “school of hard knocks” that this is not how we really want to be.

There are parallels to both of these experiences in our life on earth. One of the best helps along our spiritual journey is to find a well-trained and sympathetic counselor who can help us understand our own thoughts, feelings, and actions, and work through them to a healthier way of living.

On the negative side, we may have to reap many painful consequences from some of our destructive habits before we fully realize how

damaging they are, and resolve to leave them behind. Beginning on a spiritual path may not immediately make things better. In fact, it may bring on a crisis as our old, ingrained habits fight back vigorously against the changes we are attempting to make. The path of spiritual growth is often a rocky one.

If we *have* resolved to follow a spiritual path and overcome the obstacles in the way, how do we go about making the changes that are needed in our life?

First, for any spiritual path, we need a goal: an ideal of human life that we are moving toward. We each have to determine this for ourselves. But we can get help from people such as counselors or ministers who may serve as our spiritual guides; from sacred literature; and from secular literature dealing with human psychology and community.

From a spiritual perspective, the ultimate goal is God. In embarking on a spiritual path, we are beginning a journey toward God. Thus the deeper and more universal our understanding of God is, the farther our spiritual path will

take us. If we put our sights on God, and always allow our understanding of God do grow, we will never reach a dead end on our spiritual path—because God is infinite.

When we are mapping out a trip, we need to know not only where we are going but also where we are right now in order to plan the best route. We usually know where we are physically, so finding the starting point on a map for a road trip is not hard. Spiritually, though, we may have very little concept of where we are. So the next step is to take stock of our inner, spiritual self, and discover where we are so that we will know our starting point, and be able to start out on a route to our goal.

Those who have had a deep NDE that includes a life review have a head start on the rest of us—especially if the being of light guided them through the life review. But we can take some guidelines from the being of light in our own self-examination. What the being of light looks for with NDEers when they have a guided life review is times when the person has shown love to others, or failed

to show love, and times when the person has learned new things, or failed to learn. These are the things we can look for in ourselves when we are determining where we are spiritually right now.

Swedenborg gives some suggestions to help us figure out what we really love to do. In the section from *Heaven and Hell* that begins this chapter, he says:

We can all judge for ourselves what we would be like if we could live without any fear of the law or for our life, and without external boundaries to our behavior such as the fear of damaging our reputation and then losing status, money, and pleasure.

In other words, Swedenborg says, “Think what you would do if nothing whatever prevented you from doing anything you wanted. What would you do?” If we think carefully about this question and clear away all the things we do because we have to or think we ought to, we will begin to see what, underneath it all, we really love. This can give us a starting point.

Another suggestion to help us figure out what we really love comes in the segment from Swedenborg given in Chapter 2:

The main way to distinguish between good and bad spirits is to notice what they pay attention to. Bad spirits eagerly listen when people talk about superficial matters, but hardly listen at all when the conversation is about deeper things that have to do with spiritual and heavenly truth and goodness. They do listen to these things, but with very little attention or enjoyment.

What do our ears perk up for? What leaves us yawning? These are good indications of where our real interest and love lies.

Some of the things we really love will be good. Others will not be so good. Our task for the good ones is to bring them out more, and to be sure we are doing them for their own sake, and not for some hidden motive that blocks the flow. Our task for the not so good ones is to recognize them, confront them, and overcome them.

For Swedenborg, doing good things without resisting bad ones is meaningless. If we do not overcome the bad parts of ourselves, they

will always be there, tainting our seemingly “good” actions. We will do good things when they benefit us, or when we happen to feel like it—not consistently and for the sake of the good itself. This prevents us from entering a spiritual flow state.

Once we have recognized the areas where we need work, we need to confront them. This means admitting that they are a part of ourselves and taking responsibility for them. We may see them in ourselves, but if we pass the buck by blaming some outside person, group, event, or influence, we have not confronted them.

It is true that we have been influenced in many ways by important people and experiences in our lives. We arrive at the beginning of spiritual maturity when, recognizing this, we still take responsibility for our own inner life, and no longer pass the buck. It is like the time of our lives when we first leave home and begin supporting ourselves.

Along with the work of responsibility for ourselves comes the power to change our own

lives for the better. Now that we recognize that our spiritual and emotional life is in our own hands, we can begin to put behind us the negative habits that are blocking our path.

This is not something to do all by ourselves, but with the help of God, and of people we trust. One goal of spiritual living is to build communities based on mutual love and understanding. By asking others for help, we begin to build this kind of community in the very act of healing ourselves spiritually.

The help we need may come from a counselor; it may come from a spouse, close friend, or trusted family member; it may come from a minister or spiritual guide; and it always comes from God. With this help, we can put aside our negative and destructive habits and begin a new and more spiritual life. We will always have shadows from our past life; but those shadows can be moved more and more to the edges of our life.

As we go through this process, we will be unifying our spirit, mind, and actions. We will be clearing away everything that does not fit

with our deepest motives and deepest loves, so that our words and actions will express our real thoughts and feelings. This is what is accomplished during our second stage after death, as Swedenborg describes it.

It is also the longest stretch of our spiritual path here on earth. If we recognize that this is not a quick and easy process, but the work of years, we can avoid some of the discouragement of the long struggle. As long as we are on the path, we are making progress, even though it may seem slow. God will give us periods of rest along the way, and send us the people and experiences we need at each step.

Eventually, there comes a time when the greatest part of our struggle is over. We have overcome the major spiritual obstacles within us. We have come to a point where we know what we want to do, we know how to do it, and we *love* doing it. This is the beginning of the more sustained flow state that we were aiming for at the beginning. We still have work to do; the flow will not be unbroken. But we will spend much of our time doing what we

love to do. This may happen here on earth, or it may happen in the spiritual world after we die.

At this point, says Swedenborg, all that is left for us to do before finding our permanent spiritual home is to shake off any remaining misconceptions we had about spirit and life, and to learn any of the basics of spirituality that we may have missed along the way. That is what happens in the third and final stage after death, near the end of our journey toward our spiritual home.

OUR THIRD STAGE AFTER DEATH

Near Death Experiencers who meet the being of light say that this being emphasizes love and learning as the most important things in life. The love must come from within; but much of our learning comes from the outside. Even though we may have gone far along the spiritual path, we may still be working under some misconceptions about God and spirit. We may be mistaken about some of the ideas we cherish.

As we go along in this life, if our heart is in the right place, God will not force us to give up mistaken notions that we love and see as guides. At some stages of our lives, certain misconceptions may even prod us farther along than we otherwise would have gone.

For example, some people seem to need to believe that God is angry with them for the wrong things they do, or they would not be motivated to change their ways. But really,

Swedenborg says, God is never angry with us; God only allows it to appear that way if we need to believe that for the time being.

Once we have overcome the bulk of our destructive side, though, we no longer have a need to hold onto faulty beliefs about God and spirit. At that point we have also left behind the ego that makes us cling to certain ideas because we think we understand things better than others. So we are ready to empty ourselves of everything remaining that does not correspond to our true love and motivation, and to learn what really does correspond to them. This is what the final stage is for.

Learning the Ways of Heaven
From *Heaven and Hell* #512–19
by Emanuel Swedenborg

Our third stage after death, when we are a spirit, is a learning stage. We go through this stage only if we are going to heaven and becoming an angel.

If we are headed toward hell we do not go through this stage because we cannot be taught anything. In this case, our second stage is also our third. We are finished, since we have completely turned ourselves toward our own love, and toward the hellish community that is involved in a similar love. When this has happened we think and want things from what we love. Since our love is hellish, we are motivated only by destructive things, and everything we think is false. This is what gives us pleasure, since these are the things we love. Because of this, we reject everything good and true that we

previously adopted because it had functioned as a means toward getting what we love.

If we are a good person, though, we are led through the second stage into a third. In this stage we are prepared for heaven by being taught. The only way we can be prepared for heaven is by knowing what is good and true, which means we must be taught. We cannot know what is spiritually good and true, nor what is destructive and false—their opposites—without being taught.

In the world, we can know what is legally and ethically good and true, and is called right and honest, because there are civil laws that teach us what is right. We also live among other people, so that we learn to live by ethical rules that involve acting honestly and rightly. However, we do not learn what is spiritually good and true from the world, but from heaven.

We *could* know these things from the Bible and from the church's teaching based on the Bible. But these things cannot affect our life unless the deeper parts of our mind are in heaven. We are in heaven when we accept God and also act rightly and honestly because that is

what the Bible tells us to do. This means living rightly and honestly with the Divine as our goal, rather than being motivated by our own self and our worldly possessions.

We cannot act this way, though, until we have been taught to do so. For example, we have to be taught that there is a God, heaven and hell, and life after death; that we should love God above all else, and other people as much as we love ourselves; that we should believe what the Bible teaches because the Bible is divine. Without knowing and accepting these things, we cannot think spiritually. Without thinking about them, we cannot be motivated by them, since we cannot think things we do not know about, and we cannot want things we do not think.

When we do want these things, heaven flows into us, which means the Lord flows through heaven into our lives. This flowing goes into our motivation, through that into our thinking, and through both of these into the way we live. This is where all our life comes from. We can see from this that we do not learn what is spiritually good and true from the world, but from heaven—and

that we cannot possibly be prepared for heaven except by being taught.

As much as the Lord flows into our life, the Lord teaches us, since our motivation is fired by a love for learning the truth. This enlightens our thinking so that we can know the truth. And as much as this happens, our inner self is opened up, and heaven is planted in us.

Further, God and heaven flow into the honesty of an ethical life and the right living of a law-abiding life, and make them spiritual. We then do what we do from God, since we are doing it for God's sake. The honest and right things we do in our ethical and community life from that source are the real effects of spiritual life. Effects get their whole nature from what causes them. Whatever the cause is like, that is what the effect is like.

Angel teachers come from many different communities. They come especially from the northern and southern regions of heaven, since these angelic communities have a great deal of intelligence and wisdom from a knowledge of what is good and true.

The places of learning are located in the northern areas. They vary, and are arranged and distinguished by the various kinds of heavenly good. We are all taught in a way that is appropriate to our personality, and at a level we can handle. These places of learning are spread out for a great distance all around.

Those of us who become good spirits are led there by the Lord after we have gone through our second stage in the World of Spirits, and are ready to be taught.

Yet not all of us go there. If we have already learned these things in the world, the Lord still prepares us for heaven, but leads us there by a different path. We may go immediately after we die. Or we may spend a short time with good spirits while we get rid of some of the rough edges of our thoughts and feelings that we had gotten from status and money in the world—so that we become purified.

Some of us must first be purged, which happens in a place called “the lower earth.” We may have to go through hard things there. This will happen if we have convinced ourselves of false things, but have still lived a good life. False ideas

that we have convinced ourselves of cling to us strongly. Before these false ideas are broken down, we cannot see or accept the truth.

When we are in these places of learning, we each live in our own home, since the inner self of each of us is connected to the community of heaven where we will be going. Since the communities in heaven are arranged in a heavenly pattern, the places of learning are arranged this way, too.

We are not all taught in the same way, or by people from the same heavenly community. If we have been brought up in heaven from childhood, we are taught by angels of the deeper heavens, since we have not gotten wrong ideas from false religion, nor have we dirtied our spiritual life with the contamination that comes from status and money in the world. If we died as adults, we will usually be taught by angels from the lowest heaven, since these angels are closer to our level than angels of the deeper heavens.

Teaching in heaven is different from teaching on earth. There, we do not memorize information, but put it right into our life. As spirits, our memory is in our life. We accept and absorb

everything that is in harmony with our life and do not accept, much less absorb, anything that is not in harmony with our life. Spirits *are* feelings; so as spirits we are in a pattern that reflects our feelings. Since we are like this, we are always filled with a love for true ideas that we can use in our life. The Lord sees to it that each of us loves the kind of work that fits our personality. This love is also strengthened by the hope that we will be angels.

Every useful activity in heaven relates to the good of the community. The community is the Lord's realm, which is our country there. The more each individual activity looks to the common good, the better it is. This means that the countless types of activity there are all heavenly and good. Everyone loves both truth and useful activity, so that the two work together; our understanding of truth grows in our useful activities. The true ideas we learn are about how to be useful. This is how we are taught as angelic spirits, and prepared for heaven.

A love for the truth that suits our work is planted in us in different ways, most of which are unknown in the world. It happens especially

by visual images of useful activity. In the spiritual world these visual images are presented in a thousand ways, all in such a pleasing and beautiful way that they pervade our being from the deeper parts of our mind to the outer parts of our body, touching our whole self. Through this experience we become our own occupation, so to speak. This means that when we reach the community we have been introduced to by what we have learned, we are involved in our real life because we are involved in our own work.

From all this we can see that knowledge, which is outward truth, does not bring us to heaven. We are brought into heaven by life itself—a life of useful activity that we enter through our knowledge.

It takes only a short time to prepare for heaven in the places of learning, since we are thinking in spiritual ideas, which can take in many things at once. When our time there is finished, we put on heavenly clothes, which are usually shining white as if made of linen. Then we are shown a path that goes up toward heaven. We are put in the care of angel guardians there, and then welcomed by other angels and invited

into different communities to take part in their many joys.

The Lord leads each of us into our own community. We go along various paths, and sometimes by a circuitous route. No angel knows the path we are led by; only the Lord does. When we arrive at our own community, our deeper parts are opened up. Since our deeper parts are in harmony with the angels in that community, they recognize us immediately, and welcome us with joy.



By the time we have reached this stage, we are beyond memorization and rote learning. As Dannon Brinkley puts it in his book *Saved by the Light*:

Now more than ever I knew that this was a place of learning. I would be steeped in knowledge, taught in a way that I had never been taught before. There would be no books and no memorization. In the presence of these Beings of Light, I would become knowledge and know everything that was important to

know. . . . It was like being a drop of water bathed in the knowledge of the ocean, or a beam of light knowing what all light knows.¹

In the spiritual world, we learn by direct experience—and by putting the insights from our experience directly into our hearts and our lives. When we are consciously being taught, this experience may come from visual images presented by angels. (It seems that what we know as video and film has developed to a much higher level in the spiritual world!) Brinkley gives an especially vivid description of the type of visual imagery the angels—or Beings of Light, as he calls them—can use.

The Beings came at me one at a time. As each one approached, a box the size of a videotape came from its chest and zoomed right at my face.

The first time this happened I flinched, thinking I was going to be hit. But a moment before impact, the box opened to reveal what appeared to be a tiny television picture of a world event that was yet to happen. As I

1. *Saved by the Light*, by Dannon Brinkley. (New York: Harper Collins, 1994) p. 36.

watched, I felt myself drawn right into the picture, where I was able to live the event.¹

In the same chapter, called “The Boxes of Knowledge,” Brinkley goes on to describe the images he was shown. As both he and Swedenborg say, it is not the type of learning that requires memorization, but the type that we *experience*, and remember because of the compelling nature of the experience.

It is also the type of learning that goes to the heart of our own concerns. This means that it will be different for each one of us. Both the method and content of the teaching will vary depending on who we are.

We may or may not need this final learning phase in our own spiritual growth. If we have already learned what we need to know along the way, and are not clinging to mistaken ideas, we will pass directly to our spiritual home. But most of us will still have things we need to learn before we are fully prepared for the spiritual work we will be doing in our future life. Perhaps one of the reasons we slow

1. *Saved by the Light*, p. 37.

down physically at the end of our life on earth is so that we will take the time to observe life around us, and contemplate its meaning.

Of course, even after we have completed this final learning phase, there will still be many more things for us to learn. Knowledge is infinite. The purpose of this learning phase is to make sure our minds are pointed in the right direction—a direction that is in harmony with our heart's direction.

At last, we are received with joy into the community that is our spiritual home. It is the place where our heart has carried us—a place where we will find rest for our souls. Yet this is not the rest of idleness. It is a rest in which we are doing the things we do because we *love* to do them. Though in one sense we may be working very hard, in another sense everything is an effortless, unhindered flow from God, through our soul, and into our outward actions.

CONCLUSION

As the rock group The Police say in their song of the same title, “We are spirits in the material world.” While the hope of an afterlife certainly fuels our fascination with Near Death Experiences, we miss much of their significance if we take them only as interesting information about what will happen to us when we die.

Most of us have a number of years left in our lives here on earth before the afterlife will become a present reality for us. For us, the greatest significance of NDEs—as well as Swedenborg’s and others’ descriptions of the afterlife—is in what they mean for us here and now. If we think of the material world as an expression of the spiritual world, descriptions of a spiritual-world afterlife can take on this kind of here-and-now meaning for us.

If we read accounts of NDEs simply out of fascination for the descriptions of the spiritual world, it will not necessarily touch our heart

and our life. But if we think of them as patterns for our life here, we are presented with a deep and lasting challenge. The Book of Revelation speaks of a city descending to earth from heaven. The spiritual world provides a blueprint: a plan that we can use to build communities based on mutual love and understanding right here on earth.

This community-building must start in the spirits of each one of us. By starting on a spiritual path and taking the steps described one way in this book, and other ways in others, we lay the foundations for the heavenly city in ourselves. As each of us finds our own spiritual path, we will also be reaching out to those around us and forming a spiritually-based community. This, I believe, is the direction we are being shown by those who have experienced the spiritual world, and come back to tell us about it.

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