

# The NDE Enlarged by Swedenborg's Vision

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## ABSTRACT

Deeper understanding of the near-death experience and out-of-body experience is possible from considering the twenty-seven-year record of the Swedish scientist, philosopher, and mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772). At the peak of his career as an outstanding scientist, Swedenborg underwent a period of out-of-body experiences (1744-1748) during which he ceased his work in the natural sciences and commenced publishing the books for which he is known as a religious revelator. He published these anonymously, making no attempt to attract followers, and it became known that Swedenborg was in conscious communication with a spiritual world. Well-documented incidents demonstrated his conversations with those who had died. In many respects the NDEs and OBEs now on record are in striking agreement with the extensive descriptions in Swedenborg's works or are better understood in the light of his overall explanations of another existence. The short biographical outline suggests that Swedenborg's experiences had a *purpose* that can also be attributed to the effect on modern experiencers.

## INTRODUCTION

In the growing record of near-death experiences and out-of-body experiences, few accounts compare with the supernal experiences of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) more than two centuries ago. The striking agreement among those whose inner vision was opened for a brief glimpse into another existence is confirmed by the visions of a man often recognized as perhaps the most remarkable genius of eighteenth-century Europe. Researchers of NDEs can benefit from a careful consideration of Swedenborg's experiences, and no serious study of the NDE can avoid the light thrown on the subject by his testimony.

### *Swedenborg the Scientist*

For those who may have little or no knowledge of Swedenborg, it would be of value to present a brief outline of his life, particularly as it pertains to the subject of near-death studies.

Born as the age of reason was dawning in Europe, Swedenborg

(the family name was then Svedberg) was the third child of nine children of a prominent Lutheran minister, Jesper Svedberg, later Bishop of Skara. Born January 29, 1688, he received a good education including studies at the University of Upsala and was raised in a religious environment.

Larsen (1980) identifies a childhood characteristic of Swedenborg's as a yoga technique that involved the "intentional stopping of involuntary movement of the mind substances" in order to increase cosmic consciousness. While still quite young, Swedenborg would carefully hold his breath while in family prayers: "I wished the times of respiration to agree with those of the heart, and so observed that then the understanding almost began to vanish, as it were" (Larsen, p. 27). Larsen says the young Emanuel, prodigy of the inner quest, thus quietly practiced yogic *pranayama*. In later life Swedenborg had much to say about increased awareness as the breathing became shallower and the heartbeat and breathing synchronized.

Swedenborg's interest in the sciences as expressions of truth began to show in his early years and were reflected in published works such as *Daedalus Hyperboreus* (1716) and the first Swedish book on algebra (1718). Nearly all of Swedenborg's writing was in classical Latin, the language of European learning.

Swedenborg also acquired practical skills including lens grinding, book binding, watchmaking, cabinet making, and the making of scientific instruments. He invented a submarine, a new siphon, sluices or locks to raise ships, a fire-driven machine, an air pump, a universal musical instrument, a water clock, and a "flying machine" (a model is displayed in the Smithsonian Air Science Museum in Washington, D.C.).

Swedenborg progressed through all of the sciences of his day and was widely recognized for his knowledge and his accomplishments, though in many instances his theories and discoveries were many years ahead of his time. Any good biography<sup>1</sup> includes examples of his understanding fundamental principles and developing concepts far ahead of the thinking of his day.

He became an honored scientist in his native land and in the countries of Europe. He was a friend and associate of his king and the government leaders of Sweden, and a member of the House of Lords as well as the foremost scientific organizations such as the Royal Academy of Sciences. He served his government in a surprising number of different roles and traveled widely, speaking eight languages and associating with the foremost thinkers of his time.

In brief, by the year 1744 he had reached "the very acme of a

scientific career that had placed him in the forefront of his generation and brought him into direct and intimate relations with royalty, statesmen, the literati, the scientists and the philosophers of Europe" (Dufty, 1939, p. 13). From his own words and from an evaluation of his work, it is clear that Swedenborg was ever seeking true knowledge. His progression followed a pattern from the abstract and mechanical sciences, mathematics and physics, to chemistry, astronomy, biology, and anatomy, and then into psychology and philosophy. In vastly different scientific fields he contributed major studies. A partial list includes his works on minerals, cosmology, crystallography, the animal kingdom, the senses, the brain, and the monumental *Principia* (1721). But Swedenborg, honored and influential at home and abroad, was failing in his true goal – the search for the *soul*.<sup>2</sup> His books began to become more philosophical than scientific and have an unusual religious quality: *The Worship and Love of God* (1956) and then a remarkable study of the Bible, *The Word Explained* (1951).

In retrospect it can be seen that all of this constituted a remarkable *preparation* – a building toward something of far greater importance. Throughout his career Swedenborg had developed those rare and essential qualities of keen observation: careful notation, searching analysis, and even the rather mechanical abilities to prepare a manuscript, make a carefully handwritten copy, and see it through to publication. He knew how to discipline himself and evaluate his own theories and had developed the habit of organizing and indexing his material for cross referencing.

### *Swedenborg the Mystic*

At this point we enter that aspect of the story closely related to the study of out-of-body experiences. Swedenborg was busily engaged in the publication of the first volume of *Animal Kingdom* (1740) as he began to be aware of a new influence in his life. As a scientist it was his normal pattern to make notes and keep a record, often asking himself questions or making observation if further thought were needed. If the profound experience he entered in the autumn of 1744 arose from an intent to deceive others or to make an unprecedented claim, he should have begun his scheme with more skill and deliberation. Though they were of immeasurable consequences, Swedenborg did not make his experiences known to others. The surprisingly full and detailed record only came to light 114 years later, by accident, when the Royal Library in Stockholm purchased an unidentified manuscript that had been among the possessions of a Professor Scheringsson who died in 1849. It was a small diary-like

notebook of about 104 handwritten pages.

The first notations carry no portent, yet this was to be what psychologist Wilson Van Dusen (1977) has called the most complete and most revealing account of an individual's transformation. The entries begin July 21, 1743, and the first ten entries refer to his sea voyage from Stockholm, some places visited, things seen, and people met, and include the delivery of his manuscript to the printer. Then the notes abruptly end in mid-sentence. There are then blank pages and signs of pages having been torn out. From this point on, the entries consist of notations recording his dreams, often with an attempt to interpret them or relate them to his life and work.

Now dreams were of course not new to Swedenborg, and we may suspect that he was aware that these were dreams of a different nature. He mentions his thoughts: “. . . wondered at myself for having nothing left to do for my own honor . . .” “I was in a waking trance . . . how my trances were before and after sleep” (*Journal*, April 3-4, 1743), and he makes conjecture as to what his dreams signified. There are frank and abrupt references to sexual dreams and the beginning of references to what he simply called “the temptation.”

He briefly describes beautiful dreams and horrible visions, and after a few notations begins to date each experience thus: “March 25-26.” In other words, it becomes a diary of his experiences between when he retired and when he awoke. Later he mentions that those around him were unaware of the extraordinary new life he was experiencing.

This strange diary was finally published in 1859, in Latin because the contents were considered so sensitive. It consists of nearly 300 entries scattered over the period until October, and a few final notes dated May 11-13. Much is revealed in this work given the title *Journal of Dreams* (1977), especially Swedenborg's agonizing struggle with his own evils until he began to experience beautiful and soothing dreams and direct messages that he was to be admitted into the world of the spirit in order to reveal things hitherto unknown.

Van Dusen (1977) says of this *Journal*:

Having exhausted all known areas of human knowledge, he chose to explore within himself in the most direct way possible . . . by visions, trances and hypnogogic experiences. Appreciate that at this time there were no psychoanalysts, no psychologists; virtually no real understanding of the inner processes or dreams except by isolated monks and mystics. It was *terra incognita*, an unknown land that he proposed to risk his life and sanity exploring (p. xvi).

He risked too, he well knew, the respect and position he had earned.

Van Dusen comments that Swedenborg was undergoing a personality change from a proud scientist to a humble "servant of the Lord" and that his writing thereafter showed a dramatic new style. "Where he endlessly speculated before, there is not a trace of speculation in his theology. There he describes what he has been given to know, what he has seen and experienced" (p. xxii).

During this period he continued with his responsibilities to his publisher and gave no outward evidence of the inner turmoil, yet this was a turning point. He ceased his scientific studies and writings, and the profusion of published works stopped, not to be resumed. Instead he had begun a long and careful change that would bring out a vast work called the *Arcana Coelestia* ("Heavenly Secrets") (1977) beginning nearly six years later, in 1749, and published anonymously. During this period he also undertook an exhaustive study of the Bible, learning Hebrew so he could read it in its pure form and assembling a marvelous collection of indexing and cross references. In addition, he was keeping a voluminous record of what we can call out-of-body experiences. It was not intended for publication but as his own notes from which to draw material for the rest of his life, and which, when published posthumously, fill five fat volumes entitled *The Spiritual Diary* (1971). In these more than 1,200 pages, we find the account of his explorations of a spiritual world that includes a transitional place where those who die are received as well as the eternal abodes heaven and hell.

I will return to this topic after following the period of transition in Swedenborg's life.

The busy and prolific scientist was undergoing a remarkable change. Quoting from entries in his *Journal of Dreams* (1977):

[Dated April 6-7, (1973) with the notations "N.B., N.B." (note well!)]  
Went to bed . . . half an hour after I heard a noise under my head . . . a shuddering so strong from the head downward and over the whole body with a noise of thunder . . . then fell into a sleep . . . then there came over me a strong shuddering from head to foot with a thunderous noise as if winds beat together, which shook me . . . I was prostrated and at that very moment was wide awake . . .

[He writes further that he had seen his father, who had instructed him.]  
I observed it as remarkable that I never called him my father but my brother.

This very private diary is frequently incomplete, with brief notes and fragments of ideas, but it is filled with dramatic imagery like the material of dreams – of animals and horrible creatures, of money, of being bound, of jewels, of a great wheel and locked doors.

Swedenborg often makes conjecture about their significance, and the entries show a progression and growing awareness that he was to be permitted the unique and awesome ability to be conscious simultaneously in the natural and spiritual worlds.

### *Swedenborg's Spiritual Sight and NDEs*

Visions have affected mankind and its thinking at all stages of history. Stephen Larsen's study, "Swedenborg and the Visionary Tradition" (1980), relates Swedenborg's visions to the broad spectrum of states of consciousness, and declares that the emerging field called "the psychology of consciousness" reveals consistencies in ancient and far-Eastern mysticisms, contemplative orders, ESP, and trances:

The visionary capacity is available to all humanity; and the allure to enter "inner space" as powerful as a human urge to exploration of the outer world. In respect to this quest, Swedenborg is indeed an exemplary guide, helping us to establish both the scope of the quest, and its potential values, as well as dangerous pitfalls (p. 8).

On the first of March, 1748, Swedenborg experienced the process of dying and awakening in another world.<sup>3</sup> On numerous other occasions he gives descriptions comparable to those of a person returning from a condition of clinical death. His book, *Heaven and Hell* (1928), contains a vast Baedeker of the spiritual world, and his five-volume *Spiritual Diary* (1971) records his years of exploration in the life beyond death. Above all, his extensive testimony gives us a remarkable understanding of an existence beyond time and space, free of the cumbersome physical body and gross appearances of this life.

It is important, however, to stress some fundamental differences:

1. In nearly all cases, the NDE or OBE is a single, isolated experience. Swedenborg's experiences, however, stretched over nearly thirty years, from 1744 to his death in 1772. For a long period he claimed he had daily and continuing experiences and an ability to move back and forth quite easily between the two existences. During this time his life as seen by friends and associates was quite normal, and he continued to be a trusted and useful member of the community. He neither tried to conceal his experiences nor to exploit them.

2. Whereas most NDEs and OBEs are measured in minutes, Swedenborg's communication with the spirit world was usually a "work period" set apart from his worldly activities. While at work it was his custom to withdraw into his room or private summer house where he was less likely to be disturbed. Sometimes he could be

conscious of *both* worlds and their interactions. Usually during such times he wrote notes to keep a record for future reference or would later write extensively on a subject related to his explorations.

3. The NDE is closely associated with the cessation of the recognized vital signs. Though there are notable exceptions, most NDEs involve trauma and even an undetectable heartbeat and respiration. During Swedenborg's protracted travels he was in excellent health, yet he noted that during his experiences his breathing became "tacit," slowed, and greatly reduced.

4. While nearly all who have returned with accounts of an NDE had no anticipation or expectation of their vision of another life, it is possible to trace a long preparation in Swedenborg's case. More than this, Swedenborg's earlier works involve a *searching for* the inner essence of human life, a prolonged desire to explore the soul (see Note 2).

5. Generally, the NDE (and even the OBE) is brought about by an extraordinary situation of abnormal stress, physical peril, or intense mental preoccupation; this was not the case with Swedenborg. Although his earliest experiences were distressing, frightening, and bewildering, within a few months he became a calm and understanding citizen of both worlds.

6. Of supreme importance is the fact that Swedenborg asserts a *reason* and *purpose* for this "opening of his spiritual sight," a commission to "reveal" ideas to mark a turning point in the history of mankind. This is not to slight the frequent ability of NDErs to see a "purpose" in their experiences; their lives and character are often greatly enriched and given meaning by their momentary ability to see with different eyes. And as their testimony contributes to the wider awareness of a higher consciousness, they put their own experiences to useful purpose.

Of course few such experiences are not challenged, questioned, or explained away. It is entirely natural for those who have not had an NDE to try to account for such things as hallucinations, dreams, or evidence of insanity, and to ignore the unexplainable fact that experiencers of vastly different backgrounds give such consistent and harmonious accounts.

In Swedenborg's case, too, there was and continues to be strong resistance to his assertion that for nearly three decades he associated with spirits in another existence, including frequent meetings and conversations with people who had died. Beyond this, Swedenborg's claim is not merely that his spiritual eyes had been opened but that he was granted this miracle in order to "reveal" astonishing truths

that challenge accepted religious beliefs. It is no surprise that he aroused opposition, and the easiest way to refute his ideas was to declare that he was a fraud or to question his sanity.

There is little need to defend Swedenborg's claim against those who accuse him of being a deliberate fraud. Unlike virtually every known religious prophet, Swedenborg did not seek either honors or gain for himself. In fact, he avoided any recognition. He published all but the last few books anonymously and made no attempt to gather followers or establish a church. He published his many volumes at his own expense, handsomely printed, quietly presenting copies to leaders and to the libraries of Europe and centers of learning. These are scarcely the characteristics of one who seeks to deceive or to gain adulation. Though he did not actively promote his works, it was not his purpose to deny them nor to conceal his extraordinary abilities. Although there is little doubt he could have offered astonishing proof of his supernatural sight, he declined to exploit his ability.

The validity of what is called Swedenborg's "claim" can only be tested by the truth of what he wrote. As he declared in one of his major works, *Principia* (1721), (before his spiritual experiences), "If what I say be true, why should I be eager to defend it? Surely truth can defend itself. If what I have said is false, it would be a degrading and silly task to defend it" (Vol. 2, p. 366). The evidence that Swedenborg honestly reported his message rests entirely on the touchstone of its rationality.

#### *Swedenborg's Views of the Afterlife<sup>4</sup>*

In revealing a world beyond mortal life, Swedenborg felt he was also revealing the real nature of man and the human mind. He discloses in countless ways that the life we sense during our time on earth is a preparation for the real life — an eternal life — for which we were created. The corporeal body is but an empty husk that will perish and be laid aside to liberate the real person we have come to be by what we experience during our lifetime. Far from being something abstract, ethereal, ectoplasmic, or ghostly, however, according to Swedenborg it is a real realm of sensations far more acute than our keenest senses, yet one that is remarkably similar to our everyday life except that it is without time and space. It is precisely what has been briefly glimpsed by those who have had an NDE.

He often refers to the *light* of that life as immeasurably brighter than the light we know — not brighter in the painful sense that



blinds, but in that quality of beauty and brilliance and clarity that is remotely suggested when the sun breaks through after a summer rain. "I have been elevated into the light, which sparkled like the light radiating from diamonds; while I was kept in it I seemed to myself to be withdrawn from corporeal worldly ideas, and to be led into spiritual ideas" (AC 4413).<sup>5</sup> He refers – as do NDErs – to communications that are not verbal, the exchange of ideas and affections, totally without any pretense or sham. Indeed, he confronts us with a slightly disturbing fact that in the other world a spirit *cannot* convey an idea that is not entirely in agreement with his inner feelings. Dissembling and hypocrisy are not possible. He tells us not only that we do see our past life – our "book of life" – with every detail, but that this plays the major part in teaching us about ourselves. He describes how we meet friends and relatives who have gone on before us, noting that we then are attracted to those who are similar to ourselves but drift apart even from relatives, parents, and children if we do not have inner harmony.

Yes, there are striking similarities – and differences. The NDE is not the life after death – it is but a glimpse of the threshold of that life. The many reported NDErs did not actually die; their visits were of short duration. Swedenborg writes carefully that we do not awaken after death suddenly in the life that is to be our final lot. And what he tells us about the process of transition is important.

First of all, he explains that there is special care for the person who is ending his earthly life. Even though this may involve tragic circumstances or anguish – physical or mental – the newcomer is brought into a state of calm, painless serenity. Swedenborg uses a phrase, "reflection withheld," to describe the fact that as man awakes to his new existence, his analytical mind is "quiescent." He is not terrified by the fact that he floats out of his body, passes through objects, and looks down on the living below. He is not worried about the new environment and usually finds himself in a situation that seems familiar – so much so that some have to be told that they have died. He is not startled to see a friend who he knows has died before him, and surprising qualities of this new life do not bewilder him because his "reflection is withheld." He does not attempt to analyze it just as we do not analyze the strange circumstances of an irrational dream. Swedenborg gives frequent references to the mental condition of those newly awakened in the other life. "Souls after death do not know that they are in the afterlife, unless by means of reflection granted to them" (SD 1903). "When he observes that he has more exquisite sensations and especially when he

begins to speak with other spirits, it dawns upon him that he is in the other life" (AC 4622).

He also writes that there are spirits (we will use that term even though "spirits" partially suggests something ghostly or unreal) who have the "job" of receiving newcomers. Their personality and nature are such that they are assigned the duty of caring for and protecting someone passing from one world to the other. They do this very gently and unobtrusively, making every effort to allow the newcomer complete freedom. Yet their presence is sometimes made known. They actually greet the person as he arrives and convey to him, above all, a feeling of deep love. They allow him to sense the presence of a new friend, someone of unfathomable love, someone who knows all and can explain everything. Swedenborg explains in many places in his writings that man does not actually see God, the ineffable Father, but that the spirit of God surrounds the welcoming spirits, suggested by the bright light.

When it will not be disturbing, the newcomer is gradually allowed to realize that he is in a new world. He is told that he has left his former life, and it is usually true that this idea is conveyed by someone he knew in his life on earth.

The transition now brings us to an important distinction. In some reported NDEs the experiencer feels that he has been introduced into what is accepted as the idea of "heaven" or "hell." One of the most important ideas in Swedenborg's writings is that man is neither suddenly admitted into heaven (for which he is woefully unprepared) or hurled into hell as punishment for his sins. He does not gain heaven through some mystical "grace," Swedenborg writes, nor is he damned for his shortcomings. It is important to keep these points in mind in considering what follows.

After years of silence from the prolific scientist, the first book offered to the public in 1749, in London, was Volume I of what would be eight volumes (twelve in modern editions) of a Latin work entitled *Arcana Coelestia* ("Heavenly Secrets") (1977). There was no mention of the author, yet the opening section boldly explains, using the first person:

It may be stated in advance that of the Lord's Divine mercy it has been granted me now for some years to be constantly and uninterruptedly in company with spirits and angels, hearing them speak and in turn speaking with them. In this way it has been given me to hear and see wonderful things in the other life which have never before come to the knowledge of any man, nor into his idea. I have been instructed in regard to the different kinds of spirits; the state of souls after death; hell, or the lamentable state of the unfaithful; heaven or the blessed state of the faithful; and especially

in regard to the doctrine of faith which is acknowledged in the universal heaven; on which subjects, of the Lord's Divine mercy, more will be said in the following pages (AC 5).

The subject matter of the *Arcana* is the methodical explanation of an allegorical message, an "internal sense" of the books of Genesis and Exodus, the Biblical history of creation, the fall of man, the flood, and the genealogy to the Patriarchs and to Moses. Interspersed between the various chapters of the book are small treatises on theological subjects. The relationship between spirits and men (AC 67-72), "Concerning the resuscitation of man from the dead and his entrance into eternal life" (AC 168-181, 314-319), "The Nature of the Life of the Soul or Spirit" (AC 320-323), and so forth.

These sections dealing with the spiritual world are directly concerned with the near-death experience or out-of-body experience, for in them he writes that man is in reality a spirit within a mortal body. The soul that comes into being at conception reaches out, clothes itself with the materials given through the body of the mother, and then, after birth, continues to develop physically while at the same time developing mentally and spiritually. This is the real being that is liberated from its material covering at death and finds its place in the world of spirits. Those who have lived well find their way to a state in pure harmony with their nature – and happiness. Those who have chosen the disorders that gratify their self-love, he writes, will not be able to tolerate the heavenly sphere and will seek others like themselves, which, clearly, is punishment enough.

After the volumes of the *Arcana Coelestia* had been published, Swedenborg's next books were presented in single volumes on a particular subject. In 1758 in London he published the work that became his best known and that ranks third in all-time religious best sellers: *Heaven and Hell* (1928). The work is divided into sixty-three chapters that include headings such as "V. There are Three Heavens," "XV. Light and Heat in Heaven," "XVIII. Time in Heaven," "XX. The Garments with which Angels Appear Clothed," "XXII. Space in Heaven," "XXVII. The Speech of Angels and Men," and many others.

Here he discusses the great complexity of heaven as a harmonious whole. This is conveyed by what Swedenborg calls "The Grand Man": that just as the human body consists of myriads of parts, organs, and cells, heaven as a whole is made up of countless distinct "societies" working harmoniously together, each essential to all others.

He stresses that this world is not a kingdom of idleness but that every spirit performs "uses" that reflect his particular loves and

temperament, and that usefulness to those around us is essential to our happiness. Life on earth is a preparation for the life to come, he writes, and there is an interplay between the two worlds that is the source of our emotions and our ideas.

One of Swedenborg's major works devotes the first twenty pages to a colorful account of why heaven is a happy state, with six illustrations of the errors in the common ideas of heavenly happiness (*Conjugal Love*, 1-26).<sup>6</sup>

This account concerns NDEs and OBEs because it describes an unceasing relationship between those in the spiritual world and those still on earth. We are in the company of unseen spirits, Swedenborg writes, and they can influence us in unknown ways. There are both good and evil spirits, and if we take pleasure in things that are unkind, filthy, obscene, and cruel, these spirits urge us on. We get caught up in their sphere and can be carried to extremes we would not believe possible. On the other hand, he writes that good spirits are unceasing in their efforts to steer us toward what is good and happy. These spirits, good and bad, operate in ways we do not suspect but are prevented from acting in any way that would take away our freedom. In the process of our lives, we are able to encourage the presence of good spirits or to shun or drive away the evil ones (this conflict is what is involved in "temptations") and are thereby actually shaping the type of person we are. We especially choose the associations we will freely choose after death.

Swedenborg describes what happens when the memory of one individual impinges on the memory of another. The result explains a phenomenon that others have sought to explain by saying that one person is a reincarnation of another person.

There is, of course, a great deal more. Further consideration of these subjects soon becomes the presentation of religious beliefs. Our interest in Swedenborg here, however, is what we can learn about the near-death experience. It is because so much that Swedenborg has to say in *Heaven and Hell* amplifies and clarifies what experiencers have reported that we can mention some teachings.

Among them is the fundamental doctrine that the complete human being is a married pair. This means that marriages are not merely practical and convenient relationships that establish families and perpetuate the race by procreation and the care of children. Swedenborg teaches that marriage is — that is, it *can be* — eternal. He even uses a unique term derived from the Latin (and distinct from the similar word, "conjugal"), *conjugal*. Conjugal love is that ideal union in which the distinct qualities of the masculine and the

feminine are completely complementary, and husband and wife become "one flesh" in an eternal marriage.

In a similar vein, Swedenborg writes that the imperfections of earthly life disappear after death, and the aged and infirm become young again.

One of the aspects of the mind to which Swedenborg refers at length is the memory. He points out that it is many times more retentive than people have believed. The classic experiments of Penfield (and Jasper, 1954; and Perot, 1963) in Montreal have demonstrated the amazing completeness of recollection.

Swedenborg has much to say about how the evil habits we acquire during our lifetime must be conquered and overcome in the other life. The initial stage in the spiritual world, termed "the world of spirits," is neither heaven nor hell, he writes, and provides a transition that may be brief or may last until we make the clear choices between good and evil. In this new existence there is neither space nor time. Space, in the sense of distance, simply means that we are close to those who are like ourselves; we are distant from those with whom we have little or nothing in common. Time has no meaning since we are in an eternal kingdom, and though we pass through stages that can be compared to morning, noon, and evening, or conditions of cold and warmth, these are "states" rather than periods of time.

The other important difference in that world awaiting us is that although it will appear very much like our life here (except that heaven is immeasurably more beautiful, hell more distorted and ugly), what we see in that world is not *material* — we see what he calls "correspondences." If we see a beautiful garden, it corresponds to the beautiful arrangement of ideas in our mind. If we see animals or birds, they represent our affections. The trees, houses, views, and cities represent our own ideas, and the clothes we wear correspond to qualities in our personality. This subject of "correspondences" is a vast one in Swedenborg's writings, and most interesting.

He reports and describes these almost as a travelog. There are hundreds of stories in which he describes being conducted to some place in the spiritual world, witnessing some event, engaging in conversations, and being taught something to be revealed in his writings. He gave these experiences the name, "Memorable Relations," or, "Experiences to be Remembered," and compiled a separate index of these remarkable adventures. They include visiting with people of ancient times, with spirits from remote areas of the globe, and even with spirits from planets other than our own!

Among the fascinating things to be found in Swedenborg's books are conversations he has had with people who have only recently died and left this world.

I have told them that their funeral services were then being held and preparations made for their burial (HH 312).

Again in the same work:

I mentioned that arrangements were now being made for burying their bodies; I said for burying *them!* On hearing which they were smitten with a kind of surprise, saying that they were alive, and that the thing that had served them in the world was what was being buried. They wondered greatly that they had not believed in such a life after death while they lived in the body (HH 452).

Among Swedenborg's associates on earth who knew he was the author of these books were those who urged him to omit any such Memorable Relations because they would discredit the logical and rational doctrines in the works themselves, but Swedenborg declared simply that he had been commanded to include them.

### *The Evidence for Swedenborg's Spiritual Sight*

No matter how interesting, these writings ask the reader to believe something impossible to prove. Even if we do not (as some did) suspect that Swedenborg had lost his sanity (and during the twenty-eight years of his life that he was in communication with spirits, he was also an active and useful, respected and honorable man), it requires a kind of faith to accept the truth of his accounts. It may be for this reason that the biographies of Swedenborg seldom omit the most astonishing incidents that testify to his communication with another world. Swedenborgians are reluctant to stress these events, yet they are of great interest as well as being well documented and reported by first-hand witnesses.<sup>7</sup>

One is reminded of the verifications of out-of-body experiences in which an experiencer accurately reported things that happened while he was unconscious, sometimes far from where he was located (see, e.g., Sabom, 1982). A famous incident in the life of Swedenborg is his detailed report about a fire that broke out in Stockholm while he was 300 miles away. His ability to report what was happening was so convincing that Emanuel Kant personally initiated an investigation of it and confirmed its validity.

After it had become known that Swedenborg could communicate with spirits, he had occasion to visit the Queen of Sweden on November 15, 1761. She engaged him in conversation and asked him

whether these reports were true. When Swedenborg replied that he could communicate with the departed, she asked him if he would be able to visit her departed brother. Three days later Swedenborg was again at the palace and sought to take the queen aside, but she insisted that he speak out publicly. He then whispered to her a message from her brother at which the queen turned pale and gasped, saying that no one on earth could possibly know of the matter. Its secrecy was intensified by the fact that her country was then at war with her brother's country, and any such exchange would be treasonable.

Another incident, amply witnessed, involved a wealthy lady whose husband had died. She had been hounded by a silversmith demanding payment for an expensive set of silverware. She felt sure that her husband had paid the debt but could not offer proof. She pleaded with Swedenborg, who said he would try to speak to her departed husband. Several days later he returned to inform her that her husband had placed the receipt for the payment in a secret compartment in the back of a drawer in his desk. The lady and others with her hurried to the desk and found the receipt precisely where Swedenborg had said.

Swedenborg put no stress on these incidents although they excited great interest. It was within his power to give a demonstration of his ability that would provide incontrovertible proof, but he declined any such idea. He was well aware that his message would not convince a disbeliever.

Another low-key and rather charming incident came late in Swedenborg's life. The great Methodist leader, John Wesley, was much surprised to receive a letter from Swedenborg one day saying, "Sir: I have been informed in the world of spirits that you are desirous of conversing with me." Wesley's surprise arose from the fact that though it was true, he had never mentioned his great interest in the Swedish seer. Wesley answered saying that he was about to take a journey but that on his return in April he would meet with Swedenborg. To this Swedenborg replied that this would not be possible since on March 29th he would leave this earthly life, which was the case at precisely the time he had predicted.

Such incidents, no matter what the evidence, have no value as proof of Swedenborg's claims. The only proof of value is the truth of what he revealed. To many there is convincing proof simply in the consistency of Swedenborg's testimony, the remarkable harmony of his works, which stretch over twenty-eight years and fill some thirty volumes. The real proof is in the logic and rationality of those ideas that could scarcely have been concocted by a charlatan. Swedenborg

could hardly have undertaken such a fraud for any benefit to himself; rather he could be said to have sacrificed his position of great honor and esteem. There were bitter and powerful enemies who attacked him and his followers, including bringing two of them to trial for heresy.

What Swedenborg wrote was often in obvious disagreement with the established churches of his time. Much of his later life was spent in England and Holland simply because it would have been impossible to publish his teachings in Lutheran Sweden. Swedenborg's writings teach that the Christian churches, Catholic and Protestant, had been judged and found wanting, as foretold in cryptic prophecies of the great red dragon and the beast described in the Apocalypse. He especially denounced the concept of a Trinity, which divides God into three persons, the Lutheran doctrine that man is saved without good works if he only has faith, and the Catholic practice of ascribing divinity and power to mortals — the Virgin Mary, the Popes, and Saints.

### Conclusion

The NDE is closely related to Swedenborg's experiences, just as it is related to countless "visions" throughout the ages. Almost the entire spectrum of religious beliefs demands a recognition of an unseen world and a higher existence than that of the senses. Even aside from any religious implications, experiences of countless individuals call for a belief in the supernatural.

There should be little reason in this day to have to argue that man is far more than the physical being. In my view, there is no question that there *is* an inner being — a more complete and more perfect being — though we may have to depend upon non-scientific measuring devices for "proof." The inner being, as Swedenborg says, is the real man, set free by the process we call "death."

All men, as to the interiors which belong to their minds, are spirits, clothed in the world with a material body, which is subject to the command of the spirit's thought and the decision of its affection. For the mind, which is spirit, and the body, which is matter, is acted upon. Every spirit, too, after the rejection of the material body is a man similar in form as a man in the world (AE 1142).

But this fact (the dual nature of man) is "hidden" or kept secret for the most part, for good reason. Swedenborg writes that man's life on earth is in preparation for the *real* life for which he was created, and that in this life he is kept in *freedom* to choose between right



and wrong. Man's freedom is preserved by his being unaware of the reality of the inner world. If he really knew the nature of heaven and hell, he would no longer be free, simply because he would do anything to achieve heaven's immeasurable happiness and anything to avoid the punishment inherent in giving way to selfish passions. Thus he would not choose freely between good and evil.

It is the Swedenborgian's belief that we are kept largely unaware of the spiritual world in order to allow us to develop freely. We can glimpse the meaning of this if we imagine how sadly we would confine our children if we compelled them to do what they should choose to do on their own, or prevented them from doing what they should reject of themselves.

This means that there is a *reason* for our not knowing too much about our real inner nature. It also follows that there are times or occasions when there are good reasons for us to become aware of the spiritual realities. This reflects the teachings that God really does direct our lives in minute detail – and that He allows us to develop a consciousness of the inner man or to experience brief existences in a non-material world – because thereby He can strengthen our beliefs or influence our attitudes. From my own opportunities to hear the messages of several NDErs, it seems more than likely that there was a real reason in their lives. Their fragmentary NDE, they testify, changed them profoundly. Few people have the bright, affirmative, and loving qualities that I noted in the experiencers I have met. They appreciate life, and they express love and have a warmth that is compelling testimony to their experiences. Above all, they declare they have no further fear of death, and we may ponder the effect on humanity if it progresses beyond that terror of the grave that distorts our thinking. Bruce Greyson (1981) has made a careful analysis of the psychological explanations of near-death experiences, noting that “the positive transformative effects” as well as the “consistency” and the “paranormal dimensions” of the NDE suggest an orderly pattern in what can be considered a sort of *revelation* about another existence.

Since death “has come out of the closet,” it is surprising how many accounts there are of both NDEs and OBEs, partially because these very personal experiences were such that the experiencer did not wish to expose them to possible ridicule. It is not surprising that many people react by considering such experiences as hallucinations, a delusion – or worse. It is true that this was what Swedenborg risked in recounting his journeys into the deep unknown. During Swedenborg's life, when his claim was widely known, though incredible, there were leading figures who did not hesitate to declare

he was sane, honest, and trustworthy. Even those strongly opposed to the ideas he had published admitted his integrity. As Swedenborg approached his death — on the date he had predicted — he was solemnly besought to “declare whether all that he had written was strictly true” with full avowal. Two days before his death a friend, Eric Bergstrom, brought Pastor Ferelius to Swedenborg’s bedside. Ferelius asked if Swedenborg had an idea that he was about to die, and when Swedenborg cheerfully agreed, he made preparation for the Communion. Then he asked him to make confession as to the verity, in part or in whole, of what he had presented. Upon hearing these words Swedenborg half rose in his bed and, placing his sound hand (the other was paralyzed) upon his breast, said with great earnestness: “As truly as you see me before your eyes, so true is everything that I have written; and I could have written more had it been permitted.” He added, “When you enter eternity you will see everything and then you and I shall have much to talk about” (Sigstedt, 1952, p. 432).

The progress in awakening to a new concept of the life after death is much to the credit of those who sincerely labored to evaluate and to make known the nature of man’s inner life, especially in dispelling so many misunderstandings of this most important event of our lives.

The overriding importance in this gradual change of attitude lies in the fact that what man believes lies beyond this mortal life greatly affects his attitudes. In the simplest form, if there is no concept of reward or punishment in a future life, then (if we can somehow manage not to get caught) we might just as well see what we can get away with.

In my judgment, it follows, then, that we should pay attention to the rather consistent messages that have come to us via NDEs. To begin with, we can find considerable comfort in the evidence that “death” is a surprisingly pleasant experience, usually free from pain or worry. The feelings of warmth and love are a major part of nearly all NDEs. There is a reality that is difficult to put into words because the new existence has very unearthly qualities. Ideas are conveyed without words, and time and space are of no consequence. We have a feeling of reviewing our lives, seeing old friends, and being welcomed. Because the NDE is reported by those who *did* “return,” we become conscious of a “purpose” in life — a need to care for others or complete something useful. We sense, too, that we are still ourselves and that we still have the ability to choose and react. These, as I have insisted, are but tiny fragments of the broad picture Swedenborg offers.

The final message of all this may be simply a call to accept the

idea of this higher experience and to let it influence us in our daily lives. This can be said to be the heart of religion, but it is certainly not the private possession of any denomination. It is surprisingly outside or beyond elaborate rituals or catechisms, yet the gentle, loving pressure it exerts on our lives and our relationship with relatives, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and mankind in general could, if we would but let it, greatly change the world.

#### NOTES

1. At least a dozen major biographies of Swedenborg have been published (some are no longer in print). These are the most prominent: Sigstedt, C. O. *The Swedenborg Epic*. New York: Bookman Assoc., 1952; Spaulding, J. O. *Introduction to Swedenborg's Religious Thought*. New York: Swedenborg Publishing Assoc., 1956; Synnestvedt, S. *The Essential Swedenborg*. New York: Swedenborg Foundation, Twayne Publishers, 1970; Tocksvig, S. *Emanuel Swedenborg: Scientist and Mystic*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948; Trobridge, G. *Swedenborg: Life and Teaching*. New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1976; Van Dusen, W. *The Presence of Other Worlds*. New York: Harper and Row, 1974. The book, *Documents Concerning Swedenborg* (R. Tafel, ed.) London: Swedenborg Society, 1875, is also helpful.
2. The "search for the soul" was a subject of interest during Swedenborg's time, with attempts involving anatomical dissection such as Swedenborg describes in *Animal Kingdom* (see REFERENCES).
3. Swedenborg gives several descriptions of the process as man awakens in the spiritual world. For example, Numbers 445-452 of *Heaven and Hell*, "The resuscitation of man from the dead and his entrance into eternal life."
4. The thirty volumes in the modern editions of Swedenborg's books contain a great many descriptions of the realm of the afterlife, not only in *Heaven and Hell* and *Arcana Coelestia* but in major commentaries on the Apocalypse prophecies, *Apocalypse Explained*, a treatise on marriage, *Conjugal Love*, and the magnum opus of his final years, *True Christian Religion*. These writings and a steady stream of contemporary commentaries, biographies, and treatises can be found in Swedenborgian centers such as the church headquarters in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania, the Swedenborg Society in London, and the Swedenborg Foundation in New York City.

5. All editions or translations of Swedenborg's works have a standardized numbering system that conveniently indicates the source of a quotation or an idea. A direct quotation is usually followed by a simple notation such as DP 55 for a passage in *The Divine Providence*. A reader may also find, "In DP number 55 we are taught that the Divine Providence looks not to what is temporal but what is eternal." I will use this system in some citations in this article.
6. See also *Heaven and Hell*, No. 256, or *Arcana Coelestia*, No. 2478.
7. Several well-documented examples of Swedenborg's clairvoyance are described in most biographies. Sigstedt's *The Swedenborg Epic* is among the most detailed.

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