

# Personal Spiritual Development through Uses

*By Wilson Van Dusen*

Reprinted from *Studia Swedenborgiana*, June 1978

## Introduction

The simplest and most powerful method for personal spiritual development in Swedenborg's theology lies in the idea of usefulness, or "uses" as he called it, a term which we will continue to employ. Part of its beauty is its simplicity, which permits carrying it out in the midst of ordinary duties and labor, indeed, in any human act. It can be applied anywhere, anytime, by anyone. Part of its power lies in its wonderful concreteness. Much of religion has to do with masses of words and ideas. Use lies in concrete acts. Words are unnecessary. The very concrete immediacy of useful action takes us out of ourselves, out into circumstances, out toward others and a larger world.

The range and power of this method have been largely overlooked by students of Swedenborg's writings. Use is often seen as simply a synonym for charity and good works. It is a much more pervasive idea than that, for, as we shall see, it applies to all human acts done in a certain spirit. The method simply cannot be grasped by reading and speculation alone. It must be practiced to see its power. There is no other way! Literally, only in the practice of use may its real potentialities be found. In being useful, one is attempting to do whatever is at hand very well as a way of reaching out and learning. It is a way of practicing devotion in any work or activity. What hasn't been noticed is a subtle, fast, and consistent divine response in one's inner awareness. This divine guidance takes several forms. The complex dynamics of this guidance perfect how one works, correct personal habits and faults, and then lead into general perceptions of the nature of reality. Should you get into this process, you will see that it is powerful and comprehensive enough that no other method of spiritual development is ever needed. The interior response is in terms of what you need to learn here and now. And the range of this method not only continuously perfects what you do, but it leads through personal insights and wisdom to experience the Divine. This is the power of the method that has not been particularly well understood or applied. But first, let us look at what Swedenborg really meant by uses. If only one idea could be saved from his

writings, this is the one I would choose, for it turns out to be the hinge pin of both personal development and of his whole theology.

## What is “Usefulness”?

Swedenborg’s “use” means essentially spiritual function. Suppose we wanted to grasp the uses of a carpenter. It would not be enough to talk of measuring, sawing, and nailing wood together. This is too abstract. We should go to a project under way and walk around in the skeleton of a building under construction. Yet this would not be as good as eventually moving into the house to get the full feeling and impact of the use the carpenter has created. We have breakfast daily in the dining alcove he created and enjoy the view of the garden. It is this possibility of living in and enjoying the space he created that is a concrete knowing of his use. Use has this immensely concrete aspect, in this case a house, but it also has a personal or spiritual aspect, the qualities of living in it. In uses, Swedenborg is viewing the whole of creation in both this concrete and interior spiritual aspect. In this larger way, we are a design or use walking around in and enjoying a design use called creation. As we will see, use is a profoundly human way of appreciating existence. Taken separately from its human uses, a house is a strange tangle of wood and materials having no real rhyme, reason, or purpose. But the dining alcove, for instance, makes good sense seen from its human functioning. It is just off the kitchen, handy for preparing food. One can be sheltered while eating and yet look out on the garden which softens the light of day. The details of the form of the house make their best sense from the viewpoint of human use. This human, lived-in-quality is the ultimate spiritual nature of use.

*Truth is . . . like a garment; when not being worn, it is merely pieces of material adapted for a body, but when it is put on, it becomes clothing with human being inside it.*

Divine Love and Wisdom §150

Just as the use a family would make of the house created by the carpenter governed his work, the uses of creation are the end which govern its form. The end or purpose governs all the details of the design and hence of the form. Thus, spiritual function or use is the key to the design of creation. It is a way of looking at creation that gathers all the tiny details together and enables one to see through time to the way the whole operates. This is the spiritual or overall design.

*[Everything in heaven, in the world, and in the human body] both great and small, was created from use, in use, and for use. A part in which this last, its being for use, ceases, is separated as harmful.*

Apocalypse Explained §1194

So, like a tumor, if it interferes with use, it is cut out and killed. Use is a way of considering the design, function, and purpose of everything. We cannot see the whole of uses since we cannot see across an eternity of time, but we can clearly see a portion of these uses. And in this portion, we see enough to sense the overall design. We see through our uses into the useful design of all things. This is appropriate because in our uses we are the image of the whole. The uses the carpenter put into the house are best appreciated by the family living there. In a larger sense, we are the family living in the house built for us by God. By feeling out the qualities of the design, we are entering into the ends of the Builder. Daily, and even moment to moment, in our appreciation of the house given us, the ends of the Builder are spreading out through time. This is both an image of our ordinary experience and of the design of creation. It is through our involvement in uses that we appreciate the universe as series within series of uses.

## The Useful Body

This brings to the idea of uses something that at first seems strange. We keep coming back to the image of the human being, or, in a sexless sense, back to humanness or personhood. Is this simply our limitation that we see things through ourselves? Here Swedenborg gives an answer that, at first, may trouble the understanding. No, it is not simply our limitation. It is the other way around. In the tiniest aspect of our form, we are the image of the whole, of all there is. At first it seemed odd to me that Swedenborg kept referring to anatomical functions as theological images. But listen to his description of the human body as an image of the whole design of creation.

The lungs work with blood, which works with all the tissues: particular uses fitting together that there may be an overall use, that the person may live and act. And the person takes care of his body and its organs. This is also the image of society. The farmers work with packers, who work with grocery stores so that we might eat and live. This is also an image of heaven, where individuals make their unique contribution to societies (which are like organs of the body) which contribute to the One Man, the Grand Man. Every time Swedenborg's Grand Man puzzles you, look to your own form, which is an image of all there is. The reason that all these patterns of uses working together tend toward heaven is that, in uses, we look across from the part toward the whole. The great wonder of use as a method is that it enables us to go beyond ourselves, to reach through creation. Swedenborg sees from a limited use to the larger sphere of uses, creation.

*The muscles and organs of sense, as the sight (for instance), have respect to a common use, namely the internal sight; wherefore they also are for use and from use. Internal sight, or thought, has respect to a common end, which is the good of society in general and in universal over the earth; wherefore all things of thought will be uses and tending to that end . . .*

Spiritual Diary §3574

God designed the universe as a use and even series within series of uses. Our bodily form is an example of this; hence, we are an image of the whole. Swedenborg uses “man” or “Grand Man” or the “Divine Human” as the form of all uses.

*God as a man is the form itself of all uses, from which form all uses in the created universe derive their origin, thus the created universe, viewed as to uses, in an image of him.*

Divine Love and Wisdom §298

We see in this not so much how God looks externally, but how creation lives and functions internally. In a similar way, we do not “see” the carpenter’s real uses as boards nailed together but in the lived-in qualities of the space and shelter. We do not think of ourselves as bones and tissues arranged thus, but as one life which lives in thus-and-so ways. The image of the Grand Man is not really bones and tissues but all life seen as a one of which we and the whole of creation is a representative image. If we were wise and reflective elephants, would it be appropriate to see the design of the whole as the Grand Elephant? Indeed, yes, for it would only be through our living quality as elephants that we could sense the quality of the whole! The image of the Grand Man does not elevate humankind so much as it is a way to see into the whole through our functioning or uses. Use is a way of looking at things that gets beyond the thing-in-itself to see how it fits into the whole.

## Loving Kindness in Action

*That the Divine Love which is Life Itself and which is the Lord, is in the form of the forms of all uses, which form is man, can be nowhere better seen than in the creation of the universe and then of the earth and of all things in them both. For by creation there is nothing on the earth that is not made for use....In a work, every point in the created universe and in created beings is a use; in fact, it is a successively expanding series of uses from the use in first things to the use in ultimates, thus from one use to another in unbroken succession — clear proof that the Creator and Former, who is the Lord, is the infinite enfolding of all uses, in His essence Love, and in His form Man in whom that enfolding is.*

Divine Love and Wisdom §20

How does this operate through a person? The whole spiritual world operates through the love and affections. The love of life is the inmost tendency of the individual. It is when the deepest tendency and love are expressed in action that the individual comes into his or her highest use.

*. . . if love does not become deed, it ceases to be love, the deed being the effecting of its purpose and that in which it has its existence.*

Divine Love and Wisdom §38

There are several implications of this. Loves or affections need to do something to realize themselves. Swedenborg makes a direct equivalence between uses and charity. A person who is useless is thereby uncharitable. Charity is to do something of uses beyond one's limited self. One feels most free when realizing his love in action. Then one's highest use will be along the lines of one's deepest love of life. This formula allows for considerable range of individual differences. One may find his highest use when building things, another when singing and entertaining others, another in caring for children, etc. Throughout, the idea of use is reality. Love or charity becomes real in useful activity. There is a tendency to think of uses in a limited sense as charity, in which one does good for the neighbor. Swedenborg defines it in such a broad way as to include all a person's acts. Uses can be for one's self:

*The uses for sustaining the body comprise its nourishment, clothing, habitation, recreation and enjoyment, protection and conservation of state.*

Divine Love and Wisdom §331

It includes providing for one's self and loved ones:

*Good uses are providing oneself and one's own with the necessities of life*  
.....

Heaven and Hell §361

Neither wealth nor business is excluded:

*Riches are to be esteemed for the use to which they are put; likewise the sciences, philosophy, the gifts of genius.*

Spiritual Diary §112

Since we all pretty much have some work or duties, are we not all then useful? Not necessarily. Swedenborg is making a subtle distinction that has to do with our purposes. We have two shoe repairmen, both making a living at this trade. One has as his aim making the most money. He cuts corners on materials and workmanship. He has to grind out as many repairs as possible. The second also is concerned with profit, but he enjoys meeting customers, talking of shoe problems, and he enjoys his craft. The aim of the first is his profit above the customer's welfare. The aim of the second is profit through the customer's welfare. This is the difference between hell and heaven. If you visited these two shops, you probably would quickly sense the difference. If we sent in a shoe-repair expert, she could probably find the difference in the repaired shoes. The idea of uses is intimately related to quality. Could not the second man be even more charitable by cutting prices and thereby giving away his services as a charity? No. This would overlook his obligations to himself and his family. He has a difficult judgment to make in relation to his needs and the needs of others. His needs have to be met as well as those of his customers. If he gives away his services and materials, he will soon be

out of business and no longer of service, while having harmed himself and his family. Charity is to be toward the self, loved ones, and others.

The use that leads to heaven includes self, loved ones, and others, and indeed creation itself. The use that leads to hell puts one's self supreme. There is so much deception practiced that it may take some while to figure out which is which, but the internal end is diametrically opposite. Two men own and operate a clothing store. Outwardly they do the same thing, sell men's clothes. Look closer. One quickly sizes up the customer's wants. The customer likes this color, that style. Let's see — perhaps this is what he wants? Everyone is different, and the salesman enjoys finding and serving these differences. He is pleased to see the clothes he sold appearing here and there around town. The other clothing salesman pushes this or that, touts it as a bargain. The profitmaking sale is his end, not the customer's needs. He serves only himself. The first salesman serves himself and the other person. It is a mutual benefit.

Swedenborg's description of heaven and hell is not a remote spiritual judgment. Look closely. It is built right into any act. The first clothing salesman, in being curious of and sensitive to the needs of customers, is already opening out beyond himself to the larger community. It is as simple as that. The second man, by attempting to overcome the resistance of the customer, to get his own ends, has already started a closing in, a limiting of himself, which is the implication of hell. The outcome is built into the subtlety of their acts. Uses point heavenward. That is, they involve a reaching out, an expansion. The opposite act is for one's self above everything else. In the work situation, it also makes one in conflict with the environment. Work simply has to be gotten through so you can do what you want. In uses, one reaches through the task at hand beyond one's self. Uses involves an attitude that is sensitive to the environment. The useful person sees what needs doing and does it. But one can also be useful in ordinary social conversation by trying to sense the other person and his needs and responding to these. But then how can you reach out towards your own needs? By taking care of yourself with rest, proper diet, exercise, recreation, etc., so that you might remain a useful instrument. Healthful living is being useful toward yourself.

## Being of Use to Yourself

But carry it a step further beyond simply living by the rules of health. Your greatest uses rest upon being very sensitive and considerate to yourself so that you might find and eventually carry out your unique and highest uses. Like the clothing salesman who has to make a difficult judgment between his need for profit and the customer's needs, to find your greatest use also requires judgment. The pressure of the environment is to do this and that. One can easily become swallowed up in these pressures and never discover one's own gifts. This slow and sensitive discovery may involve saying "no" to pressures; no, I want some time to explore this or that because it interests me. There are plenty of mysteries in applying uses to one's self.

Sometimes I feel depressed, out of sorts and interested in nothing. I assume my instrument for uses, myself, has been neglected. I try to approach myself with great consideration, searching out what I need. I treat myself like a stranger who is ill and needs some kind of care. I do this for a time until interest returns and I can return again to uses. Usefulness toward ourselves is as mysterious reaching out and searching for a process as the development of our highest use. In it, I treat myself as a great unknown to reach out and discover. In my work as a psychotherapist, I've known many Christians who neglected themselves to the point of producing madness. They thought charity was only for others — never for self. It is as difficult to discover what is ultimately the highest charity towards one's self as it is for the most puzzling stranger.

In any act, whether brushing your hair, fixing a gadget, or taking care of a customer, the basic attitude of uses is a respectful search. *Devotion* would be a better word here. Uses as a spiritual method is an attempt to search through the task at hand. Working wood, it means to respect the grain of the wood. Speaking to a person, it means really trying to sense him. Washing my hands, it means cleaning them patiently and well. This faithful, devotional attitude in uses means first and foremost that one will learn and perfect the task at hand. The medieval stonemasons who built the cathedrals is an image of the mastery such an attitude leads to. These masons became familiar with the qualities of stone and through that were able to express their highest ideals. Uses, devotion to the task at hand, leads necessarily to skill and quality in workmanship. It is the opposite of simply getting tasks out of the way. Uses is a way of speaking to all there is. It is spiritual communication. You wish to speak to God? Do the task at hand with the greatest faithfulness and devotion. I must emphasize, any task. The idea that only under certain circumstances, in acts of charity, can you practice uses is wrong. Any act. I am practicing what is possibly my highest use now by writing. This is the task that has come to hand to be practiced with devotion.

I've often reflected that a spiritual method should be open to all. Suppose a person is sick in bed and can't do anything? How could he be useful? He can attempt to be little trouble to others and be as cheerful and comforting as possible to those who visit. Uses. Few of us will be statesmen or stateswomen who serve great uses in society. But all of us can attempt to serve uses within our station and occupation. You live alone in the woods? There are lots of plants and animals you can help. It might be enough just to be considerate of the plants and animals that live there too. Who cannot serve some use, whatever his place? You are stuck in the world's dullest job, screwing nuts on bolts in a factory. How to be of use? Perform your job well. Reflect on the use to others of the machine you are working on. Be of good cheer to fellow workers. Well, how can you be useful when not working? It is Sunday morning and you are reading the Sunday paper with the family. You can still attempt use. Be of good cheer to other family members. Consider the children want the funny papers first. In reading the news, reflect on the situation of other people in remote parts of the world. There is no situation in which you are really prevented from reaching beyond yourself, which is to be of use.

# The Pleasure of the Divine Response

*It is, however, granted to interrupt labors by various things that are done in the company of others; these things are recreations, and thus they are uses also.*

Apocalypse Explained §1194

*. . . a person's delights are of the same quality as his uses, and on the same level as his affection for use.*

Heaven and Hell §402

The Puritan view is that whatever leads to heaven should involve suffering and not pleasure. But people serving their greatest use will also be enjoying themselves. Part of this pleasure comes because your use is your means of extending your powers outside yourself. The good shoe repairman enjoys sharing his knowledge of what is needed with the customer bothered by a pair of shoes. At the same time, he gets a joy and a profit. The gardener enjoys watering the dry, limp plant that needs it. Why? Because by this simple act the plant comes back to life and brightens his life.

The link between feeling and uses has been implied in all the examples given. We come into our uses when we combine what we enjoy doing with what needs doing. This very much implies a marriage between the unique tendencies in the individual and the needs of the environment. For the individual, it means giving expression and reality to his or her inner tendencies. It also means individual differences.

The idea of uses rests on some subtle distinctions, but once you become involved in these spiritual matters, they become more and more obvious. The idea of uses involves any attempt to reach or even just see and understand beyond yourself. The outcome is fairly predictable.

You will live in a wider sphere than those focused only on themselves. The one who attempts this reach beyond the self is rewarded. The reward is so automatic that you will not be surprised. If my end is myself above all others, I am constricting my sphere to me. If my end is to learn, or to do something useful, I live out into a larger sphere. The results or "judgment" is forecast in the quality of the act.

The realization of one's real ends is part of the inner subtlety in uses. But there is a larger one that I have called the divine response. Some would debate this; they prefer to remove the Divine as far as possible from human acts. I call it a divine response because it is exceedingly wise, with a long-range view as to our needs and ultimate uses. We attempt to do something in uses. The response comes in moments, flows in, and opens our interior sight. It is so subtle and interior that it could easily be overlooked. Though I will give examples, you will have to try it yourself to confirm this is a universal process.

An example. I am a writer. I am trying to understand how to say this to be of the most use to you. Reflecting on this, I put down my pencil, pick up, and fondle an eraser. It is an unusually effective type of eraser I go out of my way to buy. It then occurs to me that, if enough people see its superior qualities, it will survive. But, of course, what is of the greatest use tends to last. The great classic works, including Swedenborg's, survived because many people found them useful. I see this as a general principle. I had asked how to make this pamphlet most useful. I was not answered how I could do so. The divine response was, in effect, to say what is useful lasts. Keep your eye on uses if you want your work to survive. The sequence — I make a petition (how to make this useful), forgetting, doing something by chance (handling the eraser), and suddenly seeing a general principle — is common. The answer given did not serve my ends (how can I . . . ?), but rather was a wiser answer about the general nature of reality. If I keep trying for uses, I will be working toward what lasts the longest, for uses are the design of eternity. It looks like a small thing. I make an effort, and I am given an answer in an unexpected direction. The wisdom of the answer is a very gentle turning. It says, "Don't worry about how you will do. By keeping your eye on uses, you open toward what will last, the eternal." Still fondling the eraser, I question the wonder of the eternal which I now sense. The answer comes, "It is the real." And now the reality of the things about me hit me. This is an example of seeing into general principles when practicing uses.

A more common type of divine response appears in manual labor. I am washing dishes attempting to be of use. I notice dirt on the dish I was about to put to dry. The response is, "Here, do this job better." I go on attempting to be of use and get the dishes clean, and I sense that I am too impatient. If I rush the dishes, I'll finish one or two minutes faster, but to what end? The response was, in effect, "You are too impatient." The divine response in manual labor is often to be shown how to do the work better or to learn of one's own personal faults. This is so common a response that I'd be very surprised at anyone who attempts uses in manual labor who does not have a similar outcome.

You might object, "Why call this the divine response?" I would not debate the matter. But I would say that at the time I am only aware of attempting to reach beyond myself. How to improve the job is a discovery. But even more, I had not intended to illustrate my own faults! You have to work some while with uses to get used to both the intimacy and the clever immediacy of the divine response. You also get used to the idea that, much of the time, you will be shown something of your own nature. You learn not only how to do things well, but you simultaneously learn of yourself.

This idea of using acts as a means of talking directly with God is an ancient one that has appeared in all cultures. I am reminded of the Zen monk whose job it was to clean toilets in a monastery. The whole purpose of life in the monastery is the enlightenment that is a seeing into God and All There Is. How does this jibe with cleaning toilets? Fortunately, he used his menial task as The Way at hand for him. At first in the cleaning he was taught much of cleaning so that he probably produced some of the cleanest toilets of all time. He was also shown much of his own nature and faults. Then he began seeing general principles in his work. Finally, after all this step-by-step preparation, he found the One, the design of all creation. God came forth and cleaned through his

hands. His wisdom became apparent and he was elected abbot of the monastery. But he loved The Way that had opened for him, so he continued to clean the toilets. Examples from every culture and time of this process could be multiplied. But Swedenborg is one of the few who have elevated this simple process many have discovered into the theological principle by which everything is designed.

As you get into the practice of uses, although there are a number of subtle aspects and discoveries, you will soon discover that it is not really a self-directed conscious process that is involved. You wonder of heaven for a few moments but soon get caught up in the operation of something or other. One of the discoveries is that you direct yourself for very little time and, more often, you are caught up in what is at hand. This is not bad. Your seeking heaven was your brief petition. The “random” thoughts, feelings, and bits of learning are the divine response. In effect, you need to get caught up in the task at hand in order to get ego out of the way. The discoveries and lessons sneak in when you are out of the way. The process occurs spontaneously on the edge of consciousness, like influx. Yet it occurs so fast, in a half light of awareness, that it is also helpful to reflect afterwards on what you learn, to fix it in memory. This process of petitioning—getting caught up in the task, being shown subtle lessons, and then trying to recall and fix them—is typical of both spiritual and psychological discovery. You are really into the task and enjoying yourself when the insights are given. This is one sign your true love is being realized in useful activity, for you are fully involved and enjoying yourself with little sense of time or fatigue. You can get some glimpse of the love of your life by reviewing circumstances in which this has tended to occur to you. Writing must be near the love of my life, for with the right assignment, I have researched and written nine hours a day, only to be surprised later that I had forgotten to eat. When I finally sit down for supper, the writing is still bubbling over in my head, amending and adding to what had already been written.

## A Useful Heaven

Seen at its highest, uses is a way to the experience of heaven. This is no exaggeration. The key is in knowing what you are looking for and in appreciating what is given. If you think of heaven as specific streets, people, etc., you won't see it. If you think of heaven just as Swedenborg has defined uses, then it is much easier to see. Heaven begins to be seen in a relaxed attitude in which things are seen fitting together. I see it in the garden, all these flowers and plants living together around my patio, watered by my wife. I appreciate that she cares for them and they give back the beauty of their presence. It is a circle of mutual caring and support, caring for my wife, who cares for the garden that cares for me. But you will say that this is just a representation. Heaven is elsewhere. Is heaven really outside the circle of this mutual caring? Not really. Besides, it is by savoring these little views of heaven that larger experiences become possible. The one who says heaven can only be experienced after you die has removed

it and made it difficult to experience its qualities. By savoring and learning from little glimpses, seeing more becomes possible.

Above my desk is a large black-and-white print of the medieval city of Dusseldorf. In the foreground, I see the Rhenus Fluvius, Rhine River, with many people in a barge, several anchored sailing vessels, and some people rowing. On the other bank of the river, there is a large medieval city with many public buildings and churches with tall spires. I see the efforts of many to produce the best they know of. Heaven is like this, each contributing what he can to the whole. There is also a kind of relief from selfhood. I need not hold up myself against others. Rather, each contributes what he can and is honored to be able to enjoy the great city of the whole. Uses overcomes the painful nuisance of big selfness. It is a way of fitting in, contributing what you can to the whole, that you might live in and enjoy the larger whole that is created. The citizen of Dusseldorf out rowing the boat isn't much in himself. He didn't build all the tall spires. Yet he contributes what he can and can enjoy the whole that is created. He lives in the sphere of uses that opens out from his finger tips. We are each that citizen of Dusseldorf out rowing our little boat and able to look at and enjoy the whole we have contributed toward. I have emphasized that the spiritual practice of uses in any act is a way of reaching out. Any person, any act, any time. Your attitude or the end you have in mind is fairly critical. The divine response is not always what you seek. It is in terms of what is most useful to you.

Let's say you practice uses in gardening. You seek a vision of God. But you keep getting back simple lessons about gardening. The divine response says, in effect, you are a dumb gardener with much to learn. Don't be put off by this. This is the finest lesson you can get now. That is what you need and deserve. Savor it. Learn to be a good gardener. Then one day, when you are looking for more boneheaded lessons of gardening, you may find insight into your personal traits being given to you. Having learned step one, step two has begun. Now you are learning about gardening and yourself. Later, even this changes, and you are given insights into the general nature of reality. Long after it was first sought, visions of heaven might be given. Why this sequence? My guess is that the larger view of heaven could not appropriately be given at first because your experience was not grounded. If given immediately, it would not have the reality it would have after grounding in the concrete.

Similarly, I am quite convinced that Swedenborg had to go through much discoveries of affect and feeling in his *Journal of Dreams* period before he could really grasp theology. Otherwise, he would have had a theology without love and feeling, which is less than half a theology. I believe the lessons given in the spiritual practices of uses are the most useful ones to the individual at that time. The opposite sequence, one seeking the concrete and being given spiritual lessons, also occurs in those well-developed spiritually. As long as you are seeking, you need not be too concerned whether you are being given the right level of answers. That is decided from a higher wisdom.

Is it essential that one know and seek God? Here my answer will be a little surprising. There will be those who seek through uses that don't even believe in God. My guess is that knowing higher visions is possible and seeking them will speed up the recognition

of them. But, on the other side of the coin, I believe so much in the wisdom within the process that I suspect those who really look into uses will discover God or their equivalent of him in spite of nonbelief. I am saying that the internals of the process are universal and are the same for all regardless of belief. At best, belief that something could occur may only speed up recognition of its occurring. In the internals of this process, we discover a "God" that is somewhat different and far more real than the usual Christian concept of God. Those who look outward in uses begin to experience the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things. They already are living in and moving in what Swedenborg means by heaven and God. But the concrete, ever-present, matter-of-factness and practicality of their experience may make it difficult for those caught in religious abstractions to recognize the substance of these experiences. This is an awesome idea, but it reinforces the reality of what Swedenborg is talking about. Those who enjoy uses already participate in and experience the interconnectedness of all things, which is here called heaven. Those outside the experience of uses may debate meanings. The one who experiences it may not even be able to answer the debate intelligently. But who is actually closer to heaven, the one who enjoys being useful or the one who can cleverly debate the meaning of heaven? The scriptural answer is quite clear. Love in act, being useful, charity is supreme. Better a moment's consideration of another person or of anything than all the debates. Rather than the right religious terms (whether Christian, Buddhist, or whatever), it is better to enter spiritual experiences that open out from trying to be useful. So I am saying that even the right words and religious ideas are not essential. The right concept is to try to be useful. If you consistently try to be useful and look closely at what occurs in the process, you will discover heaven and the One. You can only understand and appreciate the aspects of use actually made real, experienced, and realized in your life.

## A Useful Theology

Use is the concrete foundation of Swedenborg's theology. The natural world can't be this foundation; it is just things. Use is a spiritual thing, and from this it is a basic element of theology. There is, for me, a kind of wonderful mystery in the very spiritual thinness of uses.

*Uses are the effects in which the end has existence.*

Divine Love and Wisdom §129

*Truths which are committed to life [or acts] become uses.*

Arcana Coelestia §5527

*Charity, viewed in itself, does not become charity until it comes into act and becomes a work.*

Arcana Coelestia §6073

*Just as affection is the essential man, and use is its effect and operation and the field or training-ground as it were for its exercise, and just as*

*there can be no affection unless it has a "subject," so too, a man's life's affection cannot exist without having its use; and because the affection and the use make a one, so the quality of a man who is an affection is recognized from his use, only with difficulty and imperfectly in the natural world, but in the spiritual world clearly and fully . . . .*

*The reason the eternal life that each one has is in accordance with his affection for use is that this is the essential man, and consequently such as the affection is, such is he.*

#### Divine Love and Wisdom §48

The endless richness of uses becomes apparent when you do the same routine task in a devoted way. You then discover a never-ending series of learnings in the same task. Among many other discoveries is that the basis of personal identity changes. Early in the practice of uses, it seems that one is simply trying to do the task at hand better. You are trying. Later in the series of learning experiences, it is as though the task is being done through you. You are closer to an observer watching something being done. It goes well by itself. You begin to feel yourself to be what Swedenborg calls a recipient vessel. At first, you try to do good. Later, good is simply done through you. Much later, the experience is of God's acting through you and your finding yourself involved in acts that transcend your normal capacities. Then there is but One acting through all, and you feel like an awed spectator watching processes quite beyond your limits. The process of lessening personal identity and an increase of divine awareness is a usual spiritual development. But not knowing this, some become frightened and disturbed when it occurs.

What are we really doing when practicing uses? First, we are looking beyond ourselves. I am baking bread and considering how it is done to make a perfect product. Or I am considering my family who will eat it. Or I am considering the symbolic meaning of bread. These levels of looking beyond the self can be arranged in a complex hierarchy all the way to reflecting on how my hands work to looking for the Divine in the process. In a very long repetitive process, it is easier to examine the various levels and eventually look at the whole hierarchy. We have in effect a process within a process. Outwardly I am making bread, but this process is used as an anchor and focus for an inward process which is far more extensive and complex. The outer focus helps keep it on track, for certain things must be done to make good bread. Regardless of any inner process, there is an actual product to provide good smells and taste when taken out of the oven. The inner process is more of a devotion and a wondering and searching. It has a center focused on baking bread and a productive inner fringe of experiences.

If this makes you begin to think that uses is inwardly a very rich, complex, and subtle process, then you begin to see it well. The "normal" worker is just trying to do a task and busily discarding the inner hints, leads, and insights given. The seeker of uses is perfecting the task and all its inward components. In the initial stages, when you still think you are initiating the process, you may have an essentially foolish direction. For instance, you might seek big visions and just be given endless hints of your own lack of skills and bad attitudes toward the task. After you learn more of the process and find

even your seeking is given to you, then your seeking will have become wise. That is, you will be given to seek what is ready to be given. You are also then well into the path of regeneration that Swedenborg describes. But, you might say, suppose one person gets into this process and gets endless social understanding and nothing of heaven or God? I would not complain. What is of God and heaven this person is seeing as social. Heaven, where the joy of one is the joy of all, is remarkably social. The inward process can be understood in many frames of reference, and I don't know that one is really superior to the others.

The discoveries of uses will all focus around becoming ever more useful and doing the highest with the gifts one has been given. The same process in its full outer and inner aspects makes a master bricklayer, as well as a considerate person, and even the religiously enlightened. In a way, it is wrong to rank one superior to the other. This only reveals your own biases. Somewhere in creation, we need the impaired person who can only sweep the floor well. If this is the highest given to him to do, then this is his ticket through all the heavens. We need a method good for all people at any level of giftedness. There is a world of difference between simply sweeping the floor so it is swept and sweeping as an effort to reach out and improve things, sweeping as a devotional speaking to the highest one can conceive of. If I am sweeping just to get done with the dirt on the floor, that is all that will be accomplished. Sweeping as a reaching out, seeking, will meet in the internals of the process itself the response to my seeking.

The amount found is in direct relation to the seeking. Seek little, find little. Look for everything in the sweeping and, by golly, it is there. I have complete confidence in the total power of this method. But you will have to explore it to gain an equal confidence. Is the method perhaps more suited to the limited of gift than to very intelligent persons? It is suitable equally to both. To the limited, it gives a concrete means to address All There Is. Its wonder for the intelligent is that it tends to bypass the falsity, intellectualism, and wonderful self-deception possible to the intelligent, because it anchors in the reality of something of use. Should we all sweep floors? It wouldn't hurt, but the greatest wonders of uses will be discovered when you come into your highest uses. Then the deepest loves can be expressed and heaven becomes very obvious. What use to perform? Look around you. What needs to be done? If you don't know your highest use, it can be found eventually while exploring uses in whatever needs to be done. You are nearing the highest use when you come on uses you can hardly help performing because they give such pleasure. These uses are the high points of life. In them, you have immense recall and awareness of even fine detail. You feel at home in them and could do them forever. These bring you into contact with the eternal. These are not limiting, but instead are your own way of eternally unfolding, for they are your way to All There Is.

But I have been speaking as a psychologist describing the phenomenology of the process. How does all this relate to theology? The process is the experience of theology. That is a rather startling idea. When Swedenborg speaks of uses being the design of creation itself, I accept him literally. At first, a use, sweeping this floor, looks

less than the concerns of *theos logos*, the study of God, only because you haven't looked for God in the sweeping of the floor. I have been criticized for not emphasizing avoiding evil and doing good. I get the impression this is supposed to be a painful process of self-compulsion. To me, this seriously misunderstands what it is all about. In uses, I have been speaking of nothing else but avoiding evil and doing good. But this gives good a concrete form. The process appears like self-compulsion only at first. "To be useful, I'll pick up these things and do so and so." The more you see into the process, the more pleasure there is. Soon you do a good use simply because you prefer to do and enjoy it.

*In heaven all who perform uses from affection for use, because of the communion in which they live are wiser and happier than others; and with them performing uses is acting sincerely, uprightly, justly, and faithfully in the work proper to the calling of each. This they call charity . . .*

Divine Love and Wisdom §431

*Notice affection for use and the immediate reward: they are happier and wiser than others. And notice the work proper to the calling of each. Uses are the concrete acts that correspond to charity and good. The universal and even heavenly aspect of use becomes more apparent when we follow from their source in affections out to the community of good. . . . a man's spirit is nothing else than affection . . . .*

Divine Love and Wisdom §21

*. . . uses exist in the heavens with all variety and diversity. The use of one person is in no case exactly like the use of another; so too the pleasure of one is in no case exactly like the pleasure of another. Beyond this, the pleasures of each particular use are countless. . . Still they are closely connected in a pattern, so that they focus on each other in the same way as do the uses of each member, organ and inner part of the body. . . On the basis of this all-encompassing and detailed view, they act as one.*

Heaven and Hell §405

*Each individual has his own particular contribution. For every common use is made up of countless elements. . . All these particular elements, arranged and structured according to the divine pattern and taken together, constitute and complete a common use, which is a common good.*

Heaven and Hell §392

It is a short step from this to the Grand Man:

*In the Lord's sight the whole human race is as one man, all those in one kingdom are also as one man. . . Not that the men themselves thus appear together; it is the uses with them that do so. Those men who are good uses, those, that is, who do uses from the Lord, appear together as a man, complete in form and beautiful. These are they who do uses for the sake of*

*the uses themselves, that is, who love uses because they are uses to the household, or to the town, or to the province or to the kingdom, or to all mankind. On the other hand, those who do uses not on account of the uses, but on account of themselves only or the world only also appear in the Lord's sight as a man, but a man defective and ugly.*

Divine Love and Wisdom §17

Our uses in which we participate in the common good are also the Lord acting through us:

*“Being in the Lord” means to be a use, and “being a man” means to do uses from the Lord to the neighbor for His sake.*

Divine Love and Wisdom §35

Uses, good, charity toward the neighbor, loving one another, now we have spoken of uses both for personal development and as part of spiritual development. Is it a better method for one or the other? No, for the two are really the same process. Personal development includes the near-to-hand necessities that prepare for the longer-range experiences of the spiritual. They are part of the same continuum. The Lord may choose to emphasize the one or the other as the “language” you will understand the best. So this is uses, a simple method for both personal and spiritual development. It applies to all human acts in which you attempt to reach outside yourself. It includes caring for yourself as an instrument to be kept in order. It includes one's occupation or calling used as a way of doing good. It is, at its heart, the same as charity, the doing good for the neighbor. Among the searches in uses is the attempt to experience one's highest use in the love of the life.



Use anchors us in a real doing of something of use, while inwardly there is an infinite series of discoveries, which include how to do this act better, learning of one's own faults and traits, seeing into the general order of things and, at its highest, the experience of heaven and the Divine.

To be of use is open to all, even the most limited. The method has its own safeguards. If you overemphasize inner vision, it will bother you with your lack of outer skill.

It begins simply by looking around at what needs doing and doing it. And, in the doing, look to see what is the Lord's simple, intimate gift to you. Although it is inwardly as rich and complex as all there is, it is also as simple as sweeping the floor, very well, with a certain earnest devotion. I need not specify the right way to practice uses more than

this; for if you try, you will be shown precisely in relation to your effort and what is ultimately useful for you. That is the wonder of uses.



### About the Author

Wilson van Dusen, Ph.D., (1923-2005), trained as a clinical psychologist and devoted his professional years to working with schizophrenia. **As a psychologist, he gravitated toward the depths of human experience, with a special reference to the human potential for the experience of God. An accomplished writer, his later books focus on universal spirit, which transcends cultural and doctrinal differences.** His books include *The Natural Depth in Man*, *Returning to the Source*, and *Beauty, Wonder, and The Mystical Mind*, *The Design of Existence* and *The Country of Spirit*.

