



Building A Daily Spiritual Practice Based on Swedenborg's "Rules of Life"

BY JIM LAWRENCE

A History Chase

Though Swedenborg's "Rules of Life" have been in Swedenborgian published discourse since as early as his memorial service, disagreement exists on whether Swedenborg literally penned the Rules of Life. The only extant claim of seeing them

heresy trial and, despite having many prominent friends, he was the subject of much ridicule, even to the extent of published cartoons questioning his sanity or honesty, since many thought he was fabricating his spiritual world stories.

The now legendary Rules of Life occur in Sandels's eulogy, immediately following a paragraph where he acknowledges some of the public perception issues associated with his colleague. Interestingly, in 1784, just twelve years after Swedenborg's death, Robert Hindmarsh in England published an edited translation of the eulogy in which he excised language addressing problems in Swedenborg's public image, and this abridged version of the eulogy has had a far greater reception in history than the full text, which was not published until 1826.

In the full version, the rules come right after Sandels broaches the controversy around Swedenborg. The rules form the basis of his

defense of the character of his much older colleague. Sandels describes Swedenborg's healthy psychology and his conscientious approach to living as a refutation of any notion that Swedenborg was crazy or had suspect motivations. Sandels claims to have seen scribbled in the margins "in several places" in Swedenborg's manuscripts these rules that Swedenborg set out for himself as evidence of his sincerity and honesty.

The problem with this claim of several instances of these rules appearing in Swedenborg's manuscripts is that those same manuscripts were all carted to the

Royal Academy of Sciences in Stockholm, and they have been painstakingly examined by a great many scholars and researchers. The rules have never

Continues on page 86

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is the eulogy delivered at his memorial service by Samuel Sandels, a colleague from the Board of Mines and the Royal Academy of Sciences.

Swedenborg had become somewhat controversial by the end of his life. He was still involved in an unresolved

Rules of Life: a Daily Practice

Continued from page 81

been seen. Few archives have been as thoroughly vetted as Swedenborg's. Without mentioning their names here, I have asked a few people who, I believe, have the best knowledge of those archives, and all of them agree there is zero chance that several scribbles of the rules in margins exist in those twenty thousand pages.

How the Rules Came to Be: A Surmise

Here's what I think happened (and I've given many eulogies). Sandels wanted in his eulogy to present his friend's life in the best possible light. It is clear from the tone of the eulogy that Sandels did not expect Swedenborg to become an inspiration for a worldwide religion and that those very same piles of papers going from Swedenborg's house to the Academy would be painstakingly pored over by scholars and devotees in the centuries to come. The most believable hypothesis is that Sandels creatively shaped the Rules as a rhetorical device to convey fairly and justly his friend's integrity in the way he lived his life. Sandels would have been bowled over if he had been informed that in the centuries to come his rhetorical device would adorn plaques hung on countless walls all over the world. But he might have been pleased that he nailed the spirituality of his beloved colleague so truly.

Indeed, I have hung the rules on my wall for thirty-five years and felt from my earliest days after my young adult conversion into the faith that they are true to Swedenborg's spirituality. Their continual presence since the inception of organized Swedenborgian activities has established them as part of the lived tradition of Swedenborgian spirituality. But I am unaware of any serious attempt in any Swedenborgian tradition to turn them into a practice.

I began shaping a daily spiritual practice of Swedenborg's Four Rules via an incorporation of them into the forms of *Lectio Divina* and the *Examen* about a year ago and have been using and revising the practice on a daily basis since. It has worked for me better than any other spiritual practice I have tried, probably because I really do regard it as Swedenborgian and believe it is a profound way to efficiently engage spiritual principles for the kind of regenerative living to which Swedenborg constantly points. Below I share the framework I have been using.

What are Swedenborg's Rules of Life?

In Sandels's Swedish there are six statements, which traditionally have

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been combined to create four rules. The six statements are as follows:

- 1) Diligently to read and reflect on the Word of God
- 2) To be content with God's providence; to submit everything to the will of Divine Providence
- 3) To observe a proper behavior
- 4) To obey what is commanded and keep your conscience pure and clear
- 5) To attend faithfully to your office and duties
- 6) To be useful to society in general

The two most common renderings on websites and plaques are first,

- 1) Often to read and meditate on the Word of God
- 2) To submit everything to the will of Divine Providence
- 3) To observe in everything a propriety of behavior, and to keep the con-

science clear

- 4) To discharge with fidelity the functions of my employments, and to make myself in all things useful to society

And second,

- 1) Diligently read and meditate on the Word of God.
- 2) Be content under the dispensation of the Lord's Providence.
- 3) Observe a propriety of behavior and keep the conscience pure.
- 4) Obey what is ordered; attend faithfully to one's office and other duties; and, in addition, make one's self useful to society in general.

A Suggested Practice for Swedenborg's Rules of Life

After receiving a Ph.D. in the field of spirituality and being asked to teach an introductory course in spiritual disciplines and practices multiple times at Pacific School of Religion, I have become increasingly acquainted with a broad spectrum of spirituality practices.

A couple of years ago, for the first time I noticed that Swedenborg's Rules of Life incorporate the essence of two of the most popular Christian spirituality practices from a far back history: *Lectio Divina* and the Ignatian *Examen*. The first rule is a version of *Lectio Divina* or *Lectio Spiritualis*, which are structured ways of "praying the Word" (or possibly even Swedenborg's writings). The rest of the rules are easily shaped into performing a daily *Examen*. In my interest in shaping a practice that is doable on a daily basis, I prefer the option in the rules that says "often" for praying the Word, which is not necessarily daily. The first rule might be done a few times a week, whereas "praying" the rest of the rules should be done daily.

Brief *Lectio Divina* Primer

Using the Bible or Swedenborg's

Continues on page 87

Rules of Life: a Daily Practice

Continued from page 86

writings, one reads a selected passage slowly four times with a space of time placed between each reading. A different focus or spiritual mindset is employed sequentially across the four times through the selected text. Those

are each described below. Some people, however, like to “go with” a focused movement within once they have identified the word or phrase or thought that has arrested their conscience and heart. Instead of proceeding with the customary sequence, they remain with the movement that has occurred and “pray it through” to a finished con-

versation with the One to whom they pray. You can experiment a little with it either way, but let’s know that the classic method is to read through four times slowly so that the work of each step can take place in its structured process. Slow the reading down if you feel it is passing you by.

Continues on page 91

A Daily Swedenborgian Practice Based on Swedenborg’s Rules of Life

Find a comfortable spot where you are not likely to be disturbed.

- I) **Recall that you are in the presence of God:** As you quiet yourself, become aware that God is present with you, that God is always present in the creation that surrounds you, in your body, in those around you. The One who brought you forth into being unwaveringly loves you and is present working with you to reach your fullest potential. “The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth” (Psalm 145:8).
- II) **Swedenborgian Lectio Divina:** If this is a day that you will do *Lectio*, spend fifteen minutes or more reflecting in a journal on a small amount of text from the Bible or from Swedenborg’s writings. Read the text as if it is being spoken to you personally, and let yourself be in dialog with it. The main objective is to feed the heart, soul, and will through the mind. Each session’s passage should be brief enough that the scope will not overwhelm you. The goal is to go deeply, not widely. After you have taken a few minutes to quiet your mind, turn your attention to the passage you have selected.
- III) **Swedenborgian Examen:**
 - A. Spend a moment looking over the past day or recent experience first with a spirit of gratitude for the gift of life that you are here with the opportunity to co-create your life with God.
 - B. Petition for the Light of Insight. Ask God to help you examine what is important in recent experience, to notice in recall your actions, attitudes, and motives with honesty and patience. Ask God for inner light that you may see what God would have you see.
 - C. Let events and experiences of your day come forth in your memory. Sense what comes forth as most important, whether big or small. Let come to the heart’s mind experiences that seem most significant, whether “negatively” or “positively.” That is, let experiences come to mind that seemed to bring you closer to a conjunction with God or that seemed to separate you from a feeling of conjunction with God.
 - D. Swedenborg’s three foci: Once you have brought the recent framework of life experience into consciousness with a noticing both of joys and concerns, ask yourself in the presence of God each of the following three questions:
 1. What do I need to submit to Divine Providence? What is too big to handle or solve or resolve? Hold it up to God and hand it over. Allow yourself to trust in God to manage the unfolding process and receive the peace in releasing this concern to God. Allow yourself to receive the blessing of spiritual contentment that comes with trust in Divine Providence.
 2. Is anything troubling my conscience? In recent experience or newly recalled experience is there something I need to amend? Is my conscience sending a message for attention to something needing repentance? Are there new actions to undertake or recommitments to take to clear my conscience?
 3. With what is upcoming in the day or the morrow, how can I be most useful? Of the many possible matters to which I can attend, which situations come to the fore as most important for creating a use for others? What do I need to prioritize to effect maximum usefulness for the next day?
 - E. Response: Review for a moment what has arisen in your Swedenborgian *Examen*. Give thanks for the connections experienced with God in bringing to light your experience. Identify the one, two, or three matters that came to you as responses to live out. Ask God for help in moving forward and return full circle to the spirit of gratitude for the gift of life.

Rules of Life: a Daily Practice

Continued from page 87

1. *Lectio*. Read a short passage of text that you have decided upon in advance. Read slowly, letting your awareness rest in turn upon each word, savoring it. As you read, be alert for any particular word or phrase that draws your attention in a special way.
2. *Meditatio*. Meditate on this word or phrase or thought, allowing it to

become more fully formed. What comes to you as a spiritual answer to something going on in your life? As you hold this dialog and insight in your mind and heart, let yourself become aware of any answering thoughts, images, or memories that arise for you.

3. *Oratio*. Respond to the word that has especially spoken to you. Your heart may call out in thanks, or praise, or joy. If the word has been painful, your response might be one of remorse or anger or supplication. Seek direction for new life through the insights given.
4. *Contemplatio*. Rest in God's presence, content simply to be with God.

Brief Examen Primer

The *Examen* is shaped from the sixteenth-century classic Spiritual Exercises by Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) and forms the core of Ignatian spirituality. Many different versions of the practice exist, though the similarities are much more prominent than minor differences. The *Examen* is the first “rule” in monastic history that was shaped for the general laity in contrast to those who had taken vows and who followed much more elaborate and rigorous rules. The fact that it has become so widely used across many Christian (and other) traditions is owed to its simple and effective approach to daily prayer. It is structured enough that you can't do it in a couple of minutes, but simple enough that a powerful and complete experience of praying through recent experience can be achieved in as few as a dozen minutes. ☩

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