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Emanuel Swedenborg comments on this aspect of our nature in many places in his writings as in this extract from True Christian Religion 498:

*It becomes clear in riotous crowds, where the restraints of the law are ineffective, that this is what people are like inwardly, as also in cases of massacre and looting, when the signal is given to wreak one's fury on the defeated or besieged; hardly anyone holds his hand until the drum is heard signalling it to cease. These examples show that if there were no fear of legal penalties to deter people, not only society but the whole human race would be destroyed. The only way to be rid of all these evils is to use one's free will in spiritual matters correctly, that is, to focus the mind on thoughts of the conditions of life after death.*

Emanuel Swedenborg also explains that when we pass fully into the spiritual world any external pretence about who we are, drops away and our real character emerges so that what lies beneath comes out into the open.

But we must not wait till then! The challenge for us is to confront what lies beneath and with God's help remove the worst of our selfish desires and inclinations and so progressively make our true character transparently good. Then there will be no lies beneath!



## What lies beneath?

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## What lies beneath?

It is just a few weeks since the awesome power of Hurricane Katrina wrought havoc across several of the southern states of America and in particular brought death and destruction to the city of New Orleans. Although the city should have been protected to some degree by the concrete levees surrounding it, these failed, and most of the city was engulfed in water. It is hard to really imagine the scale of the tragedy brought on by this natural disaster, despite all the television and newspaper reports. Lives and possessions were lost, thousands of buildings were destroyed and all this from one hurricane! But, as if this was not bad enough, a second tragedy developed as law and order collapsed and looting, rioting, rape and murder erupted. Why did the frightened huddled masses have to cope with an outbreak of man-made terror as well as the effects of a natural disaster?

Commentators reporting on these scenes asked whether such things would happen in other cities of the world faced with extreme situations and we must wonder how we would have reacted placed in the same situation. Whilst we should not make rash judgements about what took place, we can look at this second tragedy of New Orleans and see what it can tell us about our own communities and our own lives.

In New Orleans the destructive effects of the hurricane made law and order impossible to maintain. The normal external controls on everyday life disappeared and violence and hatred rose up where care and concern should have been prevalent. The hard pressed people of New Orleans found out what lies beneath the thin veneer of civilised life – evils of all kinds waiting to break out!

Now we have experienced riots in cities in this country in past years, but these happened when normal law and order was in place. Just imagine what might happen if something like hurricane Katrina had caused the breakdown of law and order - what might we then have witnessed here?

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But the real lesson of the second tragedy of New Orleans comes from reflecting on our own nature and character. In many ways we are like a community, a town or even a city. We have many different aspects to our character like the many different people in a town. There are good parts to us and bad parts. We have right motives and wrong motives. But whatever the tremendous mix of characteristics that makes us who we are, we tend to present an overall image to other people that is reasonably good and kind. We keep control of ourselves so that for most of the time the world around us sees us as we want to be seen. But the question we need to ask of ourselves is – “what lies beneath?”

Now occasionally some of the bad aspects of our character come to the surface and we become angry, aggressive, intolerant, rude or whatever. To some extent we lose that tight control we have on ourselves and a real part of us briefly erupts. Now imagine what would happen if there were no constraints on how we behaved, no laws to keep us in check, would just our ‘normal’ anger, aggressiveness and intolerance come to the surface or would much worse, deeply hidden evils break out?

In the gospels Jesus uses some of the Scribes and Pharisees as examples of the hypocrisy that can be present when we fail to acknowledge what really lies beneath our veneer of respectability.

*“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness”.*

**Jesus in Matthew 23:25-28**

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