

“What Day Is It?”

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TWO READINGS:

Genesis 1:24-31

Then God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind”; and it was so. God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind; and God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” Then God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you; and to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to every thing that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food”; and it was so. God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Arcana Coelestia, n. 50 (Swedenborg)

“What the Most Ancient Church understood by 'the image of the Lord' exceeds everything one can say about it. Man is totally unaware of the fact that the Lord is governing him by means of angels and spirits, and that at least two spirits and two angels are present with everyone. By means of the spirits he is in communication with the world of spirits, and by means of the angels with heaven. Without this communication with the world of spirits by means of the spirits, and with heaven by means of the angels, and so by means of heaven with the Lord, a person cannot exist at all. His entire life depends upon that link, and if the spirits and angels were to withdraw he would perish instantly.

[2] As long as a person remains unregenerate he is governed in an entirely different way from when he is regenerate. As long as he is unregenerate, evil spirits reside with him, who have such dominion over him that angels, though present, can accomplish little more than simply distract him from plunging into utter evil and so divert him towards something good. Indeed they use his own unregenerate desires to divert him towards good, and his illusions of the senses to do so towards truth. At that point he is in communication with the world of spirits by means of the spirits who reside with him, but not in the same way with heaven, for the reason that evil spirits have dominion and angels simply forestall them. [3] When however he is regenerate it is the angels who then have dominion, and they breathe into him every kind of good and truth, as well as a horror and dread of evils and falsities. Angels do indeed lead, yet they are but servants, for it is the Lord alone who, by means of angels and spirits, governs a person. Now because this is done through the ministry of angels, it is said here, in the plural first of all, 'Let Us make man in Our image'. Yet because it is still He alone who rules and disposes, it is said in the following verse, in the singular, 'God created him in His image'. This the Lord also states plainly in Isaiah, 'Thus said Jehovah, your Redeemer,

He who formed you from the womb, I Jehovah make all things, stretching out the heavens Alone, spreading out the earth by Myself.' [Is. 44:24.] Angels themselves also profess that no power at all resides with themselves but that they act from the Lord alone."

If only the point of religion is to save people from the hells of ego absorption and to bring us into the salvation of loving relationships with God and with others in community, then shouldn't we expect God's Word to say something about that pretty early on in the text? One could make the argument that the Bible doesn't get around to any kind of primer until the Ten Commandments, far into the second of two long books of the canon. That's tantamount to a news story not mentioning what happened until the sixth paragraph. Wouldn't a good copy editor send it back saying in red-pencil: Get to the point faster, God. Tell us everything we really need to know right off, very first thing, and then you can elaborate and go off on fishing expeditions (pun fully intended) for those who wish to continue reading. So, does God need back a red-penciled copy of Genesis?

There is a tradition of both Jewish and Christian interpreters of the text, a tradition which includes Swedenborg, that believes in fact that God gets to the point right away—that in fact God returns the text in gold pencil saying: Look more deeply; it *is* all there in the first paragraph.

It is? It is, according to this tradition that unlocks the symbolic style of the ancient text. According to the inner sense tradition, this creation story that opens the whole Bible is a symbolic tale of the point and goal of life, of being human in God's creation.

In the *Arcana Coelestia* n.6, which interestingly is virtually the very first page of his thirty-volume corpus of theosophical writings, Swedenborg summarizes the mythic tale of the creation of the cosmos as a parable for the creation of the angelic soul, as a symbol-laden sequence of days that speak to the process of regeneration. One can see in the great metaphor of a developing world that each day becomes more complicated, more evolved into a living system. And Swedenborg suggests that each "day" represents the dawning and maturation of a new stage in a successive process of regeneration. Observing his day and times, Swedenborg wrote, "Those who are being regenerated do not all arrive at the sixth stage or day; the greatest part today only attain the first stage; some only the second; others the third, fourth or fifth; few the sixth, and scarcely anyone the seventh."

Swedenborg has peers in our own day in viewing the human being as one who evolves in stages and also in perceiving that many people never go past early phases of development—that the world allows us the freedom to quit trying to become a better person and simply get by and survive on lower-order capacities of relating to the world.

Developmentalism is a theory about how growth and formation occur and is especially characterized by its understanding that growth and formation move through successive organic and orderly stages: that the learning in one stage provides a stepping stone and foundation for what is required to evolve into the capacities of the next stage. So, in classic developmental theory, you can't skip stages like a grade in grade school, because the kind of learning we're talking about is organic (not competitive and comparative). By the mid-twentieth-century Jean Piaget, the Swiss philosopher and scientist known for theories of cognitive development and Erik Erikson, the Danish psychologist often thought of as the father of developmental psychology especially had shaped developmentalism as a theory of growth and process, which in the Eighties was

famously applied to moral formation by Harvard's Lawrence Kohlberg and to religious faith formation by Emory's James Fowler. But Swedenborg here in the eighteenth century is saying that spiritual regeneration is very much a developmental affair unfolding in successive stages that can be called "days," and that God displays this developmental schema in parable as the opening stanza of sacred scripture. Six for Swedenborg and throughout scripture is the number of process—of moving towards a goal.

Getting stuck, getting complacent, bored, disengaged, coasting: this is a big challenge of spiritual life as we move further into our adulthood phases, because to survive physically does not require anything beyond about stage two or three. Profound happiness does not lie in Day 2 or 3, but getting by camps out with comfort there. Last night Joanne and I went to see "The Visitor"—though I want you to know this sermon was basically finished beforehand! But I had to come back to this spiritual reflection to reference this excellent film, because the protagonist played by Richard Jenkins epitomizes the adult who has long ago stagnated in all the important dimensions of being human. A late-middle-aged professor disconnected from his work for twenty years, he has flatlined in all the important categories of human activity, especially in terms of how he deals with people, with the human community. The awakening to a new day is the drama of the story, his transformation coming forth through risks he begins to take in caring about other people. The film even puts into play a metaphor I already had in this sermon, so let's proceed into a little reflection on the first creation story. Let me attempt to share by way of three insights about text towards the goal of engaging our own spiritual life so that we will each and all in fact live to see another day—symbolically speaking.

Let's start with verses 24-5: *"Then God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind"; and it was so. God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind; and God saw that it was good."*

Swedenborg focuses on how an arcana of how the order of listing is reversed from what the "earth" brings forth (which, correspondentially, is the human mind), and then what God brings forth—the arcana that relates to regeneration, Swedenborg says, is this: "For at first and afterwards, a person brings forth as if from themselves, until a person becomes celestial, and thus regeneration begins from the external person and proceeds to the internal. Therefore, here there is another order, and external things are mentioned first."

Swedenborg here broaches one of his golden principles, what George Dole likes to call sicutaseity from the Latin for the common phrase in Swedenborg *sicut a se*: "as if of self." This is a principle that works especially in growing in the latter few stages. We are to act as if the next Day were already our full reality. That is, we should fake it! Sicutaseity is acting as if we can do it from ourself, because without that effort from the sense of self, no forward action can take place. Even if we believe that it is actually God and the heavenly host indwelling our minds and hearts, no higher wisdom can manifest unless we fake it first.

There's an analogy between body learning and spiritual learning. All skill activities require learning that unfolds in ascending levels of mastery over bodily capabilities that have to be developed. You have to use sicutaseity to become excellent, to advance through the stages of mastery. In the beginning with painful, awkward and what feels like unnatural motions, say in fingering guitar or piano chords, in controlling a soccer ball with your feet or controlling a tennis ball with topspin, or handling the foot and hand coordinations in a tango—one must go through terribly incompetent motions doing the best one can with all the instruction and insight you can get, until slowly, gradually, in discernible steps mastery develops—and for those who really go deeply into a skill activity the motions soon become rather effortless, so that something greater seems to be coming through and such that it is hardly as if one is doing it at all anymore, for it has become us and we are part of a larger pattern. Sicutaseity works just the same way in spiritual intelligence as it does in body intelligence. If we take a spiritual principle we want to make our own—say, patience or forbearance or altruism—all we have to do to begin moving through the week towards that goal is to simply practice it, practice it, practice it: *sicut a se*.

Let me offer two more brief reflections on our text, continuing next to the legendary verses 26-27, the Imago Dei itself—the claim that we are created in the image and likeness of God. Swedenborg immediately brings into the equation the Word who became flesh, who became human, the divinity in the midst of humanity as one within humanity, such that in the imago dei we are in relationship with the divine-human. But even that is not all: for the whole community of heaven is also imago dei—the body of Christ, if you will. Swedenborg calls this the universal human. The most important piece of this rather large and inexhaustible symbol of the human is that of relationship. The human form is an economy of the whole human race and angelic order living in the divine love and wisdom of God. So, in a high functioning society, we play our various parts to create a living being in aggregate as a society, as a community-at-large. In a word, then, being created in the imago dei speaks primarily and profoundly to our capacity to relate to God as a person, as the Divine-Human, and to others as part of the imago dei writ large.

Robert Kegan, currently of Harvard, is the theorist who is best-known for the latest work on developmental theory for how learning and personal development occurs, and he argues that the social dimension of the self is the most important factor in personal development. Our relationships are the great arena for developing our spiritual life, and as a teaser I will say that his highest stage of human development he calls the inter-individual: a way of relating based on values. We are in the image of God when we are connected in profoundly healthy ways to the whole, and it is no accident of literary history that the Bible closes with the image of the Holy City.

Finally, an even briefer word about that oh-so-problematic verse 28, in which God exhorts the human to multiply and have dominion over the creation. In many quarters, this verse is pegged as one of the most damaging mindsets in modernity. But Swedenborg and other symbolists step away from a literal reading and focus on the symbol sets in the creation story, and in this reflection having dominion means something entirely different than hogging the world's resources and a low-minded sense of superiority. The waters, the earth, the plants, fish, birds, and roaming animals all correspond to various aspects of

our spiritual make-up as an imago dei. They speak to our thought life and our emotional life as vehicles for expression and being. These are the engines of our personhood, and to multiply is to develop depth and fullness in our personality qualities and to have dominion over them is to have competence and mastery—so that we are at the end of the day, so to speak, we are highly capable stewards of and producers in God's divine economy which is life and life in its fullness.

As you can see by our Swedenborg quote printed above, which describes something about the 6th Day, it would appear to be a very evolved spiritual state indeed—one in which we have developed a very strong internal spiritual basis for loving and understanding higher values—and for manifesting them due to an actualized mastery of sensing the leadings of the divine and merging with those. That's being led by angels.

It has become one of my favorite points to make that every sane person should want Swedenborg's picture of life to be true. What vision could be more wonderful than that we can continue ever-growing into new stages of competency in the interactive life system that is ourselves, our family systems, our communities, our cosmos, such that new peaks of joy, purpose, and meaning always beckon, world without end?

So, my friends, the ancients long ago knew it and believed it: Seize the day!

Two Creation Stories

Imago Dei: only three times in the Bible, all of them in the mythic chapters of Genesis

John Doughty

Six is process; Philo 6 a special number as both product and sum of the first three numbers; Hexamaeron tradition

Set up idea of the New Creation and the concept of developmentalism

Introduce the Imago Dei

Head/Heart/Hands

Capacity to be in relationships

The Big Transformation

The 6th Day is the attainment of regeneration, when we are no longer in danger of slouching towards egoic absorption.

I think a lot of us who come to church live in the 4th or 5th day and it is possible that none of us yet abide in day six. I want to talk about proceeding into the sixth day and the psycho-spiritual doorways

Let me say a word about developmentalism: it is a theory of being human that has a big place not just in education and psychology but very much in religion and spirituality.

I think that many people who are actively caring about their spiritual life tend to be working out their regeneration in the fourth day towards the fifth and perhaps the fifth day towards the sixth.

The goal is the Sabbath, and in a sense our whole life is like living through a week.