

## **Impermanence and Eternity: the Path Between**

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Readings: Tao Te Ching, Chapter 16; Mark 13:31-37

One day last May I was at home with my newborn daughter, Marielle. She was about two weeks old and she was having a very fussy afternoon. I was trying everything to make her feel better, but I couldn't figure out what was bothering her. I found myself holding her in my arms and bouncing gently in the living room, when it occurred to me to put on some music and see if that could change her mood. I put on a favorite new CD of mine, by an African-American a capella women's group called Sweet Honey in the Rock. I chose my favorite song, turned up the volume and held my baby in my arms next to the speaker.

I had listened to this CD a couple of times but had never really comprehended the lyrics of this particular song. But as I stood there, singing words I hadn't before understood, I realized it was a song from a daughter to her recently-deceased mother. She sang, "You used to rock me in the cradle of your arms/ You said you'd hold me till the pains of life were gone/ You said you'd comfort me in times like these- /And now I need you./ Now I need you, and you are gone."

I sang the words into Marielle's little new face. Tears sprang to my eyes and dropped onto her soft clothes. She became silent, calm and utterly alert, her blue eyes absolutely clear. I was singing this song to her, and she was also singing it to me some time in the future, mourning my death. Time collapsed in on itself, and there we were: a mother and newborn baby; and also a memory of a mother and and grieving daughter. The present and the future sat side by side in my living room.

We were only two weeks into the immense new project of unfolding our lives together, and yet I was overcome with feeling how ultimately temporary it all was. The song ended with resolution: "I thought you were gone/ But now I know you're with me/ You are the voice that whispers/ All I need to hear." When my baby and I get to the other end of the lifetime we had just begun, I will be gone, and surely she will carry something of me with her. In some sense, we were already there. In those three minutes of clear-eyed wakefulness, she and I existed both in time and in eternity. We glimpsed the beginning and the end, what lies between and what continues throughout, having neither beginning nor end. I am sure that she saw it just as clearly as I did. But the song ended and she began to cry again.

I'm not sure why exactly it was that at a time of my life so full of birth and new life, so full of vitality and potential, I was led to meditate precisely on their absence. Living with a baby puts one in an odd state of constantly cherishing and mourning the particularly amazing creation of a single day. It is like living with an exquisite ice sculpture-- fascinating to behold and unable to be captured as it melts away. But what has really been so interesting to me about living with babies has been to acknowledge that we are all growing and changing in miraculous ways and at a very dynamic pace, just like they are. The miracle of

birth has happened to all of us, and if I can dare to call it this, the miracle of death will happen to us as well.

The Eastern religions have seen far more clearly than Westerners the insight of the impermanent nature of being. It figures prominently in Buddhism and is known as one of the four "seals of the law." The Buddhist world view believes that everything emerges from nothingness and returns to nothingness; that change is constant; and that the only thing permanent or fixed is existence itself.

Some Tibetan Buddhist monks create mandala sand paintings as an expression of these ideas. A sand painting is a representation of the universe and contains traditional Tibetan Buddhist symbolism. It is created by monks whenever they feel there is a need for the healing of the environment and all living beings. The act of constructing it is considered a religious practice and a path to enlightenment. First the monks hold an opening ceremony to evoke the forces of goodness. Then, hour after hour and day after day for several days, the monks carefully pour colored sand into the intricate design, working painstakingly for hours on end. When finally the design is complete, the monks hold another ceremony-- to destroy it. They sweep the sand up with a broom, moving from the outside in towards the center. The hours of work, the unique beauty, the spiritual symbolism-- gone. The destruction symbolizes how all returns to the source in old age and death. Afterwards, the monks either give the sand to those present for healing purposes, or pour it into a nearby river or stream, so that it may make its way to the ocean, disseminating universal goodness through the world.

We heard a reading from the Tao Te Ching this morning, representing another Eastern tradition which upholds the notion of impermanence. The Tao is seen as the ultimate reality, both beyond time and in time, a kind of life energy flowing into all things. Taoist philosophy emphasizes a freedom and simplicity of being when we can let go of ego and let ourselves be carried by the innate balance in the flow of life.

Our own culture resists contemplation of impermanence and dying. We tend to go to great lengths to forget that we are only on earth temporarily, and this is evident in everything from the kinds of products we buy, to the way we interact with our bodies, to the way we handle our trash. But this morning I'd like to propose that when we meditate on the impermanence of our lives, we welcome a deep and beautiful level of meaning that is truly transformative. When we welcome our temporary nature, we embrace the opportunity to wake up to our spiritual lives.

One thing that we might realize is that we are not who we think we are. There is an essential part of us that is eternal, and that part of us is not made up of the things that we usually think of as our identity, like our bodies, where we live, or what kind of work we do. The things we think of as our "own," Swedenborg called our *proprium*. Our *proprium* wants to appropriate, wants to take and hold, and is always trying to get us to believe that we can fully take the credit-- and the blame-- for our lives. When in fact, our whole lives come from

and belong to God.

In this world, everything that is, is from God. God's divine love and wisdom is constantly flowing into us and if this were to cease even for one moment, creation would collapse. In a sense then, we don't have a self that is separate from God; we are vessels of God's creative love.

This is incredibly liberating when we think about impermanence because we realize that if we have no separate self, we can never die. And if we can never die, we belong to the eternal. Swedenborg believed that we live in two worlds at the same time: the natural world and the spiritual world. Another way of saying that is that we live both in time and in eternity.

If we have no separate self, then what are we? In Swedenborgian terms, we are what we love: this is called our ruling love. In our eternal process of spiritual growth, we are invited to transform our ruling love from love of self into love of God and love of others. To move from natural love to spiritual love. This is the legacy we leave behind. This is the signature we leave on the spiritual reality of existence. All of the love we give to others, all of the good acts that we do: these are stored by ourselves and others as spiritual "remains" that stay with us for eternity and create the quality of our being in this world and the next.

In our reading from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus exhorts his followers to wake up in the face of what was believed to be the imminent end of the world. Swedenborg says that in this passage, to be awake means to receive life from the Lord, which is spiritual life. Sleeping means living only a natural life, while waking up means understanding spiritual truths and living according to them.

We are temporary beings on earth, constantly mediating the path between the impermanence of the natural world and the eternity of the spiritual world. Both are real. Both are present. We are called to fully wake up to this dynamic reality. To be spiritual is to embrace the eternal, and to embrace the eternal is to invite the opportunity to live in heaven right now.

How does it change the way we live if we embrace that which is eternal? Perhaps we realize that everything we want for ourselves and for others is goodness. Perhaps we practice letting go of our self-centeredness; letting go of our ego; perhaps we hold lightly instead of desperately, to our worldly goals; perhaps we practice loving the world and other people in every way we can, every single day. We understand that our lives are a humbling and precious gift we have been given by God. We try to make our lives a beautiful and loving project with the time span we have been given. We open our eyes to the beauty that surrounds us; to the exquisite wonder of all things existing in any given moment. We open our eyes to the suffering of the world, and lend our lives to alleviating it. Perhaps we turn the focus of our life spans on things that really matter; perhaps we use our abilities to build a better world.

The experience I had listening to the song with Marielle was one in which I stepped out of time and into the eternal for a moment. It opened my eyes to cherish all that I had in the present with the knowledge that it would not always be there. It made me think about what kind of life I want to lead with the time I have on earth, and what kind of mother I want to be. It made me think about

what kind of world Marielle will live in, and what I want to give to her before I die.

Swedenborg says that every one of our actions has consequences to eternity. As the days of our natural lives count down, may we walk the path between impermanence and eternity, consciously and lovingly. May we hold our life spans like the most precious of jewels, created by God and destined for heaven. May we embrace fully our existence in two worlds, with love flowing through us and out from us, reaching backwards into the past, deeply into the present, and outwards into the future. And above all, may we keep awake! Amen.