



Robert Frost's Critical Appropriation of Emanuel Swedenborg's Theology

BY DAVID J. FEKETE

"What is my philosophy? That is hard to say. I was brought up a Swedenborgian. I am not a Swedenborgian now. But there is a good deal of it that's left with me. I am a mystic. I believe in symbols (Robert Frost, Lathem 1966: 49)."

Here, Frost tells us that the "good deal" of Swedenborgianism that is "left in him" is none other than his mysticism and use of symbols. Frost's mother was a Swedenborgian, and she took him to Swedenborgian Sunday school. I saw a document some years back in which the writer reflected on her remembrance of Frost as a boy in her Swedenborgian Sunday school class. This document is now lost. Frost again attests to his Swedenborgian upbringing when reflecting on his mother's religion.

My mother was a Presbyterian. We were here on my father's side for three hundred years but my mother was fresh a Presbyterian from Scotland. The smart thing when she was young was to be reading Emerson and Poe as it is today to be reading St. John Perse or T. S. Eliot. Reading Emerson turned her into a Unitarian. That was about the time I came into the world; so I suppose I started a sort of Presbyterian-Unitarian. I was transitional. Reading on into Emerson, that is into "Representative Men" until she got to

Swedenborg, the mystic, made her a Swedenborgian. I was brought up in all three of these religions. . . . But as you can see it was pretty much under the auspices of Emerson. It was all very Emersonian (Frost, "On Emerson," *Daedalus*, Vol. 88, 1959: 713).

In Emerson, Frost found reinforcement for Swedenborg's use of nature as a symbol for the human soul.

We also know that Frost read Swedenborg's book *Divine Love and Wisdom* (Thompson 1970, I: 499). Even as late as 1959 (he died in 1963), Frost dallied with Swedenborgian ideas. In his essay "On Emerson" Frost makes an allusion to Swedenborg's view of the heavens. In Swedenborg's theology there are two principal heavens: the spiritual and the celestial. In the celestial heaven, the highest, people don't dispute about religion. However, in the spiritual heaven, the second-highest, there is reasoning about religious issues. It is to these two heavens that Frost alludes in his essay on Emerson,

In that essay on the mystic he [Emerson] makes Swedenborg say that in the highest heaven nothing is arrived at by dispute. Everybody votes in heaven but everybody votes the same way, as in Russia today. It is only in the second-highest heaven

that things get parliamentary . . . ("On Emerson" 713).

The interesting thing in this statement is that Emerson does not go into the two heavens in his essay on Swedenborg. Frost's attribution of this idea to Emerson shows that he remembers some of the Swedenborgian doctrine that he was brought up in—even as late as in 1959.

Swedenborg also came to Frost most immediately through Ralph Waldo Emerson. In Emerson, Frost found reinforcement for Swedenborg's use of nature as a symbol for the human soul. As Jay Parini says of Frost, "In the tradition of Emerson, his most significant literary ancestor, Frost read nature as a symbol of the spirit" (Parini 1999: 443). Emerson was profoundly affected by Swedenborg's use of nature as a symbol for the soul. In his essay "The American Scholar," Emerson credits Swedenborg as a source for his own idea of nature as a symbol for the human soul.

There is one man of genius who has done much for this philosophy of life, whose literary value has never yet been rightly estimated;—I mean Emanuel Swedenborg. . . . He saw and showed the connection between nature and the affections of the human soul. He pierced the

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The Editor's Desk

Peace, Love, and Understanding



The zeitgeist of the 1960s can be encapsulated in the phrase “peace, love, and understanding,” a phrase popularized by a sizeable

number of the baby boom generation and a favorite of the media. Believers and supporters hoped this would become the watchword of a new age. It didn't happen. Five decades later we find ourselves in an age that seems to be defined by “conflict, hate, and misunderstanding.”

Evidence of conflict, hate, and misunderstanding presents itself to us daily. New media and platforms for the twenty-first century, the internet, Twitter, Facebook, etc. have provided an unmediated, direct pipeline of instantly accessible information for and from everyone. Thus, Russian operatives, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and anyone who wants to spew hatred towards an individual or a group, be it political, racial, or religious, need merely open their computers and start typing. A little skill and knowledge allows the posting of hatred, lies, and misinformation in the guise of professional postings.

Even the President of the United

States participates, leads by example, in this kind of activity. He uses social media and his easy access to the press to bully and belittle people who disagree with or criticize him; he makes off-the-cuff, often vague, statements that he disagrees with or claims he never made the next day or shortly thereafter; he threatens war, even nuclear war, with problematic nations, eschewing diplomacy or more measured policies.

Political extremism appears to be self-justification for engaging in these kinds of activities. On television news, we see and hear individuals justify hatred and discrimination with confused, ill-informed arguments; we see and hear crowds cheering and chanting mindlessly to assert their willingness to follow demagogues.

Our most recent mass slaughter occurred in Las Vegas, where fifty-eight people were killed and over 500 were wounded when a man opened fire on a concert with rifles that sprayed hundreds of rounds of ammunition per minute. No one knows what motivated him to commit this heinous act, but the word evil is often used in discussing the incident. Was the perpetrator evil? What does that mean? How do we define evil and where does it come from? How do we oppose it and replace it with goodness? Should we hate him? Should we hate the National Rifle Association and the politicians

they support? Should we hate the people who resist universal open and concealed carry laws?

How did we get here and how do we move our world toward peace, love, and understanding? What can we do as individuals, as Swedenborgians, to better understand and be of use in a confusing and complicated world?

There are, of course, no easy answers. But Rev. Jane Siebert in her “President's Letter” (page 123), explores how anger can emerge from either hate or righteousness, and how we can look within ourselves and address the anger that leads to hate.

—Herb Ziegler

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Church Calendar

- **October 28:** Investment Committee, Cambridge MA
- **October 27–29:** SPLATz (Tweens) retreat, LaPorte, IN
- **November 3–5:** General Council Fall Meeting, Framingham MA

the Messenger

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Letter from the President



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

Dear Friends,

It seems that so much violence is happening in our country and the world; I am wondering what will happen between the lines as I sit down to write this column and the time it will be published. It is not a comfortable time in America. We are on edge, and for good reason. North Korea is a time bomb. Charlottesville opened our eyes to see in the open the rage in the faces of fellow Americans—young men turning to White supremacy, the KKK, and neo-Nazism for reasons that make no sense to me.

One thing that is not going to change between now and then is the divisive hatred that is spilling out on our streets. I find myself asking, where is it coming from? How long has it been brewing? And which of my neighbors and, maybe even relatives, is seething with anger over some injustice they believe has been mounted against them? As I drive down the road, I wonder about each driver and each passenger, what might they be carrying from past hurts that would cause them to hate?

And there is one more very important question to ask. What about me? What anger am I carrying that might incite hate within me? What can I do?

Is there really “a time to love and a time to hate?” (Ecclesiastes 3:8). We often refer to Jesus’s righteous anger when he entered the temple and called it a den of thieves as the vendors were trying to make money from the people coming to the

temple. Jesus turned over the tables of the money changers and the sellers. Yes, I can agree he was angry, but I don’t believe he hated any of people doing wrong. In the Gospel of Luke we read the words of Jesus, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27). Righteous anger is directed at the wrong being perpetrated, not the person. Righteous anger is laced with love for what is right.

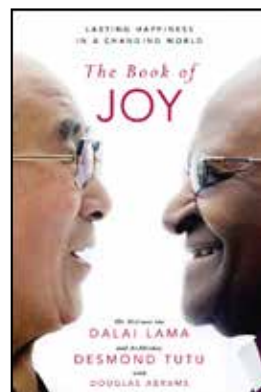
I like what Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.” Hatred incites more hatred. We use the hatred we see in others to justify our own. And leaders that speak with hatred send out waves of acceptance of hate, like the pebble dropped in a pond. Hate can reverberate through our society. Hate makes people do crazy things they wouldn’t otherwise do.

So, how do we stop the anger within ourselves that can inflame hate and instead “stick with love?”

The Book of Joy, by Douglas Abrams, chronicles a conversation between the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, two men who radiate joy even though they have endured tremendous trials. They talk of

three poisons and three roots of virtue. Difficult things are going to happen to us, this cannot be avoided.

What poisons us is to attach to the pain of what happened, hang onto anger about it and feed ourselves delusions about how we were wronged and want to get



even. To counter this, the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu tell us to reframe our perception of the difficulty. Spiritually, we can move to the antidotes for the poisons, the roots of virtue. Let go of the hurt and don’t let it stick; have compassion for the

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My Time at Gathering Leaves

BY ALISON SOUTHCOMBE

Earlier this autumn, I joined the seventh biennial Gathering Leaves event, which is a Swedenborgian retreat designed to bring women from all the denominations of The New Church together.

This year the event was based at Crieff Hills Retreat in Puslinch, which is tucked away in the beautiful countryside of Ontario in Canada.

To give a feel for the setting of our retreat, Crieff Hills has miles of trails through open country and pine woodland, an outdoor seven circuit labyrinth, an outdoor amphitheatre for worship and gathering, and little spots for silent prayer and reflection. Whilst we were there the weather was really (really!) warm, crickets were chirping in the undergrowth and the sun continued to beam down on the beautiful,



Painting with Soni

part farmstead, part wild landscape dotted with goldenrod and asters (Michaelmas daisies), which are part of the native flora of Canada.

Workshop Participation

Our theme was “Waters of Life—Spirit of Love” and under this umbrella heading we were able to explore creative and healing expressions of faith. I found the workshops really inspirational and am including the titles of these below to give an idea of what was on offer:

Gathering Leaves Mission Statement

“We are gathering again to promote harmony among women who are associated with the various Swedenborgian organizations around the world. We acknowledge our common beliefs, explore our differences, develop respect for one another’s contributions, create a healing atmosphere, and celebrate our spiritual sisterhood. We promote charity and goodwill so we might say ‘No matter what form her doctrine and external form of worship take, this is my sister; I observe that she worships the Lord and is a good woman.’”

—discussing various healing modalities

- Eating for healthy hormones
- Reiki just for today—presenting this energetic healing system
- Make a wirework beaded sun-catcher
- Writing from the body—integrating body awareness exercises and writing to express spirit, creativity, and the inner life

It was really hard to make the choice of what to do, but eventually I joined the group engaged in painting our Biblical kindred spirit and later on joined the Reiki discussion.

There was also time for sister circles, an evening campfire, and trail walking, so there was plenty to engage us. Something I found totally amazing was that there were no naughty snacks!



Walking the Labyrinth

As an alternative during our coffee and tea breaks, healthy veggie sticks could be dipped in hummus; there were dried apple chips and loads of fresh fruit. We were really being very health conscious and therefore totally deserving of the delicious homemade protein balls on offer. (Please see Gathering Leaves Facebook page for recipes.)

Exploring the Region’s Country Towns

On Saturday afternoon we went on a bus trip to tour the historic Waterloo Region. With excellent guides providing a commentary on points of interest and a cheery driver, we bowled along country lanes discovering pioneer cemeteries, ancient covered bridges, and the locations of early Swedenborgian churches. The countryside here is very beautiful, a softly rolling landscape dotted with beautiful Mennonite



“The wheels on the bus go round and round.”

farms and meeting houses. We visited a Mennonite dry goods store that was much like stores from pioneer times, with a covered wooden boardwalk out front and stocking everything from corn to curtain fabric and the very best

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Gathering Leaves

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ice cream from Kawartha Dairy (unfortunately not available in the UK). The young women who work in the store are themselves Mennonite and wear long cotton dresses and head coverings, both of which are reminiscent of the attire of pioneer women from an earlier time. Some Mennonites drive a horse and buggy only, but others have adopted the car and truck. It was therefore an interesting juxtaposition to see a young Mennonite woman in traditional dress driving a huge Dodge Ram truck. Whilst travelling around this region I mused to myself that the beauty of the countryside hereabouts maybe owed a great deal to the traditional way of life of these people and how they manage the farmland.

Morning and Evening Worship

Each morning we gathered together for an opening spiritual moment, and I was pleased to be able to share something I learned at the Othona Retreat in the UK called *seedtime*, which is all about sowing good seeds by setting the right intentions for the day. The morning spiritual moment was complemented by evening worship, and over the days we spent at Crieff Hills this took the form of singing with New Church sisters who are also members of the In-shallah Choir, a candlelit Taizé service, and on our final evening, a service with a theme of blessings which featured a guided meditation and a very beautiful closing circle dance.



The Gathering Leaves panel presenters

Closing service at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Kitchener

On Sunday morning, it was time to leave Crieff Hills and set off for Kitchener, where Mary Duckworth was leading the service at the Church of the Good Shepherd. The theme for the service was the tree of life from the Book of Revelation, and this beautifully drew all the threads of our time at Gathering Leaves together.



Snack time

There was a great moment when the children came in and showed us what they had been doing in Sunday school by carefully distributing paper cut-outs and making the river of life flow through the middle of the church.

After the service it was time for the Gathering Leaves group photo, then a lovely buffet luncheon with the congregation of the Church of the Good Shepherd before we all set off for home.

Reflections on Gathering Leaves

Now back at home, it is a joy to reflect gently on my time at Gathering Leaves. I found all the expressions of creativity and worship very powerful, and I became aware that connecting with each other in this way through our love of the Lord makes for deeper friendships that seem to blossom more freely. In our time together, we were putting down spiritual roots that draw on the waters of life.

I am a summer camp leader for 9–12 year olds

at Purley Chase Centre in the UK, and our young people often comment that the friends they make at camp are somehow different; there is a stronger bond, and even though they might not see each other for a year or two it is a bond that is like a loving family. I'm pleased to reflect that for me, too, this is the feeling I have experienced in joining Gathering Leaves—it is like a warm and loving family.

I hope my thoughts and reflections of Gathering Leaves in Ontario will encourage more women to come along and draw from this source of the Lord's love and wisdom at future retreats. I believe it works through all who join together to create a powerful circle of goodwill.



Some of the ladies at Gathering Leaves

Thank you and love to everyone for welcoming me to my first Gathering Leaves. Thanks also and a big hug to my roomie, fellow Brit, Mary Duckworth for sharing time at Crieff Hills and also in Toronto. ☪

Alison Southcombe is a student studying with The General Conference of the New Church in the UK. In her third year, she is finalizing here studies and will be ordained this coming December. Following her ordination, she will become programme leader at Purley Chase Centre, a New Church retreat situated in the Warwickshire countryside within the UK.



“Reflections” Looking Back on FNCA 2017

BY TREVOR

“Intergenerational” seems to be a key word to describe the 2017 Fryeburg New Church Assembly (FNCA) camp session. Granted, the Assembly has always been an all-generations camp, and that has always played a big part in our history. This year, however, it stood out so much that many campers commented about it.

The Sparks (ages 1–12), Flames (13–22), Bonfires (23+), and Embers (way old) were noticeably spending even more time together than usual. Sparks and Embers were seen sharing stories and crafts with each other. Flames were caught actively, purposely, hanging

out with Bonfires to play music and sing together. Sparks were invited by Flames to help them with this, that, and the other thing. Flames were invited by Sparks to join them for Sparks Games some evenings other than the traditional Spark Hunt/Flame Hunt. The younger Bonfires were actively encouraged by the Flames to join them in Flames Games. Meals were far less age separated than in past years, too; other ages groups were regularly found at the Flames’ table; adults without children at camp were often sitting with the families with Sparks; and several Sparks routinely sat with Bonfires who weren’t their relatives.

That’s not all. Witnesses saw Embers reading stories to Sparks and showing them cool stuff online. Sparks were creating art and various crafts and

spontaneously giving them to campers of all ages. Flames were volunteering to assist Embers with various needs. Bonfires and Flames were regularly sharing jokes and funny stories. A group of Bonfires took the Sparks on a hike up Jockey Cap (a short hike to a fabulous view just a few miles from camp). Sparks and Flames were routinely found in serious discussions with Bonfires and Embers. All ages were seen playing games together. And on and on throughout the entire session. It was a joy to see.



Dave, Nate, and Willis, solving the world's problems

Another biggie this year was our Everett K. Bray Visiting Lecturer, Dr. Devin Zuber, who attended along with his two young daughters for the first week of camp. (Dr. Zuber serves as core doctoral faculty at our

seminary, the Center for Swedenborgian Studies at the Graduate Theological Union.) His two lectures—“Caring for Creation: Swedenborgian Ecology” and “A Bird’s Life: Sarah Orne Jewett, George Inness, and the Art of (Swedenborgian) Ornithological Conservation”—were very well received and stimulated extensive conversation and discussion. Speaking of which, Campers appreciated Devin’s eager participation in the Adult Discussion Group and his special evening presentation on “Swedenborg at the Cinema: Ingmar Bergman and Swedenborgian Spirituality.” You can listen online to his lecture and others at

<http://fryeburg.org/lecturedownloads>.

We were tickled pink that Rev. Jane Siebert, our denomination’s president, returned to the Assembly for her second time. Her presence was felt and appreciated by all. She said she wants to be a regular from now on, too. We love you, Jane! Please do continue to bless us with your presence.

Another highlight was the return of several campers after not attending for a while, some for a few years and other for a few decades. The latter include Torgny Vigerstad, Katie Rienstra Pruiett, Sheldon Perry, and Noyes and Tonia Lawrence. The former includes Sam Reed; Tobin Grams and Michelle Valazquez with their two kids; Myrrh (Woofenden) Brooks with her two kids; and Rev. Sage Cole with her two kids.

Katie Pruiett said, “After over twenty years away, it felt like coming home, even if it was for [only] a day. The same smells, the same smiles, but most of all the love and comfort I always felt as a child and teen still remained.”

I was deeply moved by a long conversation in Frank Hall in which Torgny (who grew up in the Church but has embraced Buddhism for most of his adult life and returned to camp this year on encouragement from his wife) talked extensively about how much the FNCA has influenced his life and remained a strong spot in his affections for the past five plus decades. Torgny also talked about reaching out to people with an open heart, sharing goodness and blessings with the world, and being genuine. It was wonderful to hear how well Swedenborgianism and Buddhism mesh. Everyone involved in this heartfelt discussion was simply glowing.

Beki Greenwood commented recently, “I enjoyed finally meeting



Dr. Devin Zuber

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FNCA 2017

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Torgny for the first time after hearing his name my whole life. And enjoying all the people who returned to camp this year after many years.”

We were also very happy about the return of Rev. Sage Cole to our lecture schedule this year. She was a core lecturer while she was pastor at the nearby Fryeburg New Church, but then she went and got married and moved to Alaska where her new husband lived. (The nerve!) But they and their two young sons recently moved to the Boston area, where Sage is the pastor at Swedenborg Chapel in Cambridge. We are all quite happy with this. Welcome back, Rev. Sage!

In fact, all of the returnees were wonderful to have at camp again, and we all hope you all will return again much sooner than the last time—in fact, next year would be just fine!

Two annual special events are definitely worth mentioning. First, the Dole 3 Miler Road Race, honoring the Rev. Dr. George F. Dole (who is still an active runner in his eighties!), was another very successful community event and fundraiser for the Assembly, with seventy-three runners. The race is held on the middle Saturday of camp on the Mountain Division Rail Trail, which begins directly across the street from the Assembly. This year’s race winner was Nathan Buck, the older brother of one of our regular campers, Nina Sasser. Nathan won the race its first two years in 2014 and 2015. He was unable to compete in 2016, but he came back this year and successfully reclaimed his title. I’m excited to report that our very own Sam Reed was the first-ever FNCA member to place in the race, coming in third. Sam is an active athlete and had just popped in for the weekend not knowing about the race. When he was told about it, he said, “Sure, I’ll run.”

Second, the annual LALLA Searle Scrabble Tournament ended abruptly with a huge surprise ending which Jon Crowe called the “Funniest Finish ever.”

The finalist were myself and three of the Phinney clan: Merrilee Phinney, her husband Martin Vojtko, and her daughter Beki Greenwood. Throughout most of the game, I had slowly edged into a fairly significant lead to the point where I (and, evidently, the others, too) thought I had it all sewn up when I had only one tile left and everyone else had several. Then Martin, much to everyone’s surprise, followed my play by using one of the letters I’d just played to score big using all seven of his tiles for a fifty-point bonus. Then, when he reached into the bag to get more letters and discovered there weren’t any tiles left, he realized that he’d gone out with that amazing play and the game was over. We tallied up the scores, and he had won by two points!

However, not only did he win by two points, he also he went out unknowingly . . . with a bingo on a Triple Word Score . . . using only one-point tiles and both blanks . . . on a space only made possible by the immediately preceding play by the front-runner. What a stunning play!

But it didn’t end there. At breakfast the next morning, Martin got up and made an announcement that he’d looked at the photo of the final board that had been posted to Facebook and realized that he’d miscalculated his score by three points. He was not at



George Dole and his son Andrew analyzing the race

all happy about it, but very graciously conceded victory to me by a single point. I got a nice round of applause, but not believing that all the contestants at the Scrabble table would have missed such an unspeakable scoring mistake in a game that close, I immediately left the dining hall to look at the photo in private

and discovered that, gracious as he was, Martin hadn’t made any mistake in scoring but rather, in reading the photo, hadn’t realized that one of his one-point tiles was on a Double Letter Score and was worth six points, not three (remember: it was also on a Triple Word Score). So I came racing back into the Dining Hall and went through



The final board

the whole mix up for everyone and declared that the official results of the 2017 LALLA Scrabble Tournament was indeed a stupendous, come from behind, last turn, surprise upset victory by Martin Vojtko! He got a well-deserved, thunderous round of applause.

And that’s exactly what being at FNCA is like, everyone: people feeling accepted, cared for, relaxed, comfortable, supported, appreciated, and loved . . . just the way they are. ☺

Trevor is the FNCA activities director, webmaster, chair of the Outreach Committee, and long-time member of the FNCA Board of Directors. He is a full-time entertainer, active year-round cyclist, and avid gardener. He lives in the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts with his lovely wife Nancy Little and her tuxedo cat, Whitney.



Almont New Church Assembly 2017 Summer School

BY BJ NEUENFELDT

The camp session this year was well attended, once again, with an average of 140 campers per day. Rev. Kevin Baxter continued his great job as director. The dorms were full as usual, with at least seventy campers under 18. The Survivors teen group had new initiates and celebrated that with the candlelight service, where they launched candles on little rafts into the lake—as always, a very moving experience.

We celebrated the life of the late Toby Brugler together, as Almont was one of his first families.

Joyce Fekete, the longstanding Candy Lady, where, yes, you can still get candy for one penny after lunch, gave notice that this would be her last year at the “stand.” She has been grooming some to follow in her footsteps—but there will never be another Joyce.

The educational theme was “Women in the Bible.” We were led in lectures by four Swedenborgian ministers: Rev.



The end of the rainbow

Kevin Baxter, Rev. Jenn Tafel, Rev. Kit Billings, and Rev. David Fekete and a student from the Center for Swedenborgian Studies, Nancy Pierowkowski.

Children from preschool through high school met daily for class and then most contributed to an evening chapel service.

Almost all staff at Almont grew up coming to camp as children. We had a stewardship drive last year called “100 Campers Who Care,” hoping to get up to \$100 from each contributor. The goal was close to being met with the total raised of over \$8000.

As always, there are endless projects

and new equipment to put this money towards, and so we encourage campers to continue to care in a financial way for another year. If you would like to be a participant this year as a “Camper who Cares,” please send donations to ANCA c/o Betsy Aldrich, 3416 Kissman Dr., Austin, TX 78728. ☪

BJ Neuenfeldt grew up in the Detroit Church. She is a member of Royal Oak Swedenborgian Church, a retired elementary school teacher, and a lifelong Almont camper. She never missed a session in 66 years. She just retired as treasurer after almost forty years of service.



The chapel at Almont New Church Assembly



A fifth-generation organist: 10-year-old Ellie Barnaby



Children listening to Rev Kev



The junior-high class chapel service

Robert Frost and Swedenborg

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emblematic or spiritual character of the visible, audible, tangible world (Emerson in Spiller 1954: 57).

Emerson was so taken by Swedenborg that he devotes an entire essay to him in his *Representative Men* collection. The Essay is called, “Swedenborg; or The Mystic.” And in this essay, Emerson again describes Swedenborg’s system of correspondences. Indeed, Emerson quotes at length an early statement of Swedenborg’s about correspondences. But Emerson criticizes Swedenborg for being a mystic and not a humanist in his use of correspondences. So, when Emerson describes Swedenborg’s system of correspondences, he adds an element of ridicule,

His description of nature is not human and universal, but is mystical and Hebraic. He fastens each natural object to a theologic notion; a horse signifies carnal understanding; a tree, perception; the moon, faith; a cat means this; and ostrich that; and artichoke this other (2009: 14).

I have read a good deal of Swedenborg, but do not recall ever seeing a correspondence to an artichoke mentioned.

But Emerson reshaped the doctrine of correspondences according to his own literary ends. In his own application of Swedenborg’s correspondences, Emerson opened it to the free use of the imagination. He saw the human imagination as intimately connected with the whole system of nature so that by knowing the self deeply and truly, one comes in contact with all the symbols of the created order. So one of Emerson’s contributions to Frost’s poetry

is to liberate Frost from Swedenborg’s tight correlation of one symbol with one spiritual reality. But the idea that internal aspects of the human psyche could be depicted by natural images remained. Indeed, this concept of nature representing the human soul becomes the very foundation for much, in fact most, of Frost’s poetry.



Robert Frost

Swedenborg’s influence on Frost isn’t limited only to nature symbolism. Some of Frost’s theological statements are quite in accord with Swedenborgian thought. In an interview, Frost gives a rare statement about what God means to him. Frost points to the life a person lives.

If you would learn the way a man feels about God, don’t ask him to put a name on himself. All that is said with names is soon not enough.

If you would have out the way a man feels about God, watch his life, . . . Place a coin, with its denomination unknown, under a paper and you can tell its mark by rubbing a pencil over the paper. From all the individual rises and valleys your answer will come out (Lathem 1966: 149).

A well-known Swedenborgian maxim is, “All religion relates to life.” And from Swedenborg’s *Divine Love and Wisdom*, which we know Frost read, we find the following interesting statement, “a man is not to be judged by wise speaking, but by his life” (§418). Frost’s statement about a person’s relationship to God is so close to these quotes that there appears to be a direct influence here.

Frost is, to a large extent, concerned with how metaphysics appears in life situations. Frost’s interest is with inner life. For Frost, theological issues are kept grounded on the earth. But with his theological view that religion

is to be measured by a person’s life, this emphasis on experience, or life on earth, does not negate a theological commitment.

He puts forth this theology in a short poem entitled “A Steeple On The House.” The poem is short enough that I can quote it in its entirety:

What if it should turn out eternity
Was but the steeple on our house of life
That makes our house of life a house of
worship?
We do not go up there to sleep at night.
We do not go up there to live by day.
Nor need we ever go up there to live.
A spire and belfry coming on the roof
Means that a soul is coming on the flesh.

Here we see Frost clearly stating that eternity is in “our house of life,” and that “our house of life” is “a house of worship.” The spire and belfry mean that the soul is to be found not in heaven’s heights, but grounded in life. The argument in this poem seems clearly Swedenborgian, as in the maxim “All religion relates to life.”

We see Frost’s dalliance with heaven and earth in another poem entitled “Birches.” Frost uses the symbol of birch trees that have been bent down by ice storms to depict the vital storms one lives through in life.

He suggests that one can be broken by tragedy so that one doesn’t return to well-being.

They are dragged to the withered bracken
by the load,
And they seem not to break; though once
they are bowed
So low for long, they never right
themselves: . . .

This depiction of bowed trees is followed in the poem with Frost’s own confession of how difficult life can be. The pain of living, described in the metaphor of walking through a pathless woods, makes Frost wish to leave the earth,

It’s when I’m weary of considerations,

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Robert Frost and Swedenborg

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And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with
the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it
open,
I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.

In these lines, we see Frost struggling with life. But soon the poem turns theological. At this turn in the poem's voice, Frost emphasizes life on earth. Here the poem turns experiential and we see Frost's emphasis on life, not speculative theology.

Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better.

Frost wants to ascend toward heaven and return to earth by climbing a birch tree only to have it bend and return him to earth. As a poet, Frost chooses his words very carefully. When the narrator wants to ascend the tree, it is an ascent toward heaven—not sky:

I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow-
white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear
no more,
But dipped its top and set me down
again.
That would be good both going and
coming back.
One could do worse than be a swinger of
birches.

Frost's treatment of his ascent to heaven and return seems light. But we need to remember his statement that, "I'm never serious except when I'm fooling." I think we can read here an ascent into theological and mystical experience, perhaps speculation, then bringing that ascent into a person's life experiences.

Another poem that has a similar heaven-to-earth theme is "Fragmentary Blue."

Why make so much of fragmentary blue
In here and there a bird, or butterfly,
Or flower, or wearing-stone, or open eye,
When heaven presents in sheets the solid
hue?

Since earth is earth, perhaps, not heaven
(as yet)--
Though some savants make earth include
the sky;
And blue so far above us comes so high,
It only gives our wish for blue a whet.

Here, as in "Birches," Frost calls the sky heaven. Heaven is blue, and when we see fragmentary blue here on earth, it is heavenly qualities incorporated into natural life.

Trying to pin down Frost as to belief in God is highly perplexing. He is tentative when he alludes to God. He does suggest God's existence, but almost never by proper name. So often, we find Frost talking about "Something," or "A Voice," or a "Whoever." In "Mending Wall," in which a wall between two neighbours symbolizes breaches in neighbourly love, Frost says, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." What this "something" is, he doesn't say. In a poem about breaking through subjectivity, Frost sees through his own reflection when looking into a well and finds, "Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something." In another poem, "A voice" challenges humanity to affirm life despite its pain. And in another poem, Frost asks "whoever it is," as if addressed to a higher power. In this hide-and-seek about God, we see Frost's belief in God brought into question. Perhaps this is why Frost claimed late in life that he was not Swedenborgian.

Finally, despite all the doubt and pain we find in Frost's poetry, there are suggestions of a tentative belief in God and an affirmation of earthly life. One of my favourite poems of Frost's is a late poem, and it isn't well-known. The poem is only four lines long, but

it seems to capture Frost's view of life with the precision that only a poet could do in four lines. The poem is called "A Question."

A voice said, Look me in the stars
And tell me truly, men of earth,
If all the soul-and-body-scars
Were not too much to pay for birth.

If we read this poem in the light of Frost's own statement about God, we have some strong suggestions about how he finally sees religion. We find Frost's tentative reference to God. We are not told that God is speaking. It is only "A voice." But we are invited to look that voice "in the stars." It is the creator of the stars who seems to be speaking. A challenge is put to the human race: "tell me truly, men of earth,/ If all the soul-and-body-scars/Were not too much to pay for birth." But this is actually a rhetorical statement. Frost does not give in to despair. The "soul-and-body-scars" are not too much to pay. Frost finally affirms earthly life. "Earth's the right place for love." Perhaps this poem represents a coming to terms with God. Despite being "taken and swept/And all but lost"; despite the birches that are bowed never to be righted; despite "pain,/And weariness and fault"; it all is "not too much to pay for birth." ☸

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Passages

Confirmations

On Sunday, September 10, 2017, Rev. Betsy Coffman and the Urbana Swedenborgian Church joyfully confirmed **Linda Parks** into the membership of the church family.

Deaths

Shane Landon Stimatze, 42-year-old son of Rick and Toni Stimatze and grandson of Vivian Bright, died in a farm accident August 12, 2017, at his home in rural St. John, Kansas. He was a member of the Church of the New Jerusalem, Pawnee Rock.

His celebration of life was held at one of his business locations, Mid-Kansas Ag, because the family and mortuary knew it was going to be a large funeral, and it surpassed everyone's expectations. They set up 800 chairs, and the building overflowed with around 1200 people.

When Shane's mother, asked if I would lead his service, I was honored to speak about this young man that had touched so many lives. His friends



shared these adjectives for Shane: light-hearted, quick witted, hardworking, fun-loving, successful, fair-minded, dedicated and sometimes, ornery. In fact the stories about Shane's mischievous nature start early. Toni said that by age 3, she knew she had a free-spirited child on her hands that would give her and Rick a lively home life

Shane kept his family on their toes: even as an adult, they never quite knew what new challenge or adventure or business opportunity he would engage in. He became a business owner at a young age. He loved cars, boats, dune buggies, and just recently became a pilot and purchased his own plane.

Another love at an early age was refereeing. He took great pride in this work and was good at it. He never could participate in sports due to asthma and he found his place as "the ref." He met a lot of friends through this passion and was able to let the harassment of unhappy parents and sometimes in-your-face coaches in stride. He said, "They were just cheering for me." That was indicative of Shane's approach to life. Make the best out of the sometimes-difficult situations. See the bright side. Let it be a good story to tell, not a negative one to harbor. We can all learn some important lessons from Shane's approach to life.

Shane's list of refereeing accomplishments was long, officiating for the Kansas State High School Athletics Association in all six classes, boys and girls, and their championship finals; and at the collegiate level. There were around thirty refs from around Kansas sitting together in their striped shirts at his service. His four nephews and niece were all wearing little referee shirts to honor their uncle.

It is time like this that I am so glad

Letter from the President

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pain within others and what has happened to them; and learn from our difficulties for the path to joy is through adversity, not getting stuck in it. The Dali Lama and Desmond Tutu agree, "... the way we see the world is the way we experience the world. Changing the way we see the world in turn changes the way we feel and the way we act, which changes the world itself."

I do not believe hate gets us anywhere, except deeper in turmoil. Our teacher, our example for life, our God is love.

—Rev. Jane Siebert

to have our Swedenborgian teachings around death and heaven to rely on and the opportunity to share them with so many people.

Shane grew up attending the Church of the New Jerusalem in Pawnee Rock. It is a stone's throw from his boyhood home. I imagine it was hard for this active little guy to sit through Sunday school but he had good teachers like Marian Mull, his grandmother Vivian Bright, and even his great grandmother Edna Welch. I imagine they did the best they could to keep him interested and teach lessons on the stories of the Bible and how to live a good life. Shane wasn't much of a "church goer," but he followed the teachings and lived his life helping others, being useful, dealing honestly, and spreading laughter and joy.

The day before his service, his mom texted me a Swedenborg quotation she had just found when going through some papers, and it gave her comfort. "In the spiritual world, into which everyone comes after death, no one is ever asked, 'What is your religion?' But rather, 'What is your life?' for everyone's life is their religion." ☩

—Rev. Jane Siebert

Robert Frost and Swedenborg

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About the Swedenborgian Church

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

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

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

Job Posting: Operations and IT Manager

The General Convention of the New Jerusalem in the United States of America (Swedenborgian Church) is seeking a full-time Central Office operations and information technology (IT) manager. The office is housed in the Cambridge Church of the New Jerusalem in Harvard Square, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The operations and IT manager reports to the chair of the Central Office Review Committee (the vice-president of General Convention). The salary range is \$32,000 to \$52,000 depending upon experience and qualifications, plus health benefits and 403b contributions.

The operations and IT manager serves as the communication point person for the General Convention, facilitating communication

within and without the denomination and managing the Central Office. Responsibilities include assisting General Council and all committees and support units in their work and their meetings, setting up an annual convention, maintaining a web presence, including the website and various social media sites, and producing the annual *Journal of the Swedenborgian Church*. Experience with wordpress.org and Adobe InDesign is preferred.

If you are interested in more information, receiving a copy of the job description, or being considered for this position, please email Tom Neuenfeldt (vp@swedenborg.org). Applicants should submit a cover letter, a resume, and three letters of reference. Please mail hard copies to The Swedenborgian Church, 50 Quincy St., Cambridge, MA, 02138-3013.