

GROWING YOUNG

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Bishop de Charms lived among us until 99 years of age. He retained his essential character, affections, and interests. He continued to give papers to the Council of the Clergy until a very old age; but instead of delivering them from notes as before, he began to read his short studies. When he was about 90, the Council was discussing evangelization, observing how things really weren't going well. Bishop de Charms got up and, for the first time in years, spoke extemporaneously. He spoke vividly about how the Christian Church started with so few—that even among the 12 apostles, one turned against Him. Yet that Church grew, became widespread. This was a very young man talking, with powerful insight. It was unforgettable.

Bishop Alfred Acton I (1867-1956) was my teacher in the Academy Theological School. In his 80s he invited the theologs to his home for supper, home-made beer, and discussion. Often we'd discuss the nature of spiritual substance, one of his favorite subjects. He would sit back and watch the theologs discuss. His face was absolutely alive, and there was no feeling of any age difference. He was one of us, except much wiser. He was young.

I had an uncle in his late 70s, early 80s, still an active lawyer, still exploring new ideas. He loved the Heavenly Doctrines; they were very much alive in his mind. At the shore, he loved to swim and he'd enter the waves as "Mr. Magoo," without teeth, glasses—but with childish delight. He loved to talk New Church ideas with us.

I knew two sisters in Toronto, then well along in their 90s. They were absolutely alive and young: interested in you, in other people, in the church. One of them was quite a feminist activist. Once I told her, kidding her, that we had a rule in the Church that once past the age of 85, women couldn't serve on the pastor's council or the board. She was absolutely indignant until she

caught on that she was being kidded, and laughed.

What Makes Us Young?

What makes an old person young? And why are there so few that are that way? I think both the Writings and empirical psychology help answer these questions, at least to some degree. In talking about spiritual youth, which is the essential cause of being young, the Writings tell of certain symbolic portrayals:

There are spirits who are in other respects good, but who cannot as yet be admitted into heaven, because they are not willing to hear and to admit interior and [still less] the more interior things of the Word.... Upon earth there will...be many who will hate the interior and more inward things of the Word, because they more closely touch the life of their love.... Those spirits were represented to me by a vision—they were like an old woman with an ugly face...snowy white; the face was irregular [in its features], and anything but beautiful; in a word it was deformed.... But afterwards, spirits who hear, admit, and love interior things, were represented to me by a virgin in a white shining garment, in the very prime of her maiden age, playing on a musical instrument. Thus, such spirits are clothed in white shining raiment, and are remitted into the bloom of their youth.... (*Spiritual Diary* 1139-1143)

The willingness to hear the Word openly, and to admit its interior and inmost things, is the pathway to spiritual youth. Behind this willingness to apply the inmosts of the Word to one's mind and heart is an inmost quality. This is expressed in the Word by the Lord's words: "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it" (Luke 18: 16-17). About this the Writings teach that "a person is so created as to be during his childhood in external innocence and, when he becomes old, in internal innocence, to the end that he may come by means of the former into the latter, and from the latter return to the former. For the same reason when a person becomes old he dwindles in body and becomes like a child, but like a wise child, that is, an angel, for a wise child is in an eminent sense an

angel” (*Heaven and Hell* 278: 3).

Two Ways to View Aging

Heaven and Hell reveals that “to grow old in heaven is to grow young” (414). A couple from the inmost heaven, thousands of years old, appeared to Swedenborg as incredibly handsome and beautiful, and very young. Yet they were among the wisest beings in creation. Growing old in body on earth can be looked at in two ways: from the stand-point of time and the aging body, or from the viewpoint of states and the essential spirit. All of our growth toward regeneration on earth is toward being young in spirit. Old age can be the wisest and even happiest time for us on earth, if we think in the light and warmth of the trinal Word and follow the revealed path of life. To be reborn is to enter heaven in heart even while on earth, and thus to enter the youthfulness of heaven. The same familiar passage from *Heaven and Hell* puts it beautifully:

Those who are in heaven are continually advancing towards the spring of life, with a greater advance towards a more joyful and happy spring the more thousands of years they live; and this to eternity.... Women who have died old and worn out with age, if they have lived in faith in the Lord, in charity to the neighbor, and in happy marriage love with a husband, advance with the succession of years more and more into the flower of youth and early womanhood, and into a beauty that transcends every conception of any such beauty as is seen on earth.

These angels are the very forms of charity.

Old age is ideally a “wise infancy,” innocent and playful. Just because this is very rare today does not mean that it cannot exist, or will not gradually increase as the New Church is established more universally. Conjugal love is said to be rare, but it does exist. And so with a wise and happy old age. The cause of this comes not from our doubting lower senses or “death” forces in the lower psyche, but rather from the Lord Himself, and His heavens. We are told: “‘Old age’ in the internal sense does not

signify old age, because the internal man, or man's spirit, does not know what old age is; but as the body or external man grows old, the internal passes into newness of life, man's spirit being perfected by age as his bodily powers diminish" (*Arcana Coelestia* 4676).

I have often visited old people's homes in my pastoral work and have seen the senility and pathetic states of people there. So often one sees a senile old woman hugging a doll. She is back in infancy again on one level of her mind. And the Lord is instilling with her special new remains that will last to eternity. No evil or disorder is permitted that will not yield some eternal use; and so with the senility of some in old age. An interesting contrast to the picture of old people's homes just drawn is in the book by M. Scott Peck entitled *A View by the Window*. The people he describes aren't really old. Some, a few, are even touchingly wise and alive. Scott Peck knows whereof he speaks, having served for years as a doctor in such a home.

Growing old gracefully is a vital part of living a trusting, spiritual life. Despair, grouchiness, in fact evil itself, attack strongly in old age. Later states of regeneration involve highs and lows more extreme than in youth. But if the lows are faced by holding the Lord's hand and obeying His Word, the gift of inner youth that follows gives all of life a tender meaning. I think that is why we are so affected by the innocence of some old people. When they are alive and youthful in spirit, innocent and open, it has an effect more potent to our hearts than that of even an innocent child.

Choosing to be Old

In utter contrast to this are certain attitudes that can make us old even when chronologically young. You can see, for example, a relatively young adult who is a fussy old person, with established old person habits. By their hair-do and body language, certain young women can say: "I'm not going to get

married—I'm a spinster-person!" And a young man, deeply imbedded in old person habits, can make a similar male statement. Certain psychological defenses or stances make us old in mind and go against creativity, openness, and youth. And some spiritual attitudes are even more potent in aging us long before the body is old.

What the Writings Teach about Developing States

Each stage of life has its time of crisis when we make the choice between aging or growing spiritually younger. At an early adult age we can choose to be an "Ishmael" forever (speaking in the symbolic terminology of the Writings), a rebel who is at first young, but ages quickly in negativity. Isaac, our rational and spiritual faith, is far more alive than his spiritual brother Ishmael. But in Isaac's old age, his eyes grew "dim that he could not see" (Gen. 27:1). Then it was time for Jacob to lead in spiritual life. Jacob calls for self-discipline in obeying the Word from a free conscience. If we reject obedience, we never mellow into the "Jacob-becomes-Israel" state. Instead our spirit calcifies. Instead of rejecting mediate good with its merit, we buy into merit 100%. And it undermines our spiritual youth. After the "Jacob-becomes-Israel" state, Joseph comes on the scene. He represents our later regeneration stage of truly finding and loving the Lord.

But we can reject this tender new state, yielding to what would be signified by adultery with Potiphar's wife, or remaining in the prison of Pharaoh. The choices in growing spiritually young always involve the Lord first of all—calling upon Him, asking His help to shun our disclosed ruling evil. If we do this from the Lord, He will lead us on the path of life, which is also the path of "growing young".

But there are also emotional or psychological attitudes, stances that age us prematurely. The wounds of emotional and mental disorders can cause temporary spiritual oldness. Emotional hate

and guilt are strong inhibitors of youthfulness and aliveness. And so is the anxiety and fear that hate, anger, and guilt bring. They tend to make the body rigid in defensiveness, and turn back the thinking levels of the mind. Regression is very common in emotional illness, regression caused partly from fear. In an interesting number, the Writings directly teach that fear closes down the mind (*Divine Providence* 139:1). And this is the opposite of growing truly young. A pathetic psychological aging factor is perfectionism based on a false conscience. The repetitive patterns in perfectionism, in trivial habits that trap the mind, are sad. They speak of an emotional “aging” that is pathetic to see.

The whole effort in therapy is to free the mind of these emotional defenses that are such traps. And if through self-discoveries the mind gradually becomes free, the potent awareness of youth comes in like a fresh and gentle breeze. The direction then is to proceed spiritually to grow young as well, to discover the delightful promises the Lord bestowed upon Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

Confirmations in Psychology

The Writings speak a great deal about the successive stages or major states of life. These are delineated especially in *Arcana Coelestia* 10225, which speaks of four major states from infancy to old age, with subdivisions in these states. What is interesting to me is to see how empirical psychology has also picked up on major successive states, and how there is a bit of a matching up between Revelation and psychology. In fact, the two fields feed each other.

Erik Erikson, a writer in this field, noted three major adult stages: “intimacy versus isolation” from the ages of 20 to 40; “generativity versus stagnation” from ages 40 to 55; and finally “integrity versus despair”¹. His idea of “predictable crises of adult life” was brought to widespread attention in Gail Sheehy’s

book *Passages*.²

She expanded on Erikson's ideas, preferring the less loaded word "passage" over "crisis." Again, one sees correlations between stages found in the Writings and those she discovered by collecting and analyzing case histories. Her empirical studies divide life into a series of passages. And she includes biological factors that affect these stages, such as menopause and aging.

The stage of "pulling up roots," roughly from 18 to 22, she defines as the age when we "cast about for any beliefs we can call our own.... The tasks of this passage are to locate ourselves in a peer group role, a sex role, an anticipated occupation, an ideology or world view" (*Passages* 37-39). This sounds much like the transition from Ishmael to Isaac faith! In proceeding to define the following stages, we see times when the psychological state and the spiritual state seem identical. In the "trying twenties," for example, one major focus is, "How do I put my aspirations into effect?" This parallels the early Jacob state so clearly, which is the application of ideals to natural life. Later, she speaks of the "Deadline Decade" (35 to 45): "In the middle of the thirties we come upon a crossroads.... There is grieving to be done because an old self is dying.... The man of 40 usually feels stale, restless, burdened, and unappreciated.... There are [with people] major shifts of emphasis away from pouring all their energies into their own advancement. A more tender, feeling side comes into play. They become interested in developing an ethical self" (43-45). This sounds doctrinally almost identical to the late Laban-Jacob relationship, when Jacob sees that Laban is "no longer with him, as yesterday and the day before" (cf. Gen. 31: 2). Spiritually, a person then sees selfishness that he has not seen before and he wishes to

¹ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis*, W. H. Norton and Co., New York, 1968, p. 94

² Gail Sheehy, *Passages*, E.P. Dutton, 1976

leave it behind.

Gail Sheehy's next major stage is defined as "Renewal or Resignation," and it sounds like the rebirth of the natural shown in Jacob's being renamed Israel. Gail Sheehy writes: "Somewhere in the mid-forties, equilibrium is regained. A new stability is achieved.... These may well be the best years. Personal happiness takes a sharp turn upward.... At 50, there is a new warmth and mellowing. Friends become more important than ever, but so does privacy." (*Ibid.* 45-46).

The Writings reveal another potential stage beyond this: the establishment of Joseph, or the celestial of the spiritual, in the inmost of the conscious mind. This would be a discovery of the Lord, a consciousness of His immediate presence never known before. Then Benjamin enters the story, corresponding to the new truths we've never truly seen before.

Harmony of Revelation and Psychology

The stages described by Erik Erikson, and the passages of Gail Sheehy harmonize with the revealed overview of states given by the Lord in the Writings. We are told that

...from earliest infancy to extreme old age a person passes through a number of states in respect to his interiors that belong to intelligence and wisdom. The first stage is from birth to his fifth year; this is a state of ignorance and of innocence in ignorance, and is called infancy. The second state is from the fifth year to the twentieth; this is a state of instruction and of memory-knowledge, and is called childhood and youth. The third state is from the twentieth year to the sixtieth, which is a state of intelligence, and is called adolescence, young manhood, and manhood. The fourth or last state is from the sixtieth year upward, which is a state of wisdom, and innocence in wisdom. (*Arcana Coelestia* 10225)

Each state is then described in some detail. In speaking of the last state, we are told:

[It] is a state of wisdom and of innocence in wisdom; which is when the person is no longer concerned about understanding truths and goods, but

about willing and living them; for this is to be wise.... From the succession of these states the person who is wise may also see the wonderful things of the Divine Providence, which are that a prior state is constantly the plane of the states which follow, and that the opening or unfolding of the interiors proceeds successively from outermosts to inmosts; and at last so that what was first (namely, ignorance and innocence), but in outermosts, is also last, but in inmosts; for he who knows that of himself he is ignorant of all things, and that whatever he knows is from the Lord, is in the ignorance of wisdom, and also the innocence of wisdom.” (*Arcana Coelestia* 10225: 6,7)

It is a wonder of Providence that the stages of psychology underpin and support the stages of regeneration. The Writings teach that we will go through major changes of state in our lifetimes whether we regenerate or not. These “natural” stages of life come with advancing age, and are inevitable. But they may serve as the basis and foundation for spiritual stages of progress; they strengthen and express interior development. Thus psychological growth and spiritual growth should go hand in hand (cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 5159, 4005, 4136: 2; *Apocalypse Explained* 543: 3).

The Lord Leads Us Through Successive States

The Lord provides stages of progress to help people in their pathways to compassion and wisdom. In this process, “every age has its delights, and...by these a person is introduced by successive steps into those of the age next following.... These delights had served the purpose of bringing him thereto; and finally to the delight of intelligence and wisdom in old age” (*Arcana Coelestia* 4063).

At the time of the Lord’s birth and earliest infancy, we are told of a man “in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2: 25). Simeon was led by the Holy Spirit to the temple in Jerusalem just as Mary and Joseph brought the infant Lord to be presented. As Simeon held the Infant in his arms, he said, “Lord,

now let your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation” (Luke 2: 29,30). The wise old Simeon holds the infant Lord—the secret of everlasting youth—in His arms. He is the leader, recognizing Who the Lord is.

Simeon represents loyalty to the Lord’s Word throughout a long lifetime. It is this quality that holds the Divine Child, the source of spiritual youth, in his arms. The Word offers many examples of wise old people, and we also know some in our own lifetime. More and more this will be the case on earth as people accept the trinal Word and live it. Instead of being regarded as second-class citizens, wise old people will be seen as leaders of the heart. It is said in the prophet Joel that “your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions” (Joel 2: 28). The “old men” here are the wise, and their “dreaming dreams” means that they instruct concerning truths. Wise old people can have a depth of experience and integrity to receive deep insights (*Apocalypse Explained* 624: 8), and to pass on their wisdom, their “dreams,” received from the heights of love. These are not imaginary “dreams” but the truest insights, comparable to Joseph’s dreams which represent “preaching concerning the Lord’s Divine Human” (*Arcana Coelestia* 4682). Wise old people teach us all, not didactically, but rather by their life and love’s example, and through open, gentle conversation.

Finding Wisdom Within

Where can we find these wise old people? Right within us, as we become older! How? By having the courage to look deep within ourselves from the Lord, and face directly our inmost ruling evil as He reveals it to us. And to pray to Him with all our heart to remove that evil. Then to act on this genuine repentance. If in our own psychology we find emotions of deep hatred and anger at parents or caretakers, we can follow the bravest route of

therapy and face these terrible hates within us. Again, by turning to the Lord, and praying for His help, acknowledging that of ourselves we nurse those hatreds, He will come to us, and help us. If the Lord discloses and helps us remove such ruling evil and such emotional hate, a wonderful dream comes true.

The Lord brings to us what He alone can bring: spiritual youth, the beginning of eternal youth. Perhaps we can discover that most beautiful gift of the Lord: the ignorance of wisdom, and the innocence of wisdom (cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 10225). The “ignorance of wisdom” is a new term. It denotes that our knowledge is so little compared to the vastness of creation, and the Infinity of our Lord. From this genuine acknowledgment of our ignorance can come a sense of wonder! Wonder before the beauty of creation. Wonder before the tenderness of the Lord. This is the quality of a “wise child.”

When this gift comes to us, as we deeply pray it does, then the idea of death itself will become less and less traumatic, less and less feared. It will be seen as it was in ancient times—as the gateway to heaven and to life. With death, the old body is cast aside and the loving person grows younger, and then youth in the heart is matched by the beauty of a young spiritual body. Then the angels can say of each of us what was said of Joseph: “Look, this dreamer is coming” (Gen. 37: 19).

Those who are in true conjugal love, after death, when they become angels, return to their early manhood and to youth, the males, however spent with age, becoming young men, and the wives, however spent with age, becoming young women. Each partner returns to the flower and joys of the age when conjugal love begins to exalt the life with new delights, and to inspire playfulness.... The person who while he lived in the world had shunned adulteries as sins, and who has been inaugurated by the Lord into conjugal love, comes into this state first exteriorly, and afterwards more and more interiorly to eternity.... [Then] a person puts off all the austerity, sadness and dryness of old age, and puts on the liveliness, gladness, and freshness of youth. (*Apocalypse Explained* 1000)