

# The Evelyn Underhill Newsletter



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## On Pilgrimage With Underhill

by Dana Greene

There is a special kind of learning that comes from walking where another walked, and reconstructing the reflections of a person in a particular place. For Evelyn Underhill, Italy was a place that ignited her love of God. It was through the aesthetic, through beauty, that she came to God. And it was in Italy that this happened. As she wrote, Italy was "the holy Land of Europe, a place medicinal to the soul." It was there that she said she came into "a sort of gradual unconscious growing into an understanding of things." Her travel journals and sketches from her many Italian tours, carried out when she was a young woman, were published posthumously as *Shrines and Cities of Italy and France*.

This became the text of memory for the small group who visited her "holy Italy" this past summer. The group was organized by Pilgrim's Guide, led by Donna Osthaus, an experienced guide to the art and architecture of Italy, and Dana Greene, author of *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life*. Together they visited Florence, Siena, Assisi, Pisa, and Corona. They explored the art and architecture Underhill experienced, as well as the religious and civil festivals of St. Clare in Assisi, and St. John the Baptist in Florence.

The group then traveled to England to walk in the Kensington of Underhill's daily life, visiting her home; her college; the chapels in which she prayed; the galleries she visited; the home of von Hugel, her

spiritual director; the place where she died; and the grave in which she is buried. Special moments included a visit with Rhoda Cowan, who knew Evelyn in her later years; a slide presentation on EU's use of art in her writings, by Sr. Mary Brian Durkin; and time spent at the retreat house in Pleshey. To follow in the footsteps of Evelyn Underhill, as well as to have times for reflection and prayer on this experience, was unique.

Another tour is planned for June 2000 and will be organized by the Retreat House at Pleshey and Pilgrim's Guide. For more information contact Pilgrim's Guide at 7481 Huntsman Blvd., Suite #105, Springfield VA 22153 or send e-mail to pilgrims@clark.net.



## Our Purpose

The Evelyn Underhill Association promotes the study of the works of Evelyn Underhill and supports research and writing about her ideas. Days of Quiet and Reflection are held, and the association is a resource through a newsletter and correspondence. Association officers are: Dana Greene, president; Grace Brame, vice president; Kathleen Staudt, second vice president; Carole Crumley, secretary; Milo Coerper, treasurer; and newsletter editor is Lois Sibley.

Membership is open to all and is free; however, donations to help defray costs are appreciated and may be sent to: The Evelyn Underhill Association, c/o Milo Coerper, 7315 Brookville Rd., Chevy Chase, MD 20815.

## Annual Evelyn Underhill Day of Reflection

A real man or woman of prayer, then, should be a live wire, a link between God's grace and the world that needs it. One human spirit can, by its prayer and love, touch and change another human spirit; it can take a soul and lift it into the atmosphere of God...All your prayers...can avail for those persons and causes you seek to help. To all of them you are, or should be, agents or transmitters of the transforming, redeeming power of God.

From *Life As Prayer*

Evelyn Underhill's commitment to praying for the needs of the world was the topic of the eighth annual Day of Reflection held at the College of Preachers, Washington National Cathedral, on June 13, 1998. The day commemorated the fifty-eighth anniversary of Underhill's death, and was dedicated to the memory of P. Donald Land, a devoted follower of EU who died in 1997.

Participants had time for quiet, prayer, and sharing, and heard presentations by Dana Greene, Eleanor Holland, Therese St. Andre, and Kathleen Staudt. Next year's Day of Reflection will be held on Saturday, June 12, 1999 and will focus on EU as a guide for modern seekers. For a brochure, in Spring 1999, write to Special Events, Washington National Cathedral, Mount Saint Albans, Washington DC 20016.

## Evelyn Underhill's Guidelines For a Sane Spiritual Life

by Mary Brian Durkin, OP

Evelyn Underhill is recognized as one of Great Britain's outstanding religious writers. Her books, lectures, retreat conferences, and letters of spiritual advice offer insights into ways to develop and maintain a sane spiritual life. In these works, often in homey and humorous ways, Underhill shows how the natural and supernatural life are compatible and can be fully integrated by anyone willing to make the effort. "You don't have to be peculiar to find God," she insists, "but you do have to make a willed commitment to make Him the center of your life, all aspects of it!" (*House of the Soul*, p. 90).

Adoration and charity must be paramount, she states: "Adoration is caring for God above all else. Charity is the outward swing of prayer toward all the world...embracing and caring for all worldly interests in God's name." (*Ways of the Spirit*, p. 142) Charity, Underhill insists, makes us a tool, a supple instrument reaching out, working, caring, healing, ministering selflessly in whatever ways the Lord directs us. Only by our loving, generous self giving, first in the prayer of adoration and then by our dedicated actions, will his redeeming work in this world be accomplished.

Insisting that a truly spiritual life must be founded on prayer, Underhill advocates setting aside a specific time, preferably in the morning, for adoration, spiritual reading, and meditation. "Old fashioned practices," she admits, "but it's the only way!" (*Mixed Pasture*, p. 72) So many people don't understand that this regime of prayer, time alone with God, is the spiritual food that sustains and nourishes, she told an advisee: "They only do it when 'they feel in the mood' or 'when they can.' Once you've started, never give up this practice, despite discouragements or ups and downs." (*Letters*, p. 71)

She counseled a friend:

Try to arrange things so that you can have a reasonable bit of quiet every day and do not be scrupulous and think it selfish to make a decided struggle for this. You are obeying God's call and giving Him the opportunity to teach you what He wants you to know, and so make you more useful to Him and to other souls. (*ibid.*, p. 141)

Like Teresa of Avila, Underhill advocated simplicity and flexibility in prayer. Don't be held down to any set plan or model; follow a style that suits you; change when you think it wise, she advised. A simple rule or regime of prayer, to be followed whether one is in the mood or not gives backbone to one's spiritual life, as nothing else can, she counseled. "If you fall later into a state in which you cannot, without strain, practice meditation or mental prayer, you can spend the time in spiritual reading, only try always to keep the *time intact* and not use it for other things." (*ibid.*, p. 312)

To an advisee who complained bitterly that she had to earn her own living doing "stupid typing" and hence had little time to spend in prayer, Underhill replied that the long train ride from Beckenham Hill to the city offered ample time for prayer, providing it was not spent "reading the rags."

Underhill believed that beginners in the early stages of developing their prayer life often placed too much emphasis on feelings and not enough on the will. She chided an advisee: "If by losing the spirit of prayer, you mean losing the heavenly sensations of deep devotion, I am afraid that does not matter a scrap." (*ibid.*, p. 103). She advised another to make an act of willed attention to God, to stop fussing over the lack of emotional feelings: "The will is what matters—as long as you have that, you are safe." (*ibid.*, pp. 147-148).

In another letter, she underlined this entire sentence: "Never forget that the key to the situation lies in

the will and not in the imagination." (*ibid.*, p. 82). To truly develop a spiritual life requires self-discipline and will power. To emphasize this point, Underhill quotes St. John of the Cross: "The whole wisdom of the Saints consists in directing the will vigorously toward God." She then adds, "The way that is done by ordinary people like ourselves is by aiming at Him in all circumstances of life." (*Mount of Purification*, p. 8).

Underhill's admonitions are succinct, practical, and understandable: "The direction and constancy of the will is what really matters, and intellect and feeling are only important insofar as they contribute to that." (*Letters*, p. 67); "Remember God is acting on your soul all the time, whether you have spiritual sensations or not." (*ibid.*, p. 184).

Although adamant about the necessity of maintaining a regime of personal prayer despite bouts of aridity and spiritual flatness, Underhill also insists that this fixed period of private prayer is not the only time of union with God; every bit of work, every thought and action, done for God and in His name, is a prayer.

Never let yourself think that because God has given you many things to do for Him...pressing routine jobs, a life full up with duties and demands of a very practical sort—that all these need separate you from communion with Him. God is always coming to you in the Sacrament of the Present Moment. Meet and receive Him there with gratitude in that sacrament; however unexpected its outward form may be receive Him in every sight and sound, joy, pain, opportunity and sacrifice. (*Life as Prayer*, p. 186).

Though certainly not a new concept, Underhill frequently stressed the sacramental value of the finite and temporal in mundane activities and the importance of seeing or finding God in everyday life. She wrote to an advisee:

Take the present situation as it is and try to deal with what it brings you, in a spirit of generosity and love. God is as much in the difficult home problems as in the times of quiet and prayer, isn't He? Try especially to do His will there, deliberately seek opportunities for kindness, sympathy and patience." (*Letters*, p. 137)

Underhill advised one facing a difficult situation that by increasing her prayer time to an hour at least, then she should be able "to handle the situation even though just now the 'sacrament of the present moment' may take a rather knobby sort of form. Still God is in it—and it is there that you have to find a way of responding to Him and receiving Him." (*ibid.*, p. 258). Repeating Teresa's dictum that the aim of the spiritual life is "Work, work, work," Underhill reminds retreatants that usually this means just doing one's job, enduring the drudgery, monotony, yes, even the meanness of it all, for Christ's sake. Your prayer of adoration and your outward swing to others by dedicated, disciplined service, graced by creative initiative, courage, gentleness, and compassion, indicate a requisite balance has been achieved. To minister to others requires the virtue of patience which Underhill defines in down-to-earth terms:

Patience toward God is the quiet acceptance of life, bit by bit from his hand. Patience toward others is bearing evenly all that is uneven in character, prejudice, and habits.... It is meeting with equal countenance the nasty and sunny sides of the human person.... It is equanimity toward the people who offend our taste...who ask for a cup of cold water at the wrong time, the stupid, the querulous, the obstinate. Each of us can fill up more blanks for ourselves! (*Ways of the Spirit*, p. 170).

There is only one way to learn patience, Underhill asserts, and that is to study the life of Jesus

Christ. Ponder his actions: his compassion for the sick, the marginalized, the hungry and weary, the troubled and bereaved. He never criticized one person, except the self-righteous. He overlooked rough, uncouth manners; forgave his tormentors; and found joy in doing his Father's will, even on the Cross.

She writes: "in my relations with my father which are difficult and where I'm often met by coolness and indifference, I am constantly tempted to be cold and indifferent in my turn and feel it more and more difficult to be or feel loving or anything but a stranger. Yet I know that this too is a test if I could take it rightly.

"As towards my husband, I often fail to show interest in his affairs and amusements, not rousing myself to respond when I'm tired or concerned with other things, forgetting he is very patient with me and our difference in outlook must be just as trying for him." (*Fragments from an Inner Life*, p. 94)

Underhill's journal entries and excerpts from letters to her spiritual advisors reveal that she "lived" the advice she gave to others. Admonishing herself to use the "domestic bits" of life as means to mortify impatience, uncharitableness, sensitivity to slights, she resolves, despite familial friction, to preserve an interior spirit of tranquil joy: "There is no place in my soul, no corner of my character, where God is not." (*ibid.*, p. 88).

Another entry in *Fragments* reveals that of her types of active service for Christ: direct teaching, books, and lectures, and also the direction of souls—she considered the latter to be of more importance. Her followers today would not dispute that evaluation; her influence is widespread and growing. Her pithy, practical advice on ways to balance and unify a contemplative and active life continues to inspire many on their spiritual journeys.

Excerpted from *Spiritual Life* (Winter 1997), pp. 236-43.



## Q and A



### What is the best introduction to Evelyn Underhill's thought?

Underhill was a prolific writer who published 39 books and more than 350 articles and reviews. In her early years, she wrote on mysticism; in her latter years on the spiritual life as lived by ordinary people. This latter work is more accessible than the earlier writing. Perhaps the best introduction to her is *Letters*, edited by Charles Williams, which give an introduction to her principal ideas, her style of guidance, and her immense sense of humanity and accessibility. *The Spiritual Life*, an edition of her BBC broadcast, first given orally, is a clear, concise introduction to her thought. Most of EU's retreats were published, and many are still in print. A wonderful anthology of her work is Delroy Oberg's *Evelyn Underhill: Daily Readings with a Modern Mystic*.

## New and Noteworthy

Todd Johnson published two articles: "Evelyn Underhill's Pneumatology: Origins and Implications," in *Downside Review* 116 (1998): 109-136; and "An Evelyn Underhill Primer," in *Anglican Theological Review* 80 (1998): 403-13.

Grace Brame had "The Extraordinary Within the Ordinary: The Life and Message of Evelyn Underhill," in *Feminist Voices in Spirituality*, ed. Pierre Hegy. Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 1996, 114-24.

Mary Brian Durkin, OP, had "Evelyn Underhill—Anchored in God" in *Christianity and the Arts*, Feb, Apr 1997, 48-54.

A.M. Ramsey and A.M. Allchin's *Evelyn Underhill: Anglican Mystic* has been reprinted by SLG Press, Fairacres, Oxford.

A mid-western chapter of the Evelyn Underhill Association is being formed. For information contact Mary Brian Durkin, OP, Dominican University, 7900 W. Division St., River Forest, Illinois 60305. Fax 708-524-5990.



## Evelyn Underhill's Birthplace Visited by EU Associates

Evelyn Underhill was born in Wolverhampton, the city that was home to both the Ironmonger and Underhill families. Evelyn's mother, Alice Lucy Ironmonger, was the daughter of Moses Ironmonger, a mayor of the town. Henry Underhill, Arthur's father, was also prominent, having held the office of town clerk. Lucy and Arthur Underhill married in 1874, and he began a legal career in London. However, on the impending birth of a child, Lucy returned to her parents' home to give birth. The place was Gristy Hill on the Penn Road, a main thoroughfare through Wolverhampton. It was there that Evelyn was born

on December 8, 1875. The young Underhill family moved back to London in the following year, but when the child was less than a month old she was baptized in St. John's Parish Church in Wolverhampton. Both the birthplace and the church are places of interest to those who know the life of Underhill.

The Ironmonger home is no longer extant; newly erected on the site is a Hindu temple, the Sri Krishna Mandir. Under the auspices of the Wolverhampton Interfaith Council, and with the leadership of Sheila Shield, a movement was begun to commemorate Underhill's birthplace. This is particularly appropriate now because the Anglican Church, following the lead of the Episcopal Church in the U.S., will include Evelyn Underhill in its new calendar of the church year for

June 15, her death day. The Interfaith Council commissioned a blue commemorative plaque from the Wolverhampton Civic Society which reads "Evelyn Underhill, 1875-1941, Christian Writer and Guide to the Spiritual Life—Born near this place." The expectation is that the memorial plaque will be placed on the wall of the Royal Wolverhampton Boarding School, a property adjacent to the temple.

It was the great pleasure of a small group of EU Associates to visit Wolverhampton this summer. Hosted by Sheila Shield, the group participated in a prayer service at St. John's Church and a tour of Wolverhampton. This experience strengthened the transatlantic ties of those who consider Evelyn Underhill to be one of the great influences in their spiritual lives.



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