

A SIGNIFICANT INCIDENT IN SWEDENBORG'S JOURNAL OF DREAMS

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In 1986 the Swedenborg Foundation published a commentary by Dr. Wilson Van Dusen on Swedenborg's dreams. In 1989 a book on the subject was published in Swedish. Now an English version has been printed by the Swedenborg Foundation. I refer to the book by Lars Bergquist entitled *Swedenborg's Dream Diary*.

Some of us are revisiting this subject because of this new material. I want to single out one incident mentioned in the dreams and offer some observations.

Swedenborg never undertook to write a book about dreams. There was no period in his life when he devoted himself to the study of dreams. The personal journal that he kept and which we have come to know as "Swedenborg's Journal of Dreams" consists of short notes he took over a period of about twenty-one months. That was a period of intense study, a period in which he wrote hour after hour in voluminous Latin. The few lines of Swedish which he scribbled down in the middle of the night or upon awakening in the morning were not the makings of a book. They were personal notes sometimes about what was going on in his waking life, and more often what dreams he was having.

He saw the dreams in relation to the anatomical work upon which he was consciously engaged and more notably in relation to the way his life was unfolding. Like the rest of us he was ignorant of what the future held. Like the rest of us he had dreams. But unlike the rest of us he was going to be allowed to be for years a conscious inhabitant of both worlds. This historic occurrence makes the dreams he recorded of particular interest.

Like the rest of us, Swedenborg had many dreams he did not even remember. He had many dreams he remembered but did not record on paper. If he did write them down, we have not seen the evidence. He

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wrote in retrospect, “There were dreams for several years educating me regarding the matters I was writing about.” He wrote that in August of 1748. It is from § 2951 of *Spiritual Experiences*.

The record of dreams he had in 1743–1744 was not discovered until fifty years after his death. Here are some observations on a dream described in § 242.

This dream gives us what is probably the first time Swedenborg saw an evil spirit. He saw him sitting on a block of ice! Later encounters with evil spirits might be called “chilling” experiences. Swedenborg observed that evil spirits were not aware of how cold they were. We read in *True Christian Religion* § 385:

To me it seemed wonderful that these spirits, as they acknowledged, had in themselves no sense of coldness; and I therefore likened them to fishes under ice, which have no feeling of cold because their life and their nature therefrom are essentially cold.

This passage goes on to say,

Such spirits may be compared to the icebergs that are torn from their places in the northern regions, and carried about on the ocean, of which I have heard it said that when they come near a ship, all who are on board begin to shiver with cold. So companies of spirits who are in faith separated from charity may be likened to such icebergs. Or, if you please, may be called icebergs.

The spirit on the block of ice spoke a few words to Swedenborg, and Swedenborg realized with astonishment that the words were spoken as a direct response to the thoughts going on within his own mind. That was an entirely new thing in Swedenborg’s experience. Twice in the *Arcana Coelestia* there is reference to an event which we would not be able to date were it not for this entry in *Swedenborg’s Journal of Dreams*. The date was September 24, 1744, and here is what is said about it in *Arcana Coelestia* § 5855.

Before the way was opened that enabled me to talk to spirits I had been of the opinion that no one except God alone—no spirit or any angel—could possibly know and perceive my thoughts since they were within me. Then one day something happened; I noticed that a certain spirit knew what I was thinking, for he spoke a few words to me about the things I was thinking, and he used a certain sign to indicate his presence. I was dumbfounded by this, above all by the fact that he knew my thoughts.

Again in the same work § 6214 there is reference to the day some spirit “happened to address me briefly on the matters I was thinking about.”

The evil spirit hated what Swedenborg was thinking. He was thinking of the marvels of the human body, which he regarded as the kingdom of the soul. He had published a book which in the past was called *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom* and which has more recently been called *The Dynamics of the Soul's Domain*. Now he was laboring to produce a new book on the soul's domain. It was his passion. He declared in June of 1743: “Driving me is the desire and longing to bring to the light of day, during my lifetime, something real” (*Letters & Memorials* p. 497). He felt that he could blaze a path to faith, that he could change the attitude of the scientists of his day by demonstrating to them the wonders of the human body. He hoped he might through his studies bring the learned to the acknowledgment of God.

Evil spirits did not approve of that kind of thinking! Swedenborg observed that “when I was writings things repugnant to evil spirits” the spirits sometimes reacted vehemently. Their aversion to what he was expressing impacted upon Swedenborg who says, “I was obsessed to the point of horror.” This is from a passage in *Spiritual Experiences* dated August, 1748. This passage, like the two passages from the *Arcana* mentions that time when “a certain spirit addressed me in a few words.” (*SE* § 2951; see also § 4390.)

What did the spirit say? Here is the way it is rendered in Bergquist's book: “Before I fell asleep I was thinking very hard on what I am writing at the moment, and then it was said to me: ‘Shut up! Or, I'll beat you!’ Then I saw somebody sitting on ice, and I was scared.”

This incident is discussed in the book *Debates With Devils* (Rose 2000) where we read, “Swedenborg did not guess back in those early days that, in his work, he was beginning a dialogue with devils” (p. 41). Here is what Dr. Alfred Acton wrote about the incident:

All unknown to Swedenborg, the spirits who were around him, knew his thoughts. In the world of spirits, these thoughts aroused active resistance; and, such was Swedenborg’s state, so thin the veil between him and the other world, that this resistance became actually audible to Swedenborg’s spirit even while his body was wide awake. Thinking deeply in the quiet of his own room, suddenly he heard the words “Hold you tongue or I will strike you.” He was frightened, astounded . . . because for the first time he then realized that his thoughts were known to spirits. Often before had he felt the obscurities brought to his mind by evil spirits; they had even caused him dull pains in the head; often before also had he reflected on the fact that truth is hated by the evil; but never before had he known that spirits could actually read his thoughts; and that those thoughts could rouse up the hatred and opposition of the evil among them. (*An Introduction to the Word Explained*, p. 101)

This may be compared to an incident in the Gospels in which Jesus was preaching with a notable directness and authority. Suddenly from the crowd came a voice. As we read the account in the first chapter of Mark: “And they were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Now there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, saying, ‘Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!’ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be quiet, and come out of him!’” (Mark 1:22–25). □

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