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Mehmet Oz Finds His Teacher

This bestselling author and renowned heart surgeon found inspiration for his family life and medical practice through the ideas of the Swedish scientist, philosopher, theologian, and Christian mystic Emanuel Swedenborg.

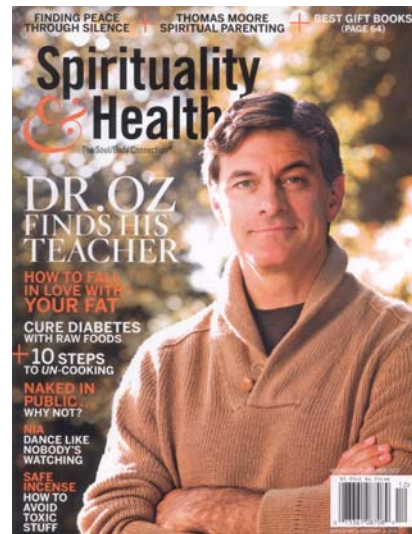
Our religion was never a subject of great interest to me. I was raised a secular Moslem. My father was a surgeon. For me, science had always been the source of ultimate truth. I didn't even begin to struggle with the deeper questions of life until midway through my first year in medical school. But the disconnects accumulated briskly. The cadaver that each of us received had many subtle anatomical structures in the heart, but no "soul" was ever delineated. Brilliant teachers showed me the inner workings of the brain, so I understood how we could remember and desire and move, but I could not find the location of love. I was introduced to patients who seemed to be more than the sum total of our textbooks, and witnessed suffering on a level that I could not understand any beneficent creator permitting. I had entered medical school to better understand the world inside us, but paradoxically, I seemed to be moving in the opposite direction as I wrestled to find the soul in medicine.

I hungered for a scientific rationale to help me reconcile my newly found insights into our bodies and the deeper spiritual longings that we all possess. Help came in the form of an eighteenth-century Swedish philosopher. As with many of the transformational ideas that would be slipped into my life subsequently, the teacher was my future wife.

Soon after I met Lisa, she introduced me to insights into heaven and hell (and marriage, of course, which should not necessarily be confused with them) that challenged my status quo. She asked what Jung, Blake, Goethe, Emerson, Dostoyevsky, Balzac, and even Helen Keller had in common. I responded that they had all died, which did not impress her. It turns out that they were profoundly influenced by the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. Lisa argued that the recommendation of these luminaries should be enough to stimulate my interest in a figure who, though rarely discussed in modern theology, might provide a spiritual light to those still searching in an often ill-lit terrain. I agreed and selfishly asked Lisa for another date.

WHO WAS SWEDENBORG?

Swedenborg, I later learned, was a scientist and theologian whose great and defining quest was to find the nature of the relationship between the body and the spirit. In



his mid-fifties he came into an altered state of awareness in which he experienced a simultaneous dual consciousness of this life and the afterlife. This sounded spooky to me at first, but as I came into contact with his many writings, I began to understand his profound insights and how they applied directly to my life.

On first glance, many of Swedenborg's teachings seem familiar: the idea of one God, infinite and absolute; the belief in an afterlife; the reliance on the Bible as a source of divine revelation. These are tenets familiar to most Western faiths. His emphasis on overcoming the delusion of the self and on the profound interdependence of all things in both the spiritual and natural worlds aligns so closely with Buddhist thought that the Zen master D. T. Suzuki referred to him as "the Buddha of the North." Yet when one examines the particulars of Swedenborg's works, one finds a distinctive vision.

For example, when Lisa and I got married, there was no "til death do us part" in the ceremony. Swedenborg taught that true marriage lasts for eternity. (Although many of us feel this to be the case anyway, it is not generally part of other traditional doctrines.) According to Swedenborg, men and women are each a partial reflection of the Divine, and it is through their union that they most perfectly approach the image of God. Heavenly marriages are deep soul-bonds formed between two individuals — eternal relationships endlessly growing and being renewed. They include a level of peace, innocence, friendship, playfulness, and, yes, sexual ecstasy that is difficult for those of us here on earth to even imagine.

HEAVEN AND HELL

According to Swedenborg, heaven and hell are not merely places but spiritual states. We do not "go there" when we die. We are already there. By choosing a life of good will and devotion, we build heaven in our hearts. This place within us then becomes our eternal home. After death, the veil that separates the spiritual from the material world is lifted, and we continue as our true selves — either angels or evil spirits, depending on whether we have internally made a heaven or a hell for ourselves while living here.

Heaven, like the human body, is an emanation and expression of the divine form. Societies are organized according to mutual loves. Each collective group has a specific function, contributing to the whole, much like organs in the body. Every person has a special use, just as individual cells in our body are responsible for specific tasks to which they are perfectly suited, such as collecting oxygen or resolving infection. The idea that we each have a purpose associated with our unique talents and desires and the concept of a "Divine Human" were particularly compelling to me.

I have always had trouble with the idea of selective redemption. How could a compassionate God condemn his children for nothing more than being born into the "wrong faith"? How could an all-loving God choose to extend that love to only a select few? Swedenborg taught that God loves us all, and the various religions allow us to approach him in the way best suited to our needs. He argued that we are all born for heaven, and that it is what we love that determines our fate, not what we profess to believe. God is infinite. We are not. Not even the most brilliant or enlightened among us can fully comprehend the Divine, so our view of God is determined by who and where we are spiritually. Each religion provides something

unique and wonderful for its followers and, when focused on loving God and our neighbor, can lead to heaven.

Further, Swedenborg claimed that God never judges us. Through his boundless mercy, God allows us to choose where we will be happiest based on our ruling loves. If we love God and our fellow human beings, then heaven is a place of immeasurable joy for us. If, on the other hand, we love only ourselves and desire merely the pleasures of the world, then hell is where we are most comfortable. It is “hellish” there primarily because we are prevented from fulfilling our evil desires to harm others.

Angels as described by Swedenborg aren't a separate species but people who are regenerate — literally, reborn humans. This is achieved through putting aside the selfish desires of the ego and attempting to align ourselves with divine providence.

THE BIBLE AND SUFFERING

Swedenborg saw the Bible as more than a history of the Jewish nation or a collection of morality tales and ancient laws; he saw it as a detailed metaphor for the human condition. Each story — in fact, each word — represents something in our spiritual life. This is its divine essence. For example, the Children of Israel's wandering through the desert for 40 years echoes our own periods of crisis when we feel lost and hopeless. Their enslavement in Egypt parallels our own addiction to worldly knowledge and delights. These deeper revelations are especially enlightening when the stories seem morally ambiguous or even self-contradictory.

While this gave me a welcome new perspective on Scripture, it was Swedenborg's explanation of suffering that I found most useful. According to Swedenborg, God permits evil only to preserve our spiritual freedom, since good which is not freely chosen is not good at all. He never wills the resulting suffering, but constantly turns it into opportunities for growth and transcendence. (I have seen patients transform their lives after a serious illness.) God, while thoughtful of our natural health and happiness, has our spiritual well-being as an even higher priority. Our struggles and afflictions in the material world are ways of reminding us of our true nature, which is pure spirit.

BRINGING SWEDENBORG INTO SURGERY

In my practice I have struggled to provide holistic healing. For example, helping a transplant recipient deal with the emotional crisis of a rejecting heart is often more of a challenge than the surgery itself. Nothing in science can address the hopelessness we feel when our hearts fail us completely, or give us comfort when we face the possibility of our own death or the loss of a loved one. As a physician, I seek to connect with my patients on both the physical and spiritual levels, since true healing is never about curing just the body. Although I rarely mention him by name, Swedenborg has made this easier for me.

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