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Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the visionary Jesuit priest, wrote in the 20th century:

We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.

Emanuel Swedenborg not only recognised that we are living in two worlds but also that when we die our real inner spiritual self goes on living:

As regards the soul, which - it is said - goes on living after death, it is nothing else than the actual person living in the body. That is, the soul is the person's inner self acting in the world by means of the body and imparting life to the body. When his inner self is released from the body the person is called a spirit and then appears in a completely human form.
Arcana Coelestia 6054

Should not our emphasis be on developing the quality of our inner life rather than worrying excessively as we do about our outer physical world?



Living in two worlds

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Living in two worlds

One of the problems with our busy materialistic world is that we seem to get very little time to think more deeply about what is going on in our lives. Everyday is made up of all sorts of practical and physical activities. We go to the shops and buy food. We cook our meals and wash up. We clean the house and read the newspaper. We mow the lawn or put our feet up in front of the television. We go to work by car or bus or train and come back late and tired. So much can get crammed into one day that we begin to feel unable to cope or at the other end of the scale we may have so little we can do that we feel lonely and cut off from the world around. If we are blessed with all our senses we can see the world around us, we can hear it, touch it, smell it and taste it. And particularly at this time of the year, when all sorts of flowers are coming into bloom, the physical world around us offers a wonderful array of stimulants for our senses. And we mustn't forget our interactions with other people: a wave across the street, a smile to a passer-by, a chat over coffee, a lengthy phone call, a letter from a friend, a kind word or a loving kiss. There is so much going on in our physical world that it is not surprising that many people live as though there is nothing else – that everything that goes on in our lives can be explained in physical terms.

But is this really so?

Imagine you are holding a fragrant rose in your hand. You see the wonderful colour and texture of the flower, you touch its soft and smooth petals and you smell its intoxicating fragrance. So far you have been involved in a physical way with this rose but how does it make you feel? Do you feel happier and a little brighter inside, does a smile come over your face, does it evoke distant memories, do you feel more peaceful, do you feel more loved or more loving? In a wonderful way that rose, out there in the physical world around us, has touched something deep inside you and you have responded.

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Or imagine that you have just received a letter from somebody you knew a long time ago. You open the letter, see who it is from, and read the first few lines. They are just ink on paper but how do you feel? Do you feel surprised and pleased, does a feeling of warmth grow within as you recall your past friendship, are you transported back to another time and place, do you now feel close once again? Just like the rose, something as physical as ink and paper has touched you deep inside and you have responded.

These are just two examples of the countless situations we can find ourselves in when we realise that there is something much deeper to our lives than our physical being. Whilst our lives appear dominated by the physical world around us there is another world within us of feeling and thought where our deepest experiences take place and where we develop our real character. It is our inner world where, for example, we can feel deep joy when we are very close to someone we love and deep pain when we are separated.

Throughout the ages wise people have realised that we live in two worlds at the same time, a physical outer world and a deeper inner spiritual world. The problem is that we get so absorbed by the state of our physical outer world that we don't spend enough time on the spiritual world within us. How many people, for example, struggling in a gym to improve their physical well-being, would spend just a little time on spiritual exercises to help them develop their inner world? Is this not a distorted view of our priorities?

Jesus highlighted the need to change our priorities in favour of the inner spiritual life when he said:

Do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. Luke 12:29-31

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