

What Is It Really Like To Die?

Last week we looked at some of the things reported and described by certain people who had had near death experiences. Many had been pronounced clinically dead and then, subsequently been revived. And it was the reports of those experiences brought together by Dr. Raymond Moody in his book, *Life After Life* which particularly interested us.

What also interests us are the parallels which exist in these reports with the much fuller teaching about dying and the life after death which is given in Swedenborg's theological writings, particularly in his best known book, *Heaven and Hell*, published as long ago as 1758.

For example, one of the things which impressed people who had had these near death experiences was the fact that life goes on, in the sense that whilst their bodies had "died" they went on consciously sensing and having an identity as they had done previously. They also spoke of having a kind of spirit, or 'spiritual' body, as much a body and every bit as 'human' as the physical one they had temporarily left behind. They felt very peaceful at the time of death and reported seeing and meeting friends and relatives whom they knew had died some time beforehand.

In the book *Heaven and Hell*, Swedenborg wrote in more detail of the way life goes on after death, almost as if death itself is no more than a slight and even, astonishingly, 'unnoticed' interruption. He also wrote of our identity after death. That we are as completely human there as we are here in this world. In fact nothing is left behind, not even the most distant memory, other than the physical body which for one reason or another is no longer capable of supporting our life in this world. Very often friends and relatives are there, waiting to greet newcomers. Husbands are there to meet wives, wives to meet husbands. And the passing over process is, we are assured, an eminently peaceful one, irrespective of the circumstances attending the death.

In fact Swedenborg wrote death is so smooth and so peaceful, that people have to be told and later reminded they have died. In the spiritual world they are surrounded with people full of warmth and love who welcome them. In order to assist in the adjustment "reflection is withheld". Such is the teaching given.

People at first do not reflect on the changed circumstances in which they find themselves for example, or stop and take in the fact that familiar friends and loved ones are no longer with them. The impression given is that they get 'caught up' in the newness and excitement of their awakening into the spiritual world and only later take time off to take stock of things and reflect on the changes which they now note and become conscious of.

Although it is one of the most natural of all our experiences, certainly as natural as birth is, death tends to be a 'no-no' subject, to be talked about only in subdued and quiet ways. And when it is openly talked about, as in the teachings given through Emanuel Swedenborg and the reality of the spiritual world, and when our life after death is insisted upon, it is thought to reflect only fringe convictions or spiritualist type belief.

What we don't always realise is that both the reality of life after death and the continuity of our life beyond the death of the physical body, was unmistakably taught by Jesus in the Gospels. Indeed, it's amazing just how extensive the references to life after death are. There is a fundamental conviction about the life after death which runs through the whole of what Jesus said and taught. For example, you have certain things Jesus said in what is referred to as "The Sermon on the Mount". 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' (Matthew 5:3). And again, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6: 19-21): Yet again, and still with "The Sermon on the Mount", "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 7:21). Clearly the reality of life beyond the death of the physical body breathes through so very much of what Jesus said. It's so obvious when it is pointed out.

Not only are there oblique references to life after death, but there are those occasional and much more direct statements such as Jesus said at the time of the crucifixion to the repentant criminal crucified alongside of Him. "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43). And there is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, retold in Luke Chapter 16, where Jesus spoke of life going on after death, as it were without a break or scarcely an interruption.

Interestingly that same parable also highlights the fact that we continue to be after death the kind of person we chose to be during our life in this world. Death does not change us.

There are some quaint and quite unreal beliefs which linger on about the life after death which make the whole thing a fearsome prospect. There has been talk of judgement and punishment for instance. Someone reading out from a book a list of your good deeds and misdeeds. And this kind of thing. But now there is new light shed on the subject which shows that it is not like this at all. Yes, there is the teaching in the Bible about judgement and about a "book" from which, or according to which, such judgement is carried out. (see Revelation 19: 11-15). But that "book" is our own memory, and not just our memory of trivia and of passing, inconsequential events. But our memory of what we've allowed or chosen to actually become part of us. And it is this which decides where we go, either to heaven or to hell. It's not as if someone else decides the outcome for us against our will. According to the type of person we choose to be, we will simply gravitate to others who are like us and in whose company we feel most at ease. It's a 'like attracts like' situation.

As for the punishment angle, once again there are these traditional ideas of what happens, but it's not like that. There is no doubt that there is punishment in hell. But it is the punishment or frustration of people not being able to do what they would like to do. Because there are limits there. People in hell can never go as far as they would like to and so they are in a kind of agony. They "burn" with evil desires and malicious schemes, but so do others around them. So it's an unending climate there of fear, suspicion, and thwarted ambitions. Just before leaving this point, it could be mentioned that "hell fire" is not something outside of a person. It's what burns within them.

Perhaps the most publicised and certainly the most widely held belief about the life after death is belief in Reincarnation. From time to time we are presented with the most persuasive "evidence" in support of it. People come forward with the most amazing recollections of some past life. Many of these claims have been most carefully documented and investigated. It can be quite astonishing. What we need to remember and as Swedenborg pointed out, there is an alternative explanation, as to how these recollections come to people which does not "demand" a belief in Reincarnation.

As is hinted at in the Bibles where angels and angelic protection is frequently spoken of, we live our lives in the midst of unseen spiritual associates who themselves once lived in this world, but who died and are now living in the spiritual world. Their association with us, whilst unseen, is a very important one. For one thing, they convey impulses to us which are vital to our being here. We could not live without them. As a general rule, and simply because of the confusion that would otherwise come about, the memory of these spiritual associates, particularly their memory of their own life in this world, is inactive. Occasionally it becomes active. And what happens is that the person they are with begins to become aware of that memory, believing that it is his or her own, and concluding that it must be the memory of some previous existence they had here. What in fact they are doing is 'plugging in' to the memory of one of their unseen and otherwise unknown spiritual associates.

We were created by God to live and serve and to have happiness, peace, and contentment in heaven forever. It was out of His love and desire to bless us, and to bestow such happiness upon us, that God created us. What God wants for us He will not and cannot impose on us. So He causes us to be born first in this world where decisions and choices can be made. This is what life in this world is all about, that such decisions and choices be made. And whilst life can seem to treat people unfairly, yet at the same time decisions and choices can and will be made. In every community and with every people or nation all over the world certain standards apply which, as they go about life, people will choose either to affirm or deny. Once this fundamental purpose of our being here, in this world, is fulfilled, and in time, we pass over into the spiritual world and do not return here. As for this world it is like a 'college' or 'seminary' where we train and prepare for what lies ahead.

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