

Swedenborg Theology Course

Session 4

How Should We Live Our Lives?

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Why are we here? Do our lives have meaning and purpose? What is the best way to live? What do we wish to experience, learn, accomplish before we pass on from this life? If we do not have answers to these questions, answers that are complete and detailed enough to guide us moment by moment through the countless decisions we make each day, then we find ourselves on a quest. We have before us the task of spiritual growth.

I would invite the reader to think back and to reflect on those moments, those actions, those achievements that have brought the most satisfaction—deep satisfaction, that is, not necessarily the moments that were the most fun, or the most pleasant, but the actions and the achievements that left you satisfied in a deep and lasting way. Is it not true that the deepest satisfactions come from having been useful? Is it not true that we find satisfaction in having made the best use of our abilities, in having employed our talents in being kind and helpful to others?

Marge Piercy at the end of a poem entitled "To Be of Use" writes:

Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

What is the "work that is real" for you? Each one of us is uniquely gifted, and each one of us is uniquely placed within the human fabric. Each one of us has our own "real work" to do and our deepest satisfaction comes from being able to do it. To use Swedenborgian language we are the most fulfilled when we enter into our highest uses. These reflections suggest to me that we should so live as to enter into the specific life of useful service that best makes use of our gifts and talents.

Ruling Love

In the first session I noted that we make thousands of decisions every day, and that we are always guided, whether consciously or unconsciously, by our underlying value system as we choose. In the course of our lives, as we make decisions large and small, and as we experience the consequences of those decisions, we are learning what it is we most deeply love. This deepest love, which Swedenborg calls our "ruling love," is what defines who we are as spiritual beings. Fulfilment in life comes when we are able to live

out of our deepest love and make it fruitful.

Swedenborg distinguishes four basic types of love: love of God, love of neighbor, love of power, and love of wealth. (His own names for the last two love are 'love of self' and 'love of world'. But when you examine closely what he means by these terms, I think the expressions 'love of power' and 'love of wealth' better convey to contemporary audiences what he intends.) These have a proper order or relative priority. Ideally, love of God, that is, love of Love Itself, is primary. Love of neighbor is an expression of our love of God. Power is valued for the ability it gives us to serve God and neighbor in useful ways. And finally, wealth is valued as providing us with the means to usefully serve others.

However, most of us to one degree or another have got these four loves backwards. We tend to love wealth for its own sake, or for the sense of physical security it gives us. We tend to love power for its own sake or as a means to gain the wealth we desire. We tend to value the people around us in so far as they serve our own wants and needs. We even at times value God as a supernatural power that can grant us our wishes. When this is true, Swedenborg says that the four loves are in 'inverted order'. A large part of the spiritual journey for Swedenborg is the process whereby we restore these four loves to their proper order, thereby making love of God our ruling love.

An angel, as we noted in earlier sessions, is a being who places love of God before all else, and as 'angels in training' we are learning to make love of God our ruling love. Angels come in infinite variety, however, and each has his or her own way of being of use. Each has his or her own unique combination of knowledge, insight and skill. Each angel has love of God as its ruling love in general, but also a specific ruling love, unique to him or her, the gift which that particular angel most loves to offer in God's service.

For a Swedenborgian the goal of this life is to get in touch with one's ruling love and to manifest that love in useful service. Or to say it another way, it is to find the best gift that we have to offer the world and then to actually offer it.

A Mixed Heritage

Part of what makes it hard for us to know how to live is that fact that we live in a world where good and evil are mixed together. We live in a world where selfishness is often placed before generosity, where anger and resentment are often placed before forgiveness, where fear and suspicion are often placed before compassion. It is indeed a world where the four loves are often in inverted order, where people often seek wealth and power for their own selfish ends rather than seeking power and wealth only for the opportunities they offer to serve God and neighbor.

This mix of good and evil is found not only around us but also within. Swedenborg would say that the average spiritual state of the human race at the moment of our birth is also our own spiritual starting point. We all have, so to speak, been born with national, cultural, community and family heritages which help make us who we are. As

small children we learn from the adults around us what to want and what not to want, how to look and how not to look, how to act in public and how not to act, what is right and what is wrong, how we should and how we shouldn't treat others, which jobs are worthy of us and which are not. This list could be extended indefinitely. In absorbing all this we internalize the same mix of good and evil that exists in the world around us. The learning is all the more powerful for being largely unspoken.

Regeneration: the Process of Spiritual Growth

Given our mixed heritage, spiritual growth for us involves two tasks. One is to discover our highest uses and to acquire the learning needed to enter into them. The other is to remove all the internal and external blocks that hold us back, blocks that come from having a heritage of good and evil mixed together.

Swedenborg describes a process of personal change that involves three stages:

1. *Self-examination and goal setting*: First we need to resolve to change in specific ways. We may wish to add something positive to our lives or to remove something negative. On the positive side we may choose, for instance, to take better care of ourselves, to learn a new skill, to get closer to the important people in our lives. On the negative side we could choose to rid ourselves of patterns of behavior that are harmful to others and destructive of ourselves. Bad habits and unhealthy addictions fall in this category as well. Anything that gets in the way of our becoming the angels we were created to be needs to be recognized and removed.
2. *Self-discipline*: Having chosen the ways we wish to improve our lives, there comes the hard work of putting our resolve into practice. Twelve step philosophy has a lot to say about this, in terms of taking it one day at a time, seeking help from others on the same path, and turning to a Higher Power.
3. *Internal change*: The work of self-discipline comes to fruition when changes that were once a great effort become easy and natural. The bad habits no longer even tempt us. The new skills that were so difficult as we were learning them no longer require conscious effort.

Swedenborg had his own terminology for these three stages, sometimes known as the "Three R's" of Swedenborgianism. He called the process of self-examination 'repentance'. Repentance is followed by the hard work of 'reformation' which leads in the end to 'regeneration'. He used the word regeneration to stand for the entire process as well as for the goal of the process. In our lives we regenerate by going through many cycles of repentance, reformation and regeneration. We grow in many steps and stages, growing in skill and removing obstacles as we develop.

This process is, according to Swedenborg, a joint effort between ourselves and the Lord. The gift of repentance can be mysterious at times. Perhaps we suddenly wake up to a need for change. Or perhaps we hear the call of God in surprising and unexpected ways. Repentance, the seeing of things in a new light, can come to us as much by grace

as by our own deliberations. Reformation, the step-by-step, day-by-day practise of change is a task which requires persistent and devoted commitment. But regeneration, the final step, is the Lord's. For Swedenborg always emphasizes that we never regenerate ourselves but rather it is the Lord who regenerates us.

As If of Self

A conceptual dilemma, common to many spiritual traditions, is to acknowledge human freedom and responsibility, on the one hand, and our utter dependence on God, on the other hand. Do we save ourselves? That is, can we save ourselves through our own efforts? In Christianity through the centuries this has been debated in terms of whether we are saved by faith or by works. Analogously, after Buddhism came to Japan, Japanese Buddhist scholars distinguished between Buddhist schools of thought which offered enlightenment by "self-power" and those which offered enlightenment through "other-power."

In a way that is hard to make conceptually clear and coherent, it seems as though the answer should be "both," both self-power and other-power, both our own works and our faithful waiting upon God. At least that is the Swedenborgian perspective, and arguably the perspective of a number of mystical writers through the ages. Swedenborg's way of phrasing this paradox is to say that God permits us to act "as if of self." It is granted to us to appear to ourselves as free, autonomous beings as we choose a course of action. In doing this, we can—and should—draw on many resources including our abilities to reason and understand. Yet, according to Swedenborg, a spiritually evolving being would also acknowledge that this autonomy is only apparent, and that any good we accomplish is not our own doing but God's.

An image that might help is that of spiritual life as a dance with the Spirit. We cannot grow spiritually by making no efforts of our own in the misguided belief that God will work the transformation for us without our active participation. God has granted us a freedom that God chooses not to override. Thus God won't work upon us without our tacit permission. But it is equally an illusion to think that our spiritual growth is all up to us and our own unaided efforts. We move forward in response to the call of the Spirit, as we are given to hear it. And whatever we choose to do, the Spirit hangs in there with us, ever issuing a renewed call in a new situation. In this dance of mutual responsiveness our lives unfold before us.

A Life Long Journey

In its broadest sense, regeneration refers to the entire, life-long process by which we go from being 'angels in training' to actual angels in heaven. And even the angels in heaven, according to Swedenborg, are works in progress. They still have ups and downs, and they are still growing into ever purer and ever more powerful channels for the Divine Love and Wisdom. In its linguistic roots the word 'regeneration' means to be created again, to be reborn. If we are regenerating, we are becoming a new person, a

person who has discovered his or her ruling love, has acquired the knowledge and skill needed to make that love fruitful, and has removed the inner obstacles to expressing that love freely and fully.

Our lives unfold in many stages, each with its own work. We don't have space here to outline these in detail. In summary though, we start with the love, trust and innocence of the newborn child. In childhood, we uncritically learn from the adults in our lives. As adolescents we question the truth of what we have been taught. While this can be trying for the adults in the adolescent's life, Swedenborg would see it as a necessary and good development. We cannot grow spiritually if we cannot question the beliefs we internalized as children and decide for ourselves what to value and what to believe. As young adults we set out upon our life's work. As adulthood unfolds our initial choices come up for periodic re-examination. As we grow we have the opportunity to understand our highest uses in deeper and deeper ways, and we have the opportunity as well to remove more and more of the obstacles that hold us back.

Swedenborg always insisted that we never regenerate ourselves, that regeneration comes from God. Indeed the promise that God makes to us, the 'covenant' renewed throughout the Bible, is that if we repent and reform, then God will regenerate us. In the course of a growing, loving, and faithful relationship with the Lord, we are led into the life heaven.