

IN MEMORIAM

Karl Birjukov
1951–2017

Karl Birjukov was born on the 6th May 1951 in Austria during his parent's journey from Yugoslavia to England. Finally, on arrival in England, the family settled in Forest Hill, in South East London. In 1959 Karl became an altar boy at St Winifred's Convent in Mayow Road, Forest Hill. About 8 years later he started training as a priest and the family moved into the Convent to live. Karl continued with his studies for about 3 years but then felt a need to change direction becoming an English teacher in 1971 at a secondary school in Dagenham. I don't know how long he worked as a teacher but eventually this too became something he decided to move away from. Karl had a brother Andrew who tragically died in 1994 at the age of 38 and four sisters Darinka, Kookie, Annie and Veronica.

It was around the time that Andrew died that Karl and Vicky Gallagher came together and found that they were soul-mates both searching for a deeper, spiritual meaning to life and with a thirst for knowing more and more about deeper things.

This search continued in all sorts of ways until one day in April 2005 Vicky walked into the West Wickham New Church. Soon after Karl came along and following discussion with Elisabeth Brooks was offered the first volume of Emanuel Swedenborg's 12 volume series *Arcana Caelestia* to borrow from the church library. This was on the 24th April 2005. I expect that initially Karl wondered what he had come across. The books, originally in Latin, were written in the eighteenth century to explain the inner spiritual sense to Genesis and Exodus in the Bible. Even in the most recent translation Karl was offered *Arcana Caelestia* is not an easy read but it proved to be exactly what he was looking for. Amazingly he came back for volume 2 on the 4th May and then volume 3 on the 25th May and so on and for the rest of his life he continued to read and re-read the cycle of 12 volumes gaining more and more insights each time. And at the same time he also read and re-read the many other volumes of Swedenborg's theology

and philosophy with perhaps his favorites being Divine Providence and Divine Love and Wisdom.

The first service he attended at West Wickham was led by a visiting New Church minister, Rev Christopher Hasler and Karl was amazed at the new depths of meaning in the Bible that Christopher presented. Soon Karl was a very regular attendee on Sunday mornings and at discussion groups on other days of the week.

The West Wickham New Church has long relied on a group of lay people to lead many of its services and Patrick Johnson soon recognized that Karl had many of As we at the West Wickham church got to know him really well we discovered his many talents—his love of writing poetry, his amazing memory and ability to link together ideas and concepts he had read about—his talent of being able to talk easily to people from all walks of life—his creativity demonstrated perhaps most strongly through origami—his flair for talking to young people and children about deep things—his simple joy in taking a ride out in the car with Vicky and going on a long walk together.

But it has to be said he was so knowledgeable in science and philosophy and progressively in Swedenborgian teachings that he could frequently leave his listeners way behind. But he didn't do that to show off. It simply came from his great love of what he had read and his desire to share the insights he had received. It is easy to imagine Karl spending all his time reading but he also wrote a great deal as well—poetry, letters to all sorts of people and magazines—his talks for Sunday services—articles in *Lifeline* and *Things Heard and Seen* and book like articles for the Swedenborgian magazine *New Philosophy*.

During his last year he maintained a very upbeat and positive approach to life despite all the problems and setbacks he experienced. This perhaps showed itself most in his easy way of talking with doctors and nurses in hospital and in St Christopher's Hospice. As I know from being with him on some occasions he made the job of those discussing difficult things with him straightforward and easy—and at the same time he might offer them some gems of wisdom or even a copy of the *Arcana*! It was a great privilege and joy for me to share communion with Karl just a week before he died. It was so clear that day how much he looked forward to hearing just a few

readings from the Word and the Writings and then sharing the bread and the wine and afterwards he expressed his wonder at it all.

Karl was and still is a wonderful man—a kind, caring and thoughtful man with a mind able to probe deeply into the real meaning of life. In one of Swedenborg’s books, *True Christian Religion*, he describes a vision of a church in heaven over the door of which is an inscription which means “Now it is permitted to enter with understanding into the mysteries of faith.” Now that Karl is fully awake to life in the spiritual world his quest to understand the mysteries of faith will be continuing unabated without the physical constraints of a worn out body and in the company of like-minded people and those with whom he has shared mutual love.

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