

# GOD'S ECOLOGY AND SPIRITUAL GARDENING\*

Edward F. Sylvia†

## INTRODUCTION

God created this beautiful planet to be of service to humankind—but to be used wisely. The urgent environmental issues and ecological crisis in the world is an indication of a deeper, spiritual crisis. A polluted world is the result of polluted thinking. Soil erosion is the result of an erosion of character, based on artificial, dead and disjointed principles.

The situation is not hopeless and every one of you has the power to make real positive changes—with God's help. In fact, these changes will increase the vitality of an ecosystem that stretches from earth all the way to heaven!

True religion involves holistic and eco-friendly thinking. Living holistically is doing God's Will because it challenges us to look at everything in nature as our neighbor. Irresponsible actions are the result of not seeing God's universe as an interconnected, interrelated, and interdependent whole. This diminished cognitive state causes ego-centeredness, artificial thinking, irresponsibility and estrangement from God, which ultimately pushes the planet and its biotic community into a more decrepit situation.

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That is why I wrote an eco-friendly, faith-based book with the quirky title *Sermon From The Compost Pile*. The best way to explain why I would ever imagine that a lowly compost pile would make a great pulpit to deliver a spiritual message will take a little setup.

### ALL THINGS IN NATURE EFFIGY SPIRITUAL REALITIES

In the fall of 1973, working as a young copywriter for a large New York advertising agency I helped to create a travel brochure for Eastern Airlines promising the “Perfect Vacation.” Featured inside the brochure was a series of illustrations showing first a beautiful paradisiacal beach in the tropics, then moving outward in a way that revealed that this image of a beautiful beach was actually taking place inside a vacationer’s mind. However, the last illustration in the series is identical to the first illustration, except that we now have the vacationer physically standing on the same beach he is thinking of.



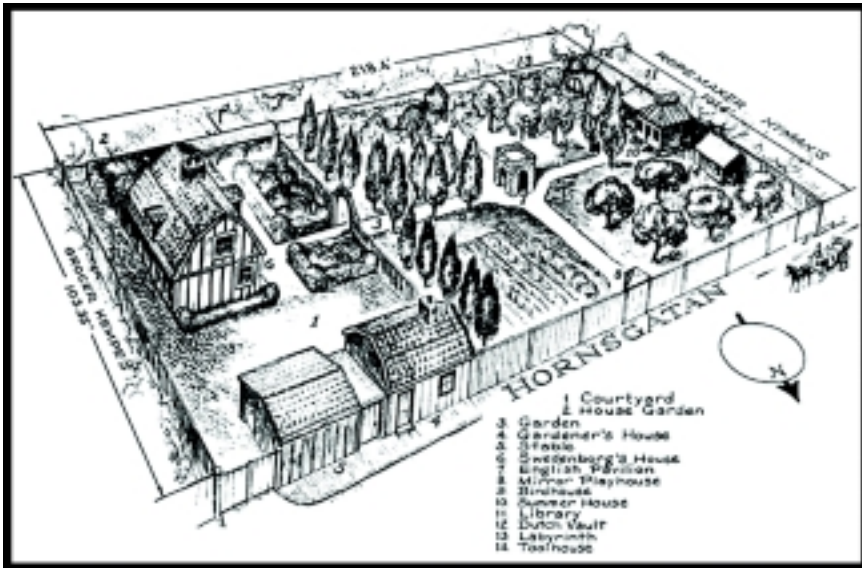
Well, we now find out that the first frame illustrated in the brochure depicted a state of mind, and in the last frame, we are made to discover that our person is physically in the same “place” as his heart and mind. In other words, where he actually is, corresponds to what he inwardly believes paradise to be.

Also inside the brochure was a simple and entertaining psychological test for the reader to fill out in order to help Eastern Airlines and travel agents determine the destination and vacation package that best matches the reader's inner profile. The headline reads: “Experience what's inside you, outside you.” As a creative writer in a New York ad agency I had intuitively stumbled upon the essential dynamics of Emanuel Swedenborg's *science of correspondences*. And, nine months later, I would providentially be introduced to Swedenborg's ideas.

Emanuel Swedenborg was an eighteenth-century scientist/theologian who made the discovery that the laws of nature were derived from spiritual laws. In other words, everything we see in nature had a spiritual counterpart or equivalent. For instance, nature's incessant endeavor to clean and purify itself is an analog of spiritual purification and God's perpetual efforts to redeem the human race.

We should not be surprised by this dual dynamic of using natural things to portray psychological things. We instinctively describe people as having a “sunny” disposition or having a “cloud” over their head. When we seek to know which way the wind is blowing, we want to become cognizant of a turn in peoples' opinion. This principle of correspondence provides us with the means by which invisible heavenly realities can be made known by visible, physical realities. From the known we can explore the unknown. And nature's ecosystem as well as the backyard garden is quite observable and knowable.

Therefore, a healthy garden that is based on sound ecological and holistic ORGANIC principles, can offer us unexpected insights into God's grand cosmic scheme and deepest spiritual mysteries—especially concerning human salvation. For this reason Swedenborg was not only a pioneering scientist and theologian, he was a gardener. He sought to elevate his mind, but always kept his feet on the ground—in a garden.



Here is a rendition of Swedenborg's garden layout. It clearly shows an eco-friendly design. It contains a healthy and diverse habitat of ornamental trees, fruit trees, flowers, and culinary plants. One might call it an EDIBLE landscape—just as the Garden of Eden was. Swedenborg's plot was just over an acre in size.

Nature can certainly be inspirational, if not breathtaking. Many gardeners instinctively feel that when they are close to nature they are close to God. Gardeners often feel a strong connection between the soil and the soul. Swedenborg added scientific precision to this theological insight through the correspondence between heaven and earth. For instance, healthy soil promotes healthy plants in precisely the same way that healthy thoughts emerge out of a *mental* soil consisting of healthy life-values and principles. The purpose of religion is to provide us with these healthy principles to ensure proper "mental fertility." So the steps for creating and maintaining healthy soil and plants on earth can teach us detailed spiritual lessons about how God attempts to prepare and cultivate the human heart and mind.

Swedenborg's notion of correspondences didn't stop with nature. He went on to discover that this scientific precision was built into the narra-

tives of the Lord's Holy Word as well. Not only could nature and gardens offer us the opportunity to think about the physical world from a more loftier, spiritual point of view, this dual dynamic is incorporated into the very structure of Scripture. In other words, Scripture is Divinely designed so that the literal words of its various stories can be raised to a higher, psycho-spiritual level of meaning, and offers us unexpectedly new and more profound spiritual revelations about faith and religious doctrine.

What Swedenborg discovered was that when the stories of Scripture are viewed symbolically and metaphorically—that is, abstracted from their literal meaning—they address, not the physical world, but the inner world of the human spirit. To help give you a visceral grasp of this, the higher levels of meaning in the Holy Word do not refer to the physical world of our Eastern Airlines vacationer, they refer to the deeper psychotopological features of his inner world of mind and spirit.

In this higher-level order of reality, the Garden of Eden represents a psychoscape, that is, the inner landscape of our heart and mind—when we allow God to become our Master Gardener. Keeping that in mind, I can now share with you Swedenborg's higher-level interpretation of the Seven-Day Creation story in Genesis from the science of correspondences. Each "day" will now describe a step in the sequential process by which the human heart and mind is gradually formed by God into an "inner garden paradise" and "spiritual ecosystem."

## DAY ONE

So we begin the Genesis story of God's spiritual ecology with the first state of person's inner reality—existing in complete darkness. This "dark" beginning does not mean that our inner world is empty and void of thoughts or feelings, but that the human intellect starts from a state of relative darkness and obscurity concerning God. But God is secretly active during this first state of human spiritual darkness and is described as "moving across the face of the waters." From the time of our infancy, the Lord God carefully collects and protects innocent experiences of love that we receive from our parents—especially from their cuddling, kissing, and pampering. God stores these experiences of innocence and love within the

unconscious mind of the infant where they are protected from less noble influences coming from the outside world. Swedenborg called this hidden treasure “remains.” It is this remnant of innocence that the Lord begins to activate when He senses we are ready to emerge from our spiritual darkness. This Divine activity in the human unconscious now opens our eyes to a new perception of reality as it reaches the conscious mind.

Swedenborg’s theological description of God storing pleasant experiences within a child’s unconscious mind (remains) has some basis in scientific fact. Neuroscientists have discovered that proper brain-cell multiplication and neural connections in a child’s cerebellum are stimulated through body contact with parents that produce pleasurable feelings. Children deprived of physical closeness and hugging with loving parents seem to lack the proper neural development of the (involuntary) cerebellum and often suffer from dysfunctional and anti-social states in later life.<sup>1</sup>

“Let there be light” refers to the first completed stage of our spiritual evolution—when we begin to consciously perceive some of the effects of God’s activity in the unconscious mind and start to sense that reality stems from of a higher Divine and Holy source. “Light” here corresponds to enlightenment or seeing this higher truth. Our inner world now moves out of darkness and into spiritual light.

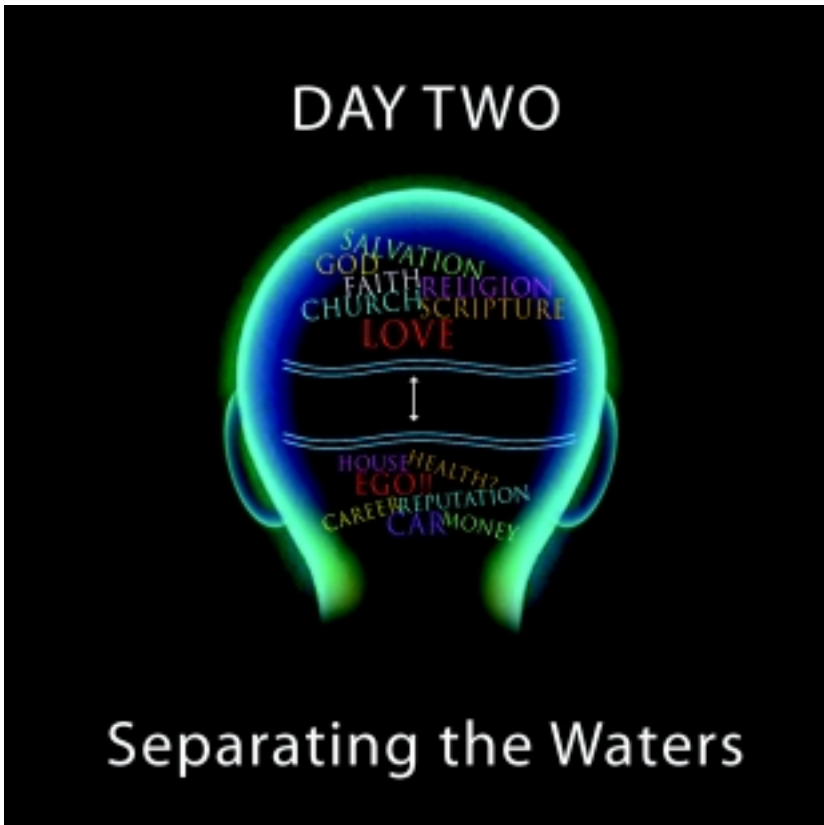
## DAY TWO

Up to now we have had all kinds of ideas floating around in our head—ideas concerning God are mixed with ideas from the world. Since human reasoning requires that we arrange our thoughts into real order from out of this chaos, our next step in changing our inner environment requires mental *discernment*.

We now begin to separate the higher ideas of God from lower worldly ideas. This is called a “separating of waters” because water corresponds to information and truth. For example, water cleanses and refreshes the body in the same way TRUTH cleanses the soul. We even *pool* our ideas in our

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<sup>1</sup>Richard M. Restak, *The Brain: The Last Frontier* (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1979), 144, 145, 150, 151.



memory from an *ocean* of information that *streams* through our senses. And finally, when someone presents us with faulty reasoning we say that it doesn't *hold water*.

### DAY THREE

The act of separating God's Truth from worldly data, and giving God's Truth the highest place causes us to humble ourselves. Only when we humble ourselves can innocence stored in our remains by God safely begin to surface in our lives. This emergence of innocence corresponds to the appearance of "dry land" in the Genesis story, which serves as a

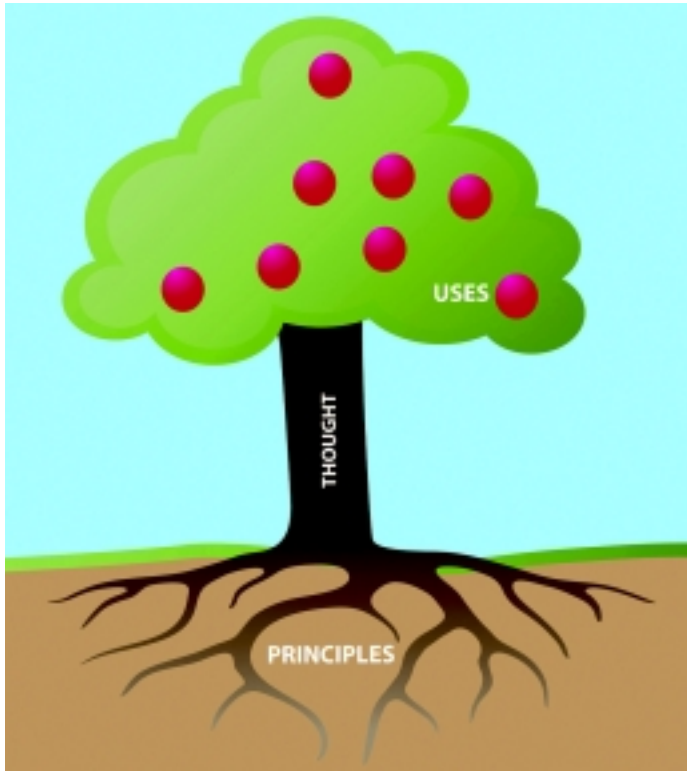
foundation for further spiritual growth. Think of this foundation of innocence as the mineral kingdom or ground of our mind's spiritual ecosystem or psycho-scape. The Lord's *parable of the Sower* refers to this inner environment of the human spirit. Otherwise, Jesus was merely telling everybody something obvious—not to throw seeds on rocks, thin soil, or on soil that has been heavily trampled on.

This metaphor of describing the world of the human heart and mind as a higher order ecosystem is more than mere poetic or creative analogy—it represents an ecosystem that is ontologically real! Religion is God's strategy by which evolution and the biosphere can be extended into a non-physical realm through humankind's spiritual evolution. This non-physical ecosystem is called *heaven*. Religion is the *lawful* means by which the inner landscape of our heart and mind is formed into a "heaven." Heaven is not someplace you go to—it is something you become. This process involves changing the way we think.

### **Plants (mental flora)**

This change in thinking is first symbolized by our innocence re-emerging to form a new matrix or "ground" for a spiritual conscience to sprout and evolve into greater living complexity. The spiritual reformation of the human mind corresponds perfectly to the emergence of the plant kingdom on earth. In the same way the mineral kingdom is exalted and raised up into the higher-level order of plant bio-structure, the religious principles we stand on are exalted and raised up into the higher level structure of noble thoughts vivifying our spiritual conscience. Thought makes our chosen principles come to "life."

Swedenborg stated that thoughts are real organic forms because they exist through *subsistence*. Thoughts manifest as they are fed and nurtured. Thought takes root in the soil of our chosen principles, then grows from these principles, branches and leafs out, blossoms, and finally bears fruit. In other words, the fruit of our labor gains its quality from the mental soil it sprouts from. Our principles of life and values are transformed into more vivified and more complex living thought-forms through human reasoning that contemplates, adapts, and self-organizes our various ideas



around some aim, purpose, or use—just as plants are forms adapted to produce fruit or more seed (which are uses).

Reasoning that is rooted in spiritual principles represents the “greening” of the human intellect and consciousness. For those of you who are scientifically-minded, consider that Swedenborg’s deeper interpretation of Genesis takes today’s infant science of complexity theory into the non-physical realm of the spirit.

### **Clues pointing to deeper meaning**

At this point in the discussion I feel the need to offer some rational evidence for why we should believe the Genesis story symbolizes an *epigenesis*—that is, the creation and evolution of new life within our inner

world or inner garden. Swedenborg points out a peculiar “switcheroo” in the Garden of Eden that would otherwise go unnoticed from a casual reading of Scripture. He makes the point that the *Tree of Life* is first to be found in the middle (midst) of God’s Garden, but later, it is the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil* that takes the center position.<sup>2</sup> Trees symbolically represent human *perception*—because their various leaves are designed to take in sunlight in different ways—just as human perception receives God’s influence in different ways. Therefore it is much more feasible that this switcheroo that Swedenborg points to represented a mental change taking place *within* humans from God being the original center of our focus to worldly and more egocentric values taking center stage in one’s heart and mind. Mature, physical trees just don’t uproot themselves and move around like that. It is much easier to uproot one’s ideas and change the mental focus. Besides, no mention is made of God hiring a landscaping team to move in with heavy equipment to transplant the two antithetical trees.

Okay now, plants not only need to be sustained by the soil, they also require a source of light for *photosynthesis*. Similarly, for our thoughts to grow upwards towards heaven, we not only need to draw material from the soil of our memory, we need a constant source of enlightenment for “psycho-synthesis.” It is here in the Genesis story that the original momentum of spiritual growth needs to sustain itself further.

#### DAY FOUR

When we look up to God for constant enlightenment, God’s eternal truths become the shining stars of our inner world—guiding us through recurring states of mental darkness. Hopefully this brings God’s truth closer to us and becomes a bigger factor in our lives. At this stage, our religious faith becomes a more magnified source of light for reflection—just as the moon is closer to us than the stars and reflects the light of the sun.

Evidence that the stars, moon, and sun in this biblical narrative refer to deeper spiritual things within the human mind comes from Isaiah:

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<sup>2</sup> Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, Vol 1, Chap. 3, § 200.

The stars of the heavens and the constellations thereof shall not shine with their light, the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine, and I will visit evil upon the world, and upon the wicked their iniquity. (Isaiah 13:10,11)

It makes no sense that human wickedness or iniquity would darken the physical light of astronomical stars, moon, and sun unless this event represented the “light” coming from God’s Truth as being blocked and obscured by evil and false thinking.

### **The directionality of human evolution is towards goodness**

Now we are ready for a more dramatic change to take place within our inner World! The appearance of the Sun as the “greater luminary” represents a radical change in our inner world—like that between night and day. Not only does the sun produce light, but heat. This heat represents a new dynamic taking over our spiritual evolution.

## **DAY FIVE**

### **Animals (mental fauna)**

Spiritual growth is now moving from the mind to the heart. Heat corresponds to spiritual warmth or love. We now begin to follow God’s tenets not simply because they are *true* but because they are *good*. Our inner world is now becoming animated and vivified by the living warmth of spiritual love. New feelings are being stirred up from within the heart. These new feelings are represented by the emergence of “moving” things, represented by fish, birds, and whales in the Genesis story.

## **DAY SIX**

The sixth stage is dominated by mammals and finally by a man and woman being introduced into the Garden. Mammals are warm-blooded and represent both a higher order bio-complexity and higher order “ther-

modynamics.” This higher thermodynamics corresponds to the activity of our heart reaching a greater degree of perfection through spiritual love and goodness—from our applying God’s truth to our lives. This application of truth to our lives and heart is like a marriage. The appearance of a man and woman in the Garden represents the final marriage or nuptials between God’s Truth and Love within the human heart and mind. We get our “humanness” from this marriage. Swedenborg claimed that being human is to enjoy the two distinct cognitive functions of *free will* and *discernment*. These two gifts are from God’s Love and Wisdom and are married together through acts of loving service and promoting the common good of society from religious principles.

### **Religion is sound ecological policy—from earth to heaven!**

So God’s command to have dominion over all things on the earth was not a license to exploit the world and its resources. It means that we are to use God’s spiritual principles to rule over all the thoughts of our mind and volitions of the heart—things that compose our inner garden and spiritual ecosystem. A garden represents *wisdom*—because in wisdom our thoughts and feelings are arranged into the same pleasing order that we find in a healthy environment of trees, flowers and wildlife. Again, for those of you who are scientifically-minded, there is remarkable precision in the similarities between the world of nature and world of human consciousness. All our thoughts and feelings fall into similar classifications as those we find in the plant and animal kingdoms on earth. For instance, Swedenborg claimed that all *general* thoughts and feelings represent some genus or family, and, all our *particular* thoughts and feelings represent the distinct species of that family.

## **DAY SEVEN**

Ah, the day of rest! Re-creation is completed. However, it is nonsensical to think of an Infinite and omnipotent Creator as needing to take a breather. It makes more sense if we understand this to mean that God has completed His task of creating a heavenly ecosystem within the human

spirit, which is one's heart and mind. Heaven is not some place you go to, it is something you become.

### **Making spiritual compost**

So, how does a compost pile fit into the spiritual dynamics of the Genesis story—the process by which our thoughts and feelings are arranged into the heavenly order of a beautiful inner garden? A compost pile is an apparatus for speeding up nature's process of creating *humus*, which is then used to increase the fertility and vitality of the soil. Once you know the dynamics and principles behind spiritual evolution you can



create the conditions to speed up that process as well. That caveat is we must speed up the *conflict* and *friction* between doing things our way or the Lord God's way ("thy will be done").

True religion and its commandments act as a spiritual compost pile for creating spiritual "humus." Spiritual humus is *humility*. God's lessons, or seeds of faith, cannot be implanted into or germinate in the soil of our minds without our sincere humility. Old thoughts, like old leaves need to die, where they can be broken down and reconstituted into new thinking

for the soul. Religion, through introspection allows us to gather all our old ideas and thinking into a heap so that God’s influence can break it all down and reconstitute it into a new heavenly order and worldview.

A person who creates a spiritual compost pile is not afraid of self-examination—even to the point of speeding up this unflattering process. In the same way that nature’s forces produce heat in the process of creating humus in the compost pile, spiritual heat is created from the friction between our old ways of thinking and submitting ourselves to God’s will and precepts. The more we subject ourselves to this friction and critical self-examination, the more actively our spiritual compost pile “heats up” and the faster our humility and innocence increases.

### CONCLUSION

In Swedenborg’s pre-theological work *The Principia*, he states, “The perfection the world consists in its varieties.”<sup>3</sup> So we should indeed be concerned with species extinction and the destruction of the richness and health of the biosphere. Swedenborg goes on to say something even more profound about the variety of living things in the world—that they have “perpetual relation to its first principle.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the more the world increases in bio-complexity and evolves higher order structure, the more perfectly the world will reflect first principles. Science has yet to identify the first causal principles of the universe or the key to causal agency in the world. The answer is LOVE!

Existence is relationship. All organization is reciprocal union. So all coherent complexity is based on the principle of love, which is God’s living essence to unify all things. Above, I mentioned that the more bio-complexity perfects itself to higher order structure, the more perfectly first principles are put on display. Through the evolution of the human mind and heart this sacred unifying principle comes to full view because love can evolve into something truly spiritual—a heavenly society.

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<sup>3</sup> Swedenborg, *Principia*, Vol.II, Part III, Chapter II, § 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, § 2, p. 244.



Religion and salvation are God's strategies for extending the biosphere into the non-physical realm of heaven through humanity's inner evolution and is the means by which each of us can enter into a more personally profound and eternal relationship with the Lord God. It was this knowledge of God's ecology that inspired me to purchase several acres of farmland in southern Illinois and turn it into a garden of living spiritual instruction.

People are amazed when they see how much positive change I could make in the environment in just eighteen years. But the real miracle is that

this much positive change can take place *within* our hearts and minds. So whether you have a flowerpot or half-acre plot, whether you choose to grow roses or do recession gardening, you can participate in the mind of God! Heavenly ecology and a mind arranged according to God's precepts *are the same thing!* □