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The Spiritual World and Experiences of It

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“Death is simply a shedding of the physical body like the butterfly shedding its cocoon. It is a transition to a higher state of consciousness where you continue to perceive, to understand, to laugh, and to be able to grow.”¹ - Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, M.D.

Kubler-Ross, someone who did not believe in an after-life, but who later became an authority on grief and the dying, credits continuing to work with the dying on the following experience with a woman who had died. Elizabeth had served the latter before she died, and at that time Elizabeth was considering giving up her work with the dying. She had heard stories of people having been visited by those on the other side, but was unconvinced. Despite knowing the woman who visited her was from the other world and could see her thoughts, Elizabeth was still unsure, but that incident changed her life and she was reassured by the woman telling her she must continue her work with the dying, and she would receive help when she continued her work with them.²

Of the many experiences recounted in the Guggenheim book we can appreciate how much comfort and healing people receive from loved ones who have died. Like Kubler-Ross, the authors’ original reactions were those of doubt, questioning if it could it even be possible³. But after many stories, they were convinced it could, especially after connecting with the International Association for Near Death Studies (IANDS). In 1987, a poll done by the National Opinion Research Center found that 42% of Americans felt they had had contact with someone who had died and 67% of all widows believed they had a similar experience⁴. Many were reluctant to share their experiences for fear of being considered crazy.

I too have felt my deceased spouse with me since he left this earth 17 ½ years ago. This was actually a request to him several months before he died. He initially found it amusing, but he easily and heartily agreed to it. Perhaps it is time for Swedenborgians to speak up and talk about the reality of the other world? “There is a union of heaven with the human race...good and evil spirits with every individual. We have our union with heaven through the good spirits and our union with hell through the evil ones.”⁵

The Guggenheims speak of how comforting these experiences could be “What would be more comforting for bereaved parents and the knowledge they could be reunited with their deceased children? That widows and widowers who have shared a lifetime of love with their husband or wife might be together again? That all people could once more encounter those they have loved on earth?”

¹ 1, p. 3

² Ibid. p. 7-9

³ Ibid. p. 7, 12

⁴ Ibid. p. 13

⁵ 4, #291, 292

Marriage Love §321 covers the topic of remarriage with those who had a happy marriage; subsection 7 speaks about why the one left on earth might not remarry: “Because the 2 are not actually separated by the death of the one; for the spirit of the deceased continues to dwell with the spirit of the one not yet deceased, and this until the death of the other, at which time they come together again and are reunited, loving each other even more tenderly than before, because they are in the spiritual world.”⁶⁷

The Guggenheim’s discussion then focuses on why people are leery of sharing those ADC experiences, and the main reason is the fear of appearing unbalanced. But here’s another view about living our lives. “Life is a daring adventure, or nothing. To keep our faces toward change and behave like free spirits in the presence of fate is strength undefeatable.”⁸ Helen Keller. But sometimes fear can make that hard to do.

The Guggenheims continue covering the specifics of these experiences and how they documented them. The documentation of these events took 7 years to complete with 3,300 1st hand accounts of ADC and interviewing 2,000 people living in 50 states, in all walks of life and age ranges from an 8- year-old boy to a 92-year-old widower. Most had a Jewish or Christian upbringing⁹ and hoped readers would benefit from their ADCs. They wanted to spare others the confusion and pain they had endured when few relatives and friends were willing to believe their stories¹⁰.

The authors estimated that perhaps 20% of the US population have had one or more ADCs, and this percentage increased dramatically among bereaved parents and children, the widowed and those who have grieved someone they deeply loved¹¹, and ADCs were significantly more common than Near Death Experiences (NDEs). In other countries the validity of the ADCs is more readily accepted than in the US, at least at that time. Do you think that has changed today since that book was written 33 years ago?

DEATH IS NOT THE END

“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, but spiritual beings having a human experience.”¹² -Dr Wayne W Dyer

As Swedenborgians we are more attuned to the reality of the spiritual world, but we sometimes have to ask ourselves: “Is that true in our daily lives?” As someone whose spouse has already left this

⁶ 5, §321

⁷ Ibid,

⁸ 2, p. 92

⁹ 1, p. 19

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 20

¹¹ p.21

¹² p. 23

world, I am blessed with being daily reminded of its reality and how my spouse is with all our family in many different ways.

There are several different ways people experience their loved one who has died. The commonest types are seeing or feeling their presence with them. My experience is feeling connected as if by a cord, yet the feeling is centered mostly around my heart and chest, sometimes in my head; and when I am in deep despair or talk to him, I feel his presence more strongly. Some of our sons have felt his presence with them, either as a hand on their shoulder when they are deeply distressed, of connecting to their dad, or just a feeling of his being with them on joyful occasions.

There are many interesting experiences in the book, and I will recount a few of them. Here is one from a hospice nurse after the death of her grandmother: “As I was standing at my kitchen sink, I felt this warmth, this presence. It wasn’t physical, but more like a presence standing around me, enfolding me. I knew it was my grandmother. Nothing special was going on in my life at the time, and I hadn’t been thinking about her. Bells didn’t ring or anything. I just had a sense Grandma was there with me. Then, in less than a minute, it stopped. I remember feeling very cherished and loved. It was a really nice thing to have happened.”¹³

I too have felt my grandmother’s presence with me. She and I shared a room for about 7 years, after the death of her spouse. She left this world about 42 years ago. For several years after her death I felt as though she was one of the spirits with me.

When someone’s body can no longer perform its functions in this natural world in response to the thoughts and affection of its spirit (which it derives from the spiritual world), then we say that the individual has died...the person, though, has not died at all. We are only separated from the physical nature that was useful to us in this world. The essential person is actually still alive.¹⁴

In my experience both as a hospice chaplain and being with my spouse as he crossed over, it almost seemed as though the spirit was pulling away from the natural body before the heart stopped. Perhaps it was a shutting down of the natural organs? But in *Heaven and Hell* 446 and 447 Swedenborg gets to experience death in order to tell us about it. He remarks that “The reason the deepest communication of our spirit is with our breathing and our heart is that all our vital processes depend on these, not only in a general way, but in every specific.... After this separation, our spirit stays in the body briefly, but not after the complete stoppage of the heart, which varies depending on the cause of death. In some cases, the motion of the heart continues for quite a while, and in others it does not. The moment it does stop, we are awakened, but this is done by the Lord alone.”¹⁵ Swedenborg then goes on to describe each phase of the dying process and the succession of angels that sat with him

¹³ p. 24

¹⁴ 4, §445

¹⁵ Ibid.

as he awakened into the spiritual world. I have noticed there is definitely a special sphere around people who are dying, or have died, and at these times it feels as though I could reach up and touch the spiritual world.

A FEW MORE UNIQUE STORIES:

One mother was driving when she heard Eric Clapton's song "Tears in heaven".¹⁶ She had lost her 2-year-old son of AIDS 3 months earlier. While listening to the words she had the sense of her son's presence. Tears welled up in her eyes and she started crying. She felt his presence all the way through the song and felt an overwhelming sense of peace. Then he left. Since that time, she has felt comforted. Others have also felt their deceased children with them and experienced that peace and comfort from them.

Needless to say, there are many more examples of the way those in heaven connect with us on earth. Most of the messages seem to provide comfort, but there are some which actually change people's lives. While unable to find the source of these 2 stories I had read, I will narrate them anyway:

- 1) A young woman had just had a baby. One night an angel came to her, looked at her and remarked she was not the one. The woman was sad, as this man appeared to be total love and she had had a sad and difficult childbirth. A week later, her baby died, and she was relieved to know he would be well loved and cared for.
- 2) A man's whole family were killed in a tragic car accident. Several times he tried to kill himself as he was so devastated by the loss. In the last attempt he made, throwing himself in front of a truck, but being rescued by the driver, he saw his whole family in front of him. They did not say anything, but just looked at him with love. This completely changed his life: he decided to devote his life to telling others the good news about the spiritual world.

Sometimes people experience the loved ones with them right as they are dying.¹⁷ This was written by a bereavement counselor for an ALS patient (Lou Gehrig's disease): "I was at home when the nurse from hospice called to tell me Howard was actively dying – a process that can go on for hours. His wife was having a really difficult time and wanted me to come over and be there with her...while in my walk-in closet I experienced Howard's presence with me all of a sudden... there was a lightness of being – a joy and a sense of freedom. He was there for just a short time and it seemed he was saying goodbye in my heart and thanking me for being there for him." That visitation occurred at the exact time he died.

¹⁶ 1, p.27, 28

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 26,27

“Anyone who thinks things through carefully can see that it is not the body that thinks, because the body is material. Rather, it is the soul, because the soul is spiritual. The human soul, whose immortality has been the topic of many authors, is our spirit; it is in fact immortal in all respects, and it is also what does the thinking in our bodies.”¹⁸

-Heaven and Hell §432

...as soon as we arrive in the other life, we are all recognized by our friends and relatives and by people we have known in one way or another. Further we talk with each other and continue to see each other in keeping with our friendship in the world. I have heard many who had just come from the world overjoyed to see their friends again, and their friends overjoyed they'd arrived.¹⁹

“Love will go with us on our journey home. Knowing that all is on loan enables us not to fight too much when we are asked to let go, because we realize that those we cherish, while a wonderful blessing to us, cannot be kept from going home. The focus is on life and love, not on death and disaster, because the Christian pilgrim knows that the one thing that does last forever is love...our faith assures us that all those we hold dearly in our hearts will meet us on the other side and together we will celebrate the wonder of this treasure. It is joy, not sorrow, that Christian pilgrims carry in their hearts, because they know they are on their way to their home in this God who is love.”²⁰ As a trained Interfaith Minister, I would like to add that many faith traditions, not just Christianity, believe in a spiritual world also. And it is no surprise to me that the work *Heaven and Hell* is one of the most well-read books of Swedenborg's writings.

¹⁸ 4, §432

¹⁹ Ibid. §494

²⁰ 3, p. 52

References

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2. *From the Hearts of caregivers*, edited by Patricia M Cronin, 2005 (I contributed 3 articles to this)
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4. *Heaven and Hell*, Emanuel Swedenborg, New Century Edition West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2000
5. *Married Love*, Emanuel Swedenborg (transl. Bruce Rogers). Bryn Athyn, PA: General Church Book Center, 1995



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