



Mining Swedenborg

-Birrell Walsh, PhD



June 2017

Digging through Swedenborg, that is what it is. Not always easy.

Swedenborg was the grandson of the miner Daniel Isaksson, and a supervisor of mines, and Swedenborg himself served for some 30 years on Sweden's Royal Board of Mines.¹ He would understand how, for a newcomer, reading Swedenborg is like mining, looking for glowing nuggets.

Perhaps it all glows, but there are many things I do not understand or perceive. Of the great mountain of writing, different parts are relevant to different people; and those who dig have different purposes. One may be seeking copper, and another is seeking tin, and a third is an archeologist looking for human artifacts. In the same way, different students will mark different sections in the same book, because we are "variously veiled." What a phrase! Even in Latin it has alliteration: "Varie obveletur." The sun shines on us equally, but we have different clouds. That was *Divine Love and Wisdom* 147². In the sermon in which the passage appeared, that phrase stood out for me and I marked it with a highlighter in my notes.

So, what glitters in my mine might not glitter in yours, and that is fine. What one person leaves, another will find.

A year ago, when I was 71, I became involved in my local Swedenborgian church. I do not have the time for a lifelong soak in the doctrines of Emanuel Swedenborg. An old man, I am perhaps studying for the final. The kindness I encountered at the church drew me in, and I began to attend. It wasn't always the words of Swedenborg that moved me. Sometimes it was just what church-members said and did. "What is *use*?" I asked. Peter Gottschalk, a member of the church, said "To make sure Love has a seat at the table." That was new to me - there is something more important than truth?

"Divine peace is in good, but not in truth apart from good," reports Swedenborg in *Heaven & Hell* 286³. Swedenborg said in *Life on other Planets* 96 that knowledge without love is like a bird that has turned to stone, but "Love to God and love towards the neighbour contain in themselves all

¹ Williams-Hogan, Jane. *Swedenborg's Career on the Board of Mines*. Bryn Athyn, PA. The New Philosophy Vol 113 No 1-2, January-June 2010.

² Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Divine Love and Wisdom*. Translated by George F. Dole. New Century Edition ed. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010.

³ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Heaven and Hell*. Translated by George F. Dole. New Century Edition ed. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2000.

intelligence and wisdom.”⁴ He was such a smart man, and here he testified that there was Love and Wisdom in God, but that the Love was greater, more important. What, the unkind things I have said - the mere fact they were true is not enough? I have spent much of my life on knowledge, and the image of the stone bird glows before me.

Our pastor said that we are to be “vessels and distributors” of the good from God, of God’s influx. That glowed too. If I do not know what to do, or how to be, I can turn toward the source like a solar collector in the desert. What is that influx like? “But the coming of the Lord may be likened to the coming of heat, which takes place in spring; because heat then joins itself with light, the earth is softened, and seeds sprout and bring forth fruit.”⁵ writes Swedenborg in *True Christianity* n. 774. This reminded me of the teaching of Tenzin Wangyal, a lama in the pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion of Bön. There is space and there is light, he said, but when they come together in the heart there is warmth. Such is the tradition in one of the “Tartaries.” And in that tradition too, the warmth seems to come from the center.

Google found me an article from *The Intellectual repository for the New Church* published in 1845, the translation of an article in French on the Genealogy of Jesus Christ by N.C. Toule. He discusses Jacob’s dream of angels going up and down the ladder:

“[...] In the first period designated by the angels who ascended man sees good by means of truth that is to say to him truth occupies the first place and good the second and he arrives thus by steps even to the summit of the ladder or to the Lord who appears to him that is he comes into a state to be affected by the celestial of love. In the second period of regeneration designated by the angels who descended man having come into the celestial of love the order in him is reversed that is instead of looking at good through truth he regards truth through good or instead of placing truth in the first rank and good in the second he places good in the first rank and truth in the second thus he descends that is good then having dominion over truth man enters into the second period of regeneration which is effected in commencing by the

⁴ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Life on Other Planets*. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2006.

⁵ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *True Christianity*. Translated by Jonathan Rose. New Century Edition ed. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010.

internal which is the most elevated or highest degree and descending through the intermediates even to the natural which is the lowest degree.”⁶

Swedenborg sometimes makes surprising equivalences, what might be called “Swedenborg switchbacks”. The upward climb of the soul is also a move inward towards our most inward parts. From this I would guess that the angels going up and down could be interpreted as miners going deeper and deeper, and returning to the surface with new ore. Or perhaps they find and connect us with hot springs, like those that heat Reykjavik through its long winter.

Is there a sequential story to these highlightings? Yes, but it does not seem to be simple or direct. One excavator might have sought copper in a Cyprus mine (as people first did 7 to 10 thousand years ago) and tin in Britain (5500 years ago). From those ingredients they could make bronze for their own era. And then in our own period others dig for the bronze implements from those ancient times. The story wends in great jumps through time.

I went from a remark by Peter Gottschalk to *Heaven and Hell, Life on other Planets*, a sermon by Pastor Thom, and *True Christianity*, and finally a hundred and sixty-two year old commentary. The thread seemed to be “the greatest of these is love,” but also “love must be brought to the surface, to wise practical work.”

How does that apply to, say, politics? Not sure yet. Maybe I need to turn upwards for more warmth, or inward to the depth of the mine. I do believe that the test of the whole work is what we can bring to the surface, to everyday life. I thank the miners who have gone before me, and those who will come after.

⁶ Toule, N.C. The Genealogy of Jesus Christ. *The Intellectual Repository for the New Church*. London: General Conference of the New Church. 1849