

The Path of Life

By Rev. Dr. Joy T. Barnitz, Spring 2026

Sermon in a sentence: *In challenging and uncertain times it can be helpful to let ourselves listen for God's comforting voice calling us to walk our unique path of life.*

Preparatory music: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=688YaaEePwE> The Way Knows the Way – by Lindsey Scott

Readings:

Psalm 16 (excerpt) Stephen Mitchell translation

Unnamable God, I feel you with me at every moment

I give thanks to you at all times for lifting me from my confusion, for teaching me in the dark and showing me the path of life.

I have come to the center of the universe; I rest in your perfect love.

In your presence there is fullness of joy and blessedness forever and ever.

Swedenborg: *Divine Providence (Dole) n. 60[4]*

There really are paths in the spiritual world, paths that lead to each community of heaven and to each community of hell. We all see our own paths, spontaneously, it seems. We see them because the paths there are for the loves of each individual. Love opens the paths and leads us to our kindred spirits. No one sees any paths except those of her or his love.

This essay is based on three prior sermons given to Swedenborgian communities.¹ Preparing for the most recent one, given online to the Church of the Holy City in Washington, D.C. in February, 2026 (<https://holycitydc.org/2026/02/15/the-path-of-life-feb-15-2026-with-guest-rev-dr-joy-barnitz/>), began in earnest as I reflected on Rev. Rich Tafel's sermon earlier in February 2026 on "How Evil Works" (<https://holycitydc.org/2026/02/01/how-evil-works-feb-1-2026-with-rev-rich-tafel/>) and on the walk of the Buddhist monks that

¹ These were at Hillside Urban Sanctuary, El Cerrito, California in February 2014; Gathering Leaves at Temenos in West Chester, Pennsylvania in September 2025 and Church of the Holy City, Washington, D.C. in February 2026

concluded in D.C. in mid-February 2026.² I felt a longing to know what I could do to resist the evil at work in our world; to know what work was ***mine*** to do to “heal the world.”³ As I reflected, my thoughts turned to the many pivot points on my long journey to ordination. An important one occurred as I was returning home to Fremont on BART⁴ from my chaplaincy internship at an acute care hospital in San Francisco. As I gazed out the window meditatively I felt a deep sense of ***knowing***; knowing that I was to “grow where I am planted, do what only I can do and to start doing it; don’t wait.” Over the next few years, I engaged deeply in the local interfaith community in the tri-cities area (Fremont, Union City and Newark) of the San Francisco Bay Area and started to volunteer as a chaplain at the local, community hospital. I joined a local church affiliated with the United Church of Christ; it had a GREAT choir! During the pandemic, I became an active “on call chaplain” at the hospital, responding to calls outside of “regular” working hours. Over time, it became clear to me that to live fully into my call, I needed more chaplaincy training and the support of a community of clergy. I was fortunate to be admitted to a program in Clinical Pastoral Education that permitted me to do my clinical work at the hospital where I was already serving. From that experience, I found myself embedded in the hospital’s palliative care team and, as the pandemic ended, establishing and coordinating the hospital’s No One Dies Alone⁵ program to support dying patients.

During the pandemic, I started attending multiple church services by Zoom, including frequently participating in evening prayers at Church of the Holy City in Washington, D.C. Having worked with Rev. Rich Tafel when I was

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2026/02/10/buddhist-monks-peace-walk-arrive-dc/> (accessed 11 February 2026)

³ “*Tikkun olam*, literally 'repairing the world') is a religious concept in [Judaism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judaism), which refers to various forms of action intended to repair and improve the world.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tikkun_olam (accessed 30 April 2026. This recalls Swedenborg’s emphasis on “inherited evil” and our call to work to heal the damage caused by social systemic evil, some of which is an unintended consequence of prior generations’ work to repair the world as they found it..

⁴ BART is the Bay Area Rapid Transit system (<https://www.bart.gov/>, accessed 28 May 2026)

⁵ “No One Dies Alone” programs provide compassionate companionship to terminally ill patients who would otherwise be alone during their final moments, ensuring they have someone by their side. Volunteers are trained to offer support, comfort, and presence, helping to alleviate the loneliness experienced by these patients. A description of “The Birth of No One Dies Alone” may be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHbQwHHR7WIvideo> (accessed 3 May 2026)

council president at the Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco and on the Wayfarer's Chapel Board, I was drawn to Rich's concept of spiritual entrepreneurship. As I continued to do work at the local hospital, I realized that my ministry was more spiritual "***intrapreneurship***," that is: initiating a new program ***within*** an established organization.⁶ Many of the challenges are similar and are common to starting anything new. However, working within an established organization means contending with constraints that may limit what your effort can become. These constraints can also become opportunities to add some "stretch and give" to the organization.

Another pivot point in my life journey occurred when I was asked by Riess Potterveld, then President of the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) in Berkeley, "Do you attribute your resilience to being a Swedenborgian?" as I prepared to leave his office at the conclusion of the meeting that occurred soon after I completed seminary in 2015. Without hesitation, I responded: "Absolutely. But I didn't know it until I was in my fifties." When I said that aloud, I knew it was true. Ever since that "Aha!" moment, I have seen my life as a journey, a pilgrimage of discovering my true purpose, my "ruling love" as I learned to call it as a child in a New Church elementary school. One of my favorite anthems from my childhood worship services comes from the Psalm 16; it begins: "Thou wilt show me the path of life. In Thy presence is fullness of joy. And, at Thy right hand there are pleasures forevermore; there are pleasures forever more."⁷

The readings for these service focused on our ***individual*** paths of spiritual growth. In addition, for Swedenborgians, communal worship and prayer is essential to our spiritual growth and development: we need each other. Worship in community, gathering in prayer with others, is ***sharing a spiritual meal***. Through sharing our reflections, questions and doubts, communal worship brings us together in a sacred space, sometimes including "sacred cyberspace;" a space

⁶ An intrapreneur is a person who initiates a new program within an established organization and setting, in contrast to an entrepreneur, who starts something new that stands alone, by itself, a new entity.

<https://www.nexford.edu/insights/intrapreneurship-vs-entrepreneurship> (accessed 4 May 2026)

⁷ "Thou Wilt Show Me the Path of Life," Anthem, *Liturgy for the Use of The General Church of the New Jerusalem* (Bryn Athyn, PA: revised edition 2005) 1105

that is a sanctuary without walls, where our spirits are fed by “the sense of belonging, which is the most vital of foods.”⁸ It’s vital to our spiritual development that we gather in community at times as we walk our own individual path, guided by God. It’s in such trusting communities that we develop resilience as we confront the challenges of our everyday lives. And we may discover that belonging to multiple, unique communities at the same time or at different times is essential to our personal growth in becoming the unique human we each are called to be. God asks us to cherish our own path, and to honor others’ paths.

And of course, while there are both pleasures and treasures along our path of life, there are also times of sorrow, discouragement, ... and even despair and agonizing loneliness. Often it is in these darkest moments that we become aware that God is “lifting us from our confusion and teaching us in the dark and showing us the path of our life”⁹ ... The path of life through which we form ourselves for heaven through our life in an uncertain world,¹⁰ fashioning ourselves as a unique “organic form recipient of God.”¹¹

The Bible often uses the image of a road, a path, a **way** as a metaphor for our lives. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that God says:

*I will lead the blind by a road they do not know, by paths they have not known.*¹²

Jesus describes himself as “the way, the truth and the life”¹³ in the gospel of John. We are reminded in Matthew’s gospel that we must **choose** to “*enter the gate (that) is narrow and the road (that) is hard that leads to life.*”¹⁴ We must **choose** to be led by God. This choice involves attention, discipline, perseverance and practice. This is a choice we make many

⁸ Adapted from Robin Wall Kimmerer, “Word for the Day” 11 July 2021 on gratefulness.org

⁹ Psalm 16 reading

¹⁰ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven & Hell*, No. 360

¹¹ Emanuel Swedenborg, *True Christian Religion*, (Ager translation) No. 34

¹² Isaiah 42:16 NRSV

¹³ John 14: 2-7 (selections)

¹⁴ Matthew 7:13-14 NRSV

times in our lives. And wherever we are on our life’s journey, God is there ... even when God seems to be silent.

In these uncertain times, I find myself grateful for the resilience that I developed during my life through overcoming setbacks such as multiple corporate restructurings and layoffs. The process of finding new positions as an employee or, eventually, as a consultant, drew on and strengthened my ability to learn from my experiences, harvest new insights, develop deep connections and form a circle of supportive colleagues who pick me up when I fall short. Colleagues who metaphorically dust me off and help me reflect on and learn from my experiences. As a trained labyrinth facilitator, I often walk a labyrinth, sometimes with my feet, more often with my fingers or just my eyes I “walk” one of my many “finger” labyrinths such as the one in the photograph accompanying this essay.¹⁵ Unlike mazes, there are no “dead ends” and, usually, there is only one path on a labyrinth. The many turns on the narrow paths of a labyrinth to keep our eyes focused on keeping to the path, paying attention to each step, to every twist and turn. During medieval times, many labyrinths were laid in the floors of European cathedrals built around 1200 C.E., toward the end of the crusades. Some scholars believe that walking these labyrinths took the place of actual pilgrimages to the Holy Land as actual pilgrimages were too dangerous.¹⁶

I find it useful to think of my life’s journey as a pilgrimage, a path of life that I make by living, reflecting, re-committing to my renewed understanding of my life purpose. In Swedenborgian terms: **my use**.

As I was reminded in a recent worship service, **each and every** Christian is called to be a servant of God: to live our lives in service to each other, and to the communities to which we belong. Through our participation, these communities are enriched and changed, and, through this service, we grow

¹⁵ The image is of a medieval labyrinth in the style of the one on the floor of the cathedral at Notre Dame de Chartres in Chartres, France. A downloadable one is available on the Veriditas website at: <https://www.veriditas.org/resources/Documents/Handouts/Printable%20Chartres-Style%20Finger%20Labyrinth.pdf> (accessed 28 May 2026)

¹⁶ See Lauren Artress, *Walking A Sacred Path*. in the Sources Consulted at the end of this essay.

and so does each community to which we belong. We are reminded in Scripture to look to God for guidance, that we must make the choice again and again to be led by God, to choose what often seems to be a narrow, difficult path, one where we may find it hard to trust in God's love for us. God leaves us in freedom to choose to be led ... or to **not** so choose.¹⁷ Our reading from Swedenborg reminds us that who we really are is revealed by the paths we choose: "We all see our own paths, spontaneously, it seems. ... No one sees any paths except those of her or his love."¹⁸

After spending most of my adult life "outside" church, I "returned" in my fifties. I recall saying to Jim Lawrence during the time I served on the council at the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church that I would go to seminary if that was the only way I could do what I was called to do. At the time it seemed highly improbable. That conversation was several years before I enrolled and about a decade before that meeting with Riess Potterveld referred to earlier. And my path to becoming a chaplain intreprenuer in a multi-faith, diverse community setting has been very challenging ... and filled with unexpected pleasures and treasures.

My specific path has taken unexpected turns. Currently, my answer to the question of "what is mine to do?" is to focus is on strengthening human connections where I live and serve. In January 2026, I co-facilitated training the third cohort in the No One Dies Alone (NODA) program. The trainees were from the Muslim, Sikh, Catholic, Buddhist and Religious Science faith traditions. The NODA program is drawing in and enriching our corps of volunteers to meet the diverse community needs within and beyond the hospital. It is a delight to be a leader building a community where the members share their experiences with others and each grow in their own way. Together we are building a sacred, safe space to grow in our own, unique use as we serve others. In this work, I use **all** of my background:

¹⁷ God leaves us in freedom to choose our path. God values our freedom so much that God permits us to **NOT** choose a path to God-self. Yet, there is an unbreakable link to God that means we can always choose to repent (return to God) and God will always welcome us. In Meister Eckhardt's words: "God is at home, it's we who have gone out for a walk." https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/meister_eckhart_149149 (accessed. 14 February 2026)

¹⁸ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Divine Providence* n. 60[4]

from the lab bench to the corporate boardroom and at the bedside.

And so, I leave you with this question: What are you doing to follow, to make ***your*** unique life path? What are YOU doing as an individual ... and in your communities of belonging to help to "heal the world" as you make that path by living it? Most importantly: What makes **YOU** come ***alive***? Because our world needs people who have come alive.¹⁹ The world needs **you** making your unique way in this life as you "form yourself for heaven by life in the world."²⁰

I conclude with a quote from Reinhold Niebuhr that comforts me and provides perspective and courage when I despair:

*Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by **hope**.*

*Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by **faith**.*

*Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we must be saved by **love**.*

*No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint, therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is **forgiveness**.*²¹

AMEN

¹⁹ Howard Thurman, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/6273-don-t-ask-what-the-world-needs-ask-what-makes-you> (accessed 14 February 2026)

²⁰ Paraphrased from Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, No. 360

²¹ Reinhold Niebuhr (2010). "*The Irony of American History*," p.63, University of Chicago Press <https://quotestruer.com/authors/r/reinhold-niebuhr-quotes/> (accessed 13 February 2026). **BOLD** is my emphasis.

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