

A NEW SPIRITUALITY

No. 13 December 2006

Let's Celebrate!

“Glory to God in the highest!” This is what the angels sang at the birth of Jesus. His birth had long been prophesied. He was to be the saviour of the world and would save his people from their sins. He was to be called the Everlasting Father, and the Prince of Peace. God the Father was being manifested in human form. The time had come for this to happen. We are told in the Writings of Swedenborg that the human race had fallen into darkness spiritually and only the coming of Jesus (God accommodated to our level) could bring us back from the point of no return. The Writings tell us how he set us free spiritually, something that is not generally known. And he showed us the way to live, setting an example for us to follow. This is the true meaning of Christmas and a reason to celebrate on Christmas Day and throughout the Christmas season. There is good reason to be joyful and give glory to God as the angels did. Love (God himself) came down to our level of existence and walked among us. He showed himself to be a personal Being to whom we can relate. He gave us the best gift of all – the gift of himself. In these pages we look further into this reason to celebrate.



The life of the Lord was love for the whole human race, which was so great and of such a nature as to be nothing but pure love. Against his life were admitted continual temptations from his earliest childhood to the last hour in the world.

EMANUEL SWEDENBORG



The Gift of a Child's Love

A story told by James Dobson to remind you that life's not built on things but on relationships.

Some time ago, a friend of mine punished his three year old daughter for wasting a roll of gold wrapping paper. Money was tight and he became upset when she tried to decorate a box to put under the Christmas tree.

Nevertheless, the little girl brought the gift to her father the next morning and said, "This is for you, Daddy." He was embarrassed by his earlier overreaction. But his anger flared again when he opened the box and found it empty. He yelled at her, "Don't you know that when you give someone a present, there's supposed to be something inside?" The little girl looked up at him in tears and said, "Oh, Daddy, it's not empty. I blew kisses into it. I filled it with my love and I wrapped it up just for you." He was crushed. Quickly, he put his arms around her and begged for her forgiveness.

My friend told me that he kept that gold box by his bed for years and, whenever he got discouraged, he'd take out an imaginary kiss and remember the love of the child who'd put it there.

In a very real sense, each of us as parents have been given a gold container filled with the unconditional love of our children. There's not a more precious possession anyone could hold.



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Editorial

Our Freedom Restored

I have just been to see the movie, The Nativity, starring Keisha Castle-Hughes as Mary. There are some memorable moments in this movie like the beauty of the nativity scene itself. But if you hoped to be stirred by the appearance to the shepherds of a host of angels praising God and singing, you would be disappointed. This dramatic event was unfortunately missing and limited to one angel speaking to a shepherd.

There was great rejoicing when Christ was born. The angels, the shepherds and the wise men joyed at his coming. People knew from the prophecies that a king would be born who was to be a saviour but they thought he would be an earthly king and would save Israel from Roman oppression. However, his kingdom, he said, was not of this world. He came to free us from slavery to our own selfishness and negative emotion and to show us the way back to innocence. This is why he was born as an innocent baby - to show us that the true essence of the infinite God is pure innocence.

According to the Writings of Swedenborg, It was the infinite God, the Creator, who had come in human form. He put on a physical human nature through his mother, Mary, so that he could experience life as we do and at our level. He was able then to be tempted in all respects as we are and to overcome those temptations. Each one of us is influenced at all times by good and bad spiritual spheres and we are in freedom to choose which influences we will allow to affect us. At the time of the Lord's coming, people were no longer in spiritual freedom because the bad spiritual spheres had come to outweigh the good ones due to mankind's fall into self love - the love of dominating over others. Innocent people were being possessed. God came to earth to give us a way to come back to him. Through Jesus' life of fighting against and overcoming temptation, he restored freedom in the spiritual realm so that we can once again choose the right path.

When we are tempted to do harm or break any of the commandments, God gives us the opportunity to take a step towards innocence. This is the state of harmlessness and complete trust in him (pictured in a tiny baby). We all start out in a state of innocence but over the years it becomes covered over. If we look for it we can see the innocent goodness that God planted at the heart of every person in their infancy. This is the state that God wants each of us to gradually return to, with a difference. The difference is the wisdom we gain through our life experience.

Let's not get so caught up in the shopping, planning and cooking this Christmas that we give no thought to the real reason for the season. It is a time for rejoicing. God came to our earth as a little child, a human being, in order to restore freedom to a fallen world. This is good news and certainly something to celebrate.

Jenny



Great Joy George Dole

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I am bringing you good tidings of great joy’” (Luke 2:10).

“Actual heavenly joy as it is in and of itself is beyond description,” but that is not the end of the story. I’ve been told that I cannot draw a perfect circle, and I believe it, but give me a compass and I can still draw a reasonably good one. Even freehand I can draw some that are better than others, and I can certainly tell the difference. So even though we may not be able to describe heavenly joy, we can tell the difference between happiness and misery, and we can tell the difference between being reasonably happy and being on top of the world, between moderate happiness and “great joy.”

What the angel was telling the shepherds about was “great joy.” Obviously, it was not something the shepherds could get for themselves, it was something God was going to give. This would seem to be telling us that happiness is not something that we go out and get, it is something that comes out and gets us.

If we could remember the times when we have been happiest, most completely filled with joy, I suspect that this would be clear as day. It might happen when we looked at a beautiful nighttime sky and were overcome with a sense of cosmic order and peace. It might happen when we were holding a baby and that little hand grasped one of our fingers. It might happen when we looked at a husband or a wife or a parent or a child and caught a glimpse of the unique, irreplaceable inner angel. Whatever the circumstances, one thing is always the same - the joy that fills us is not something that we manufacture, but something that seems to flow in, often catching us totally by surprise.

In fact, the moment we try to hang on to it, it

starts to slip away. As soon as our attention shifts from the sky or the little hand and turns toward “how we are feeling,” the flow is cut off. We are never truly happy when we are feeling self-conscious.

As it is, though, at such moments time seems to stand still, and the reason is not far to seek. What we are feeling is love, the heart’s response to goodness and beauty, and love is not bound by time and space. Perhaps that is what Jesus was trying to tell his disciples when he said:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and so that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love each other as I have loved you (John 15: 9-12).

What would it be like to walk around in the constant consciousness of the irreplaceable beauty of every human soul?

It is all there. To be in the Lord’s love is not just to feel loved, it is to feel that love within ourselves,

to feel toward each other as the Lord feels toward us. In case we were too dense to realise this the first time, it is made explicit: “This is my commandment, that you love each other as I have loved you.” To abide in that love is to enter fully into its timelessness. When we abide in his love, that feeling about each other is the rule rather than the exception for us.

What would it be like to walk around in the constant consciousness of the irreplaceable beauty of every human soul? It is hard to imagine, especially since that beauty is so often buried under layers of fear, anger, and defensiveness. Still, the promise is clear - it is God’s intent that we not only experience that joy but abide in it. Since life itself is love, that is when we are truly alive, and we are created for eternal life. We are created to have those rare moments last forever, quite literally.

Of course, we know better. We know that we need to make ourselves happy; and we keep reaching for happiness and discovering that something is still missing. A recent survey used some means or other of trying to measure how happy people were in different countries. I have no idea how "scientific" it was, but by its standards, the rich and powerful country of the United States of America came in sixteenth, and the happiest country was Nigeria. Suppose for a moment that this could be proved scientifically. How many Americans would emigrate to Nigeria? How many would look for some way to cash in on this information? Obviously, if I can write a book about happiness that will hit the best-seller list, I'll be happy. Strange indeed that no Nigerian has realised that. If they knew what we know, maybe they wouldn't be so happy.

Will Rogers was quite right when he remarked that "It ain't what people don't know that hurts them, it's what they do know that ain't so." we "know" perfectly well what will make us happy, and it ain't so. We have the clues we need, but we keep missing the point. We have those moments of joy telling us what it is like to be in God's love. Both Scripture and the Writings of Swedenborg tell us that we are designed and created to abide in that love. That is why heaven is not simply a multitude of regenerated individuals but a multitude of communities. That is why there are two great commandments, not just one, and it is why the two are inseparable. To love God with heart and mind and soul is to love the neighbour, for the simple reason that God loves the neighbour.

"Do not be afraid. I am bringing you good

tidings of great joy." The heart of the Christmas message is that God does not even ask us to meet him halfway. He comes all the way down to our level. He really come **all** the way, right to the bottom of our social ladder. We do not have to put on our Sunday best and go to church to meet him, because he is right there and right at home when we are mucking out the stables. At any time, in any place, we can be "surprised by joy."

Essentially, the Writings of Swedenborg tell us, the neighbour to be loved is the goodness within each individual. Sometimes that goodness is so deeply buried that we cannot see it. Sometimes it is hidden behind pretended goodness, outward warmth and courtesy. We have every reason not to let our critical faculties be lulled to sleep, but of one thing we can be sure - we are not likely to see beauty in anyone unless we try. This means that we are not likely to find joy. The message of the angels will be just words to us.

Actual heavenly joy as it is in and of itself is beyond description because it dwells in the deepest natures of angels. It flows from there into the details of their thought and affection and from these into the details of their speech and action. It is as though their deeper levels were wide open and freed to accept a delight and bliss that spreads out through all their fibers and therefore through their whole being, giving them a kind of sense and feeling that simply cannot be described (Heaven and Hell).

"Do not be afraid. I am bringing you good tidings of great joy."



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Expect Transformation

Rachel Rivers

A little boy had one line to say in his first Christmas pageant, and his family helped

him practice and practice the words: "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy!" The day came for the pageant. The church was packed and excitement filled the air. The little boy entered, saw all the people, and froze. He knew he was supposed to say something, but the words he had rehearsed and rehearsed were nowhere to be found. Finally, after what felt like forever to his family, the child threw open his arms and proclaimed in a loud voice: "Boy do I have good news for you!"

He had forgotten the words, but he had remembered the message: "Boy, do I have good news for you! Something wonderful is going to happen." We are entering the season of Advent, and something wonderful is going to happen. *That* is certain. My question is: are we going to get excited about it? Are we going to get excited about Christmas this year? I mean *really* excited? Do we dare to let our expectations rise that high? Expectancy - anticipation - is an important part of what the Advent season has to give us: how to reclaim our natural exuberance for life after having seen enough and lived through enough dark and painful times to have dampened our spirits.

Even though Advent is about preparing for a new birth, the birth in our Biblical narrative does not happen at a time when people are feeling hopeful and optimistic. Quite the opposite: it is a time of bleakness and despair. God became human because God could no longer reach people by the intrinsic divine. People had moved too far away from God, and so God took on a human form in order to connect with us more fully again.

The birth we celebrate on December 25 came at a time of great human need. So contrary to what it would seem, if you are feeling particularly low these days, you are at a very good place to begin Advent. Christmas is an

opportunity for the Scrooge and the Grinch in us to be transformed.

Advent is for those parts of ourselves that we have closed off from the light: the parts of ourselves that are isolated and alone, cold and unfeeling; it is for those parts of ourselves that are quite cynical about feelings of hope and expectation.

With this and the idea of transformation in mind, let's look at an author and the character he created. Charles Dickens was not having a good year in 1843. His new novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* was not selling well, and his publishers were suggesting that his monthly drawing account be reduced. He had four small children and a fifth on the way; he was feeling the mounting pressures of material need. In October, in the midst of his troubles, Dickens was giving a speech on public education, and something in the bright eyes and beaming faces of his audience broke through his troubled spirit and gave him the idea for his next book.

This was the origin of *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens was utterly possessed by the project. He lived the story; it poured itself out of him, and over it he laughed and wept. His character Scrooge had zero expectation and anticipation for Christmas. He had forgotten how to laugh and how to weep; his heart had turned to stone. He was out of touch with the joy of love and friendship. He was obsessed with hoarding and saw people entirely as a threat.

Writing the story of Scrooge's liberation from bitterness and pain and greed helped free Dickens's own spirit from the tyranny in which he was enslaved. In a mere six weeks, *A Christmas Carol* was completed, and 163 years later it is still working its magic to help rekindle the spirit of hope and transformation in its readers.

Turning back to the agent of transformation,

let us consider God again. God was born into our world to help us reclaim life. He came to set the captives free. When our hearts are hardened against joy and connection, we are captive - and like Scrooge, we don't even realise we are in chains. The Lord came to give us the secrets of the kingdom, and the keys to unlock our prisons. He told us, "If you hold to my teaching, you are truly my disciples. You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

God became human for two basic reasons. First, humanity had slid so far downhill that the equilibrium between good and evil was threatened. By taking on a human nature and facing every trial and temptation imaginable, this imbalance was righted.

The second reason God became human was to show us the way out of despair and into hope and love. When Jesus was born, he was God in potential. By living the life he did, he glorified his humanity, uniting it with the divinity which was his essence. So through the process of his life, death, and resurrection, the Lord's human essence was united with his divine essence and he became one. In terms of transformation, we human beings have a similar task: not to become God, but to fully embrace our spiritual nature and to live it out in the comings and goings of daily life.

In our *inner* nature we are spiritual beings; in our *outer* nature we are natural beings. We are born into this natural world, yet with God's help our higher spiritual nature can infuse our external life here on earth - and we can engage life to the fullest. The alternative is to let the baser side of our humanity lead. Then we become like Scrooge and the Grinch: caring for nobody but ourselves, always on the defensive, and enjoying life not at all.


Letting our internal, spiritual nature lead involves opening ourselves up and blossoming, so to speak. When we are open, we are vulnerable to being hurt. Most of us have been scarred along the way--and a very understandable response to having opened up and then gotten burned is to decide, consciously or unconsciously, not to open up again, like Scrooge and the Grinch.

Getting excited, having high hopes and expectations, letting in love, is risky. But *not* letting our hopes and expectations rise is downright deadly. So especially when things look bleak, and our old wounds are painng us, we need to find a way to let God find us. We need to make an opening. We need to dare to believe that life is good and worth celebrating; to *not* be taken in by the forces that would have us believe otherwise.

Each day is an opportunity for us to live the way of loving one another. And each Advent and Christmas season is a special invitation to us to let God into our hearts and lives more fully than ever before.

The little boy speaking his line in the Christmas pageant forgot the exact words, but he remembered the message: "Boy, do I have good news for you!"

Let's get excited! And let's invite God into our excitement. Let's do battle with the forces of inertia and doubt that would have us say "humbug" to Christmas this year. It doesn't matter if you don't like shopping or cooking or parties or even Christmas carols. Don't let your Scrooge nature get the better of you. Find a way to let Christ in! Reaching out to friends and family and helping to meet the needs of others is the surest way. As is letting yourself, in the presence of God, feel your hopes and fears of all the years.

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