

The Evelyn Underhill Newsletter

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Coming Home to Pleshey A Memoir

by Kathleen Staudt



Evelyn Underhill recalls how her first experience of a conducted retreat at Pleshey retreat house in 1922 transformed her attitude toward church and vocation, and began the process of clarifying her own calling. She writes to Baron von Hugel of the satisfactions of the daily regime of communion and four services a day, and reflects that "the whole house seemed soaked in love and prayer." With that description in my memory, I made a two-day retreat to Pleshey last April.

And so I found myself, late on a Saturday afternoon, at the railway station in the distinctly unromantic London suburb of Chelmsford, being met by a tall, soft-spoken man in a worn tweed jacket! He introduced himself as Bruce Hollamsby, the assistant warden, and welcomed me heartily, saying, "You cannot **imagine** how delighted we are to have you here!"

As we drove into the Essex countryside, we talked about other American visitors who had come to Pleshey, and shared experiences as lay ministers in our parish churches. Both of us serve as lay chalcists, and both of us do some pastoral care among the sick in our parishes -- he at the small church next door to the retreat house -- I in suburban Washington, D. C. We found an immediate meeting of minds about the deep satisfactions that we find in our ministries.

Dizzied as I was by the romance of a pilgrimage to Evelyn Underhill's special place, I also found myself oddly confused by the familiarity of what

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Annual Day of Reflection

The 1995 EUA annual Day of Reflection focused on Evelyn Underhill and prayer. Grace Brame wrote: "There is no more important subject for Evelyn Underhill than prayer. It is integral to everything. She writes of SAINTS and says prayer got them that way. She writes of personal TRANSFORMATION and HOLINESS and says it is impossible without prayer. She considers THEOLOGY and BELIEF as only external truth unless expressed through prayer. When she writes of ABSOLUTE REALITY, she claims that the only way to become like it is through prayer. She pleads for CONTEMPLATIVE ACTION, which is life lived as prayer. And when she talks of SERVICE, she says God can do nothing through us, unless we are in prayer."

The Day of Reflection was again held at The College of Preachers, Washington National Cathedral, on June 17th. For the second year the National Retreat Association of England sponsored its National Quiet Day on the same day. Next year's Day falls on the actual death day of EU, Saturday, June 15th. Those interested in attending may contact the Special Events Office of the Washington National Cathedral.



HELP!

We need your help! Tell us what you are doing to make known the life and work of Evelyn Underhill. How can the Association help? Give us ideas. How about a dramatic presentation on the life of Underhill? Other programming? Ways to secure funding? Be in touch with the editor.

I found at Pleshey. Arriving just in time for dinner, I joined the members of a parish retreat from the village of Exling. We sat at table, eating family-style, and I recognized these lay people, open to such innovations as the ordination of women and liturgical reform, yet also proud of the centuries-old traditions of their parish. The setting was not so different from suppers I have had on retreat at the Claggett Center in Maryland, or at parish suppers at other times. And when I thanked them for including me in their weekend, one of my companions said firmly "It's your retreat, too, now!"

I learned that the retreat house shies away from becoming or being perceived as a pilgrimage spot, a shrine to Evelyn Underhill, though they do draw some spiritual tourists from America and Australia. I was welcome, not so much as a pilgrim, but as a friend and guest -- to be a part of this house of prayer, and to join with those who were there. This was, after all, exactly what Evelyn's whole ministry stood for. Though her crucifix is there, and there is a plaque in her memory in the chapel, perhaps the best testimony to the everyday, consecrated lay ministry that she most cared about is the functional new building on the already-crowded grounds of the retreat center. Called the Evelyn Underhill Center, it is a place for day retreats and quiet days.

As I joined in the readings of the daily office, I entered into the quiet, dignified spiritual life that goes on in the Anglican tradition at its best -- deeply centered, without the expectation of drama or epiphany. The Eucharist in the chapel on Sunday morning was lovely, light-flooded, and we used a modernized version of the liturgy -- much like our American Rite II.

I said to myself, reflecting and writing there, it feels like "home." It could be in Maryland, or Virginia, or northwest DC -- a spring garden, shouting songbirds, a family of cyclists passing by on the footpath by the stream, a lawnmower going in the churchyard next door -- the same sounds heard back home on a Sunday afternoon, an ocean and thousands of miles away. Well, yes -- the moat and hedge that pass by this place

are over 600 years old, the village is much quieter than suburbia. These are differences. But the familiar outweighs the exotic. There is a sense that I have been here before, and will return again.

Perhaps, after all, this is a glimpse of eternity. Greeted with a welcome beyond our imagining, we find ourselves in a garden that we have visited before. Looking at a statue that stands in the garden, or gazing at the tower of a village church or a great cathedral -- or in the quiet of a sunlit chapel -- we know there are arms stretched over us in love. In the noisy quiet of chattering birds, or the luminous silence of a consecrated place, we seem to hear a voice that we have heard before, out of the depths of love: "Behold, all things are being made new. Enter and join in this great work. You cannot imagine how delighted we are to have you here!"

(This was first delivered at the 1995 Day of Reflection)



The Evelyn Underhill Association

The purposes of the Evelyn Underhill Association are:

To make known and promote the study of the works of Evelyn Underhill and to this end to conduct meetings, conferences and retreats and to distribute a newsletter;

To support research and writing about Evelyn Underhill and her ideas in the areas of religion and spirituality;

To promote and support fellowship among people interested in her work.

All who support these purposes may become Associates. Officers of the EUA are Dana Greene, president; Grace Brame, vice president; Carole Crumley, secretary; Milo Coerper, treasurer; Lois Sibley, newsletter editor.

The association is supported solely by your tax deductible contributions. Please help us expand the work of the EUA by giving a \$5.00 donation.

The Ways of the Spirit by Evelyn Underhill, edited and with an Introduction by Grace Adolphsen Brame. New York: Crossroad, 1990.

Reviewed by John O. Barres in *Spiritual Life*, Winter 1991.

Researching the life and works of Evelyn Underhill, Grace Brame rediscovered four handwritten retreats given by the spiritual theologian between 1924 and 1928. In the introduction to the book, Brame analyzes and evaluates these previously unpublished retreats, situating them in the context of Underhill's development and her other writings.

Underhill's texts reveal a sensitive ability, not only to diagnose interior restlessness and struggle, but also to help her retreatants settle quickly into a state of quiet receptiveness to the workings of the Spirit. Underhill has a gift for both comforting and challenging the reader. She warns her retreatants about the danger of excessive self-criticism, and encourages them to relax and breathe a spirit of quiet recollection. At the same time, she urges them to deeper levels of self-surrender and to a deeper fortitude and fidelity to their daily plan of prayer.

She has an insightful and direct approach to encouraging retreatants to quiet the interior churnings of daily life so that they can focus and derive the maximum spiritual benefit from the retreat. She writes:

"The way we enter a retreat is very important...I remember my own first retreat and the apprehension and vagueness with which I entered it. But what a wonderful revelation it was! I remember my alarm at the idea of silence, the mysterious peace and light distilled from it, and my absolute distress when it ended and the clatter began."

In the first retreat, Underhill shows that the purpose of prayer and holiness is love. She culls inspiration from the high priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17, and traces the practical consequences of a belief in the doctrine of the communion of the saints.

Brame notes that the second retreat is based on the sayings of St. Ignatius of Loyola. "It is only when our hearts are thus at rest in God in peaceful selfless adoration that we can show his attractiveness to others... Thus alone can it achieve that utter self-for-

getfulness which is the basis of its peace and power" (p. 137).

In the third retreat Underhill turns to the themes of adoration, communion and cooperation drawn from the writings of the founder of the Sulpicians, Jean Jacques Olier. Underhill is inspired by Olier's meditation image of Christ in our hearts, minds and hands.

The final retreat is based on the visions of Isaiah and St. Francis. How was Isaiah called and prepared? It happened in three states: 1) He had an overwhelming vision of Perfect Reality; 2) In its light he saw and acknowledged his own imperfection and weakness. He was cleansed by love, and so made fit for service; (3) Then he heard a call, he was given an opportunity, and, of his initiative, he responded: "Send me!" (p. 105).

The Ways of the Spirit can be used for scholarship, as models for the preparation of effective retreats, or simply for powerful and penetrating spiritual readings.



Into Thy Hands We Commend Their Spirits

1995 saw the deaths of three devoted disciples of Evelyn Underhill.

In February, Daphne Martin-Hurst died in Oxford, England. Miss Martin-Hurst joined the Sisters of the Love of God as a young woman, but later left the order because of health reasons. She studied at Oxford and worked as a social worker for many years. She was a friend and spiritual directee of Evelyn Underhill.

Douglas Steere, the noted Quaker writer and lecturer, also died in February. As a university student who wrote his doctoral dissertation on Friedrich von Hugel in the 1920s, Steere interviewed Evelyn Underhill. He subsequently wrote several pieces on her.

John Yungblut, another Quaker worthy, died in July. John was a writer and Quaker activist who founded Touchstone, an institution dedicated to the care of souls. He, too, was greatly influenced by the work of Evelyn Underhill.

Each of these "great souls" will be remembered. We can be grateful for their lives.

Do We Need

A Spiritual Entente?

Although Evelyn Underhill was baptized and confirmed in the Anglican Church, her family was not particularly religious. In her late twenties she wanted to join the Roman Catholic church, but for a variety of reasons did not. In about 1919 she began to attend Anglican services and also joined the Spiritual Entente, a secret prayer fellowship which had been founded by Sorella Maria, an Italian Franciscan nun. The purpose of the Entente was to work silently, like leaven in the world. The Entente had no meetings or rules. Its members were to be "seekers" after the presence of God, capable of prayer, and church participants. Underhill's sense was that the Entente was "a curiously strong little organization whose members did seem to be in actual spiritual contact." The Entente's emphasis on prayer, the invisibility of its work and its ecumenicity were all important to Underhill. She saw prayer as the basis for the rejuvenation of the church. Although we know very little of Underhill's commitment to the Spiritual Entente, it was attractive to her because it fostered the practice of prayer among believers. Is there need to create among us, a

Spiritual Entente, with no meetings, no newsletters, no rules, to be an association of seekers after the presence of God? If you believe so, write Spiritual Entente, 1209 Tulane Drive, Alexandria, VA 22307.



Evelyn Underhill Archives Given to Virginia Seminary

Archival material related to Evelyn Underhill has been given to the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. The excellent Underhill book collection in the seminary's library has now been augmented with reprints of articles, dissertations, and copies of materials from the King's College Archives, London, and the Archives of St. Andrews University, Scotland. These materials were given by Dana Greene, author of several books on Evelyn Underhill. The VTS archives will be the best repository of materials on Evelyn Underhill in the U.S. Since more research on Underhill is done in this country than in England, Greene wanted these materials here, available to scholars. Those interested should contact the archivist, Library, Virginia Theological Seminary, 3700 Seminary Road, Alexandria, VA. 22304.

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