

# The Evelyn Underhill Newsletter



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## Open Letter to Evelyn Underhill

Dear Evelyn,

Ever since I read in Dana Greene's book, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, that your grave in Hampstead was neglected and obscured by grass and brambles, I wanted to go there, tend and prune, and pray with you.

On Saturday, June 24, 2000, Dana, Donna Osthaus, our tour guide; and eight of us did go there. We laid a dozen white flowers on your grave, and I said for us all, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. Even so, says the Spirit, for they rest from their labors."

We began our pilgrimage by entering Italy at its marvelous gate, Florence. To me, the vision of Fra Angelico's Virgin receiving her annunciation is worth all the glories of the Renaissance. You loved the "best of the medieval spirit" in the Spanish Chapel and we shared it.

We saw and felt the mystery and courage of Catherine at Sienna and then to Assisi, the center of everything Franciscan: joy, humor, devotion, courtesy, and beauty. An evening procession in honor of Santa Chiara (Clare) was led by herald trumpets in medieval costume. We visited Cortona, Perugia, Gubbio, and Spello, all with their own treasures of art and faith and legend.

On we went, to London. We saw your home near Kensington Palace. A hike the next day through Hampstead led us to the house where you endured World War II bombing, the places where you studied, worshiped, and where we made our tribute at your grave.

It is a long ride from London to Pleshey, that village in Essex, the

essential England: two pubs, the Anglican church, quaint homes, farms, an ancient castle with moat, and the Retreat House, our goal.

The Rev. Lindsay Spendlove led us in retreat, sweet silence, time to be alone together, and to digest all our impressions. Dana's meditation made us all conscious of our footsteps. You have taught that part of our spiritual goal is to awaken consciousness. My dear Evelyn, I am grateful for all you have taught, and still teach. You have opened my eyes, disciplined my faith, and fulfilled my dreams. And I am grateful that you have so many wonderful friends, who have become my friends too.

Faithfully,  
John C. Kimball



## Who Are We?

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 this newsletter and correspondence. Officers are: Dana Greene, president; Grace Brame, vice president; Kathleen Staudt, second vice president; Carole Crumley, secretary; and Milo Coerper, treasurer. Newsletter editor is Lois Sibley.

Membership is open to all and is free. 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. Changes of address should be sent to Lois Sibley, 2245 Pleasant Ave, Glenside, PA 19038.

## News and Notes

Underhill's *School of Charity* was the basis for a recent retreat for the Daughters of the King in Cape May, N.J., directed by the Rev. John C. Kimball.

On June 18, the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity, Underhill quotes were included in the seasonal missalette used in most Roman Catholic parishes in the U.S.

"Evelyn Underhill: Contemplation and Social Justice--On the 60th Anniversary of Her Death" is planned for May/June 2001 at Regis College, University of Toronto. Contact the Rev. Gerald Loweth, 76 Powell St., Richmond Hill, Ontario L4C 4S4, Canada for details.

Pilgrim's Guide plans another Evelyn Underhill pilgrimage to northern Italy and England in Summer 2002. For details contact Pilgrim's Guide, 7481 Huntsman Blvd., #105, Springfield VA 22153.

## EU in Cyberspace

There are angels--and Gary Goodwin, longtime EUA member, is one! A whiz with computer technology, Gary volunteered to create an EUA website. Check it out at [www.evelynunderhill.org](http://www.evelynunderhill.org). It is getting about 90 "hits" a month. The site contains material on EU's life and writings, the full text of recently published articles, and a bookstore through which you can buy books by and about her. Gary is always looking for new material for the site, so send it to him at [gegood@erols.com](mailto:gegood@erols.com).

## The Wisdom of John of the Cross in the Writings of Evelyn Underhill

by Mary Brian Durkin, O.P.

When Evelyn Underhill (1875--1941) began to study and write about the meaning of mysticism, she immersed herself in the writings of St. John of the Cross. Her monumental volume, *Mysticism* (1911), reveals her knowledge and appreciation of his teachings concerning the mystical life. In *The Mystic Way* (1913), *Practical Mysticism* (subtitled "Little Book for Normal People" 1914), and *Mystics of the Church* (1925), she continued to expound on John's wisdom concerning ways to achieve union with the Absolute.

It was particularly in retreat conferences and in letters to advisees that Underhill utilized and with keen discernment, presented ways to develop a practical and balanced spiritual life based on the teachings of St. John of the Cross, who, she claims, is "at once the sanest of saints and the most penetrating of psychologists" (*Mysticism*, London: Methuen, 1911, p. 275).

Evelyn Underhill frequently began retreat conferences with the statement that any discussion of practical ways to grow closer to God must begin with the humble recognition of the supernatural truth that he dwells permanently within each of us. In *The Golden Sequence*, Underhill reiterates the words of John of the Cross: "In every soul, even that of the greatest sinner, God lives and substantially dwells" (*The Golden Sequence*, New York: Harper & Bros, 1960, p. 55). John distinguishes between the immanence of the Creator in all his creatures and that supernatural union that requires of each of us a willed self-giving as the price of our transformation into a suitable dwelling place for Divinity. Underhill explains: "God is always really in the soul...but this does not

mean that He always communicates to it supernatural being. This communication is the fruit of grace and love, and all souls do not enjoy it. Those who do, do not possess it in the same degree, since their love may be greater or less....The greater the love, the more intimate is the union (*The Golden Sequence*, p. 56).

An important teaching of both John and Underhill is that we are half-formed, incomplete creatures, continually being shaped by God's pervasive presence and pressure. For this reason, Underhill pleads, "Don't say 'God made me.' Say 'God is making me.' The Divine Creator is still working on you!"

Like Adam, we too are partially formed and unfinished creatures upon whom the Divine Potter is still working. John of the Cross also refers to the Artist within our souls, able to accomplish his handiwork only if we are receptive to his touch (*The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. Washington, DC:ICS Publications, 1973, p. 318). Left to ourselves we could only accomplish the merely natural and temporal, Underhill asserts, then adds, "Our spiritual life begins with a recognition of this humble truth, and a willing response to the Spirit, who first creates, then nurtures and stimulates us (*The Golden Sequence*, p. 67).

John of the Cross states that the practice of self-knowledge is the first requirement for advancing toward the knowledge of God. Take some time, then, to examine your past, Underhill advises. Discover how the indwelling Presence has shaped your life. You may be surprised to discover that what you

dismissed as a lucky coincidence was actually God's molding pressure; that lost job, which later opened up a more advantageous position for you; the broken relationship that forced you to recognize and correct a personal weakness; words written in anger but, fortunately, never sent. Were not these inexplicable outcomes the work of the Lord's nurturing grace--his initiative, not yours?

If, at times, the Potter's touch seems sharp and painful, Underhill suggests pondering John's words: "The hand of God, so soft and gentle, is felt to be so heavy and oppressive, though merely touching it (the soul), and that, too, most mercifully; for He touches the soul, not to chastise it, but to load it with His graces" (*Mysticism*, p. 399). How do you respond to the idea that God is truly present in your soul? That God's prevenient grace and transforming touch is continually forming and molding you to his pattern? That the Divine Potter is making you, even at this moment? The realization that God's formative presence is within you, Underhill asserts, inevitably nurtures the desire to rid yourself of faults and failings that prevent a closer union with him.

Asked how one can learn to respond to God's presence and pressures, Underhill cites John's teaching: "Absolute self-giving is the only path from the human to the Divine." She then adds, "...by prayer also. The two are really one." She explains that to form a closer union with our Creator, we must purge ourselves of all that separates us from Divine Goodness. For most of us, this is a lifetime process, demanding a drastic remaking of our character--getting rid first of self-



love; and second, of all those foolish interests that prevent us from making God the center of our lives (*Mysticism*, p. 204).

Stating that the entire teaching of John is directed to perfecting the soul in charity—so that all it does, has, is, and says is transfused by its love for God—Underhill insists that prayer is the only way to achieve this goal. Prayer must become a top priority. God must come first in our lives! Of course, by prayer she does not mean a number of litanies, rosaries, the divine office, or other formal utterances. Prayer is all of life, offered with love to Absolute Love. If you truly believe that your spiritual life depends, not so much on your actions but on God's actions within you, you will find time to be silent and still, alone with him, allowing his supernatural life and love to permeate, grow, and sustain you (*Fruits of the Spirit*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1942, p. 4).

Too many individuals, living lives of frenetic hurry and tension-filled activity, foolishly neglect the essential need: prayer. Both John and Underhill urge simplicity in prayer, but Underhill, to a greater extent than John, stressed the role of adoration: the lifting up of heart and mind to the Eternal God. We are created to praise, worship, and serve him, she states. If we neglect praise and adoration, our service counts for little. Adoration, she insists, does not mean emotional, sentimental outpourings or ecstatic, esoteric devotions. It simply restores the sense of proportion in our hectic lives. Every aspect, even the most humble, of our everyday life can become part of this adoring response. Only when our hearts are at rest in God in selfless adoration are we empowered to show his attractiveness to others.

Underhill deplored the growing practice of many devout Christians who, in order to give more time and energy to Christian social services, shortened their time of prayer, justifying this by claiming such work is in fact prayer. She insists: prayer must precede work. Take time for communion with God first; withdraw from activity, seek solitude,

be silent, rest in his presence, listen to God speaking to you, and then praise him for his goodness. Follow the advice of John: "The soul must now learn to receive, to let Another act in her" (*Life as Prayer*, ed. Lucy Menzies. Harrisburg, Pa: Morehouse, 1991, p. 92).

Prayer, however, is only one part of our spiritual life. Underhill cautions that we cannot remain in a cozy oratory, conversing intimately with our Friend, cut off from the world. Love demands action! We do not truly love God until we are driven to seek his incarnation in the world of time. We must use, expand, and share our God-given gifts to further his work. We must emulate the saints who, Underhill wryly points out, served God, not by standing aloof, "wrapped in delightful prayers...but by going down into the mess and there, right down in the mess, they are able to radiate God because they possess Him" (*Concerning the Inner Life*. London: Methuen, 1924, p. 61).

Underhill reminds retreatants that there is a work that God requires each person to do and which no one else can do. Few will be asked to make heroic sacrifices, but we are all required to serve our Creator in that situation and condition where he has placed us. There is no place where Eternal Love cannot be served, praised, and made known to others. It is up to us, as John bluntly states: "One action, one endeavor of our own is worth more than many done by others." Underhill observes that this is true only when we give unselfish and dedicated service, accepting pain, failure, rejection, and misunderstanding, without desire for personal satisfaction, reward, or recognition. "Real charity," says John of the Cross, "is not shown merely by tender feelings, but by strength, courage, and endurance" (*The House of the Soul*. London: Methuen, 1924, p. 144).

When reminding retreatants that John of the Cross said, "In the evening of life, we shall be judged on love," Underhill emphasized the word "evening" to reinforce once again the thought that our spiritual formation is an ongoing, lifetime

process. Incomplete and unfinished, we are gradually being formed and shaped by the Divine Artist who dwells within us. Our faithful, enduring response to the Potter's chipping and chiselling will gradually enable us to seek and find the Eternal in our everyday world of duties, demands, pressures, and pleasures. Only then will we be empowered to carry out the command of John of the Cross: "Be thou the Message and the Messenger" (*The Mystery of Sacrifice*. Harrisburg, Pa: Morehouse, 1991, p. 67).

Challenging but not daunting, these spiritual goals can be implemented by frequently recalling and acting upon the practical counsels pertaining to ways to grow in detachment, mortification, prayer, and service as explained by John of the Cross and Evelyn Underhill, two mystics separated by centuries but bonded by their intense desire to follow—and to help others to follow—the way of their exemplar, the Divine Artist.

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Mary Brian Durkin, O.P., is retired professor of English literature, Dominican University, River Forest, Ill. She is presently engaged in research on the spirituality of Evelyn Underhill. Underhill's poem "Trusting in Your Word, O God," appeared in *Be Not Afraid, I Am With You: Prayers for Healing*, ed. Mary Brian Durkin, St. Mary's Press, Winona, MN, 2000, a collection of traditional and original prayers addressing the needs of the ill and those who care for them.



## The Professor's House

by John C. Kimball



This novel by Willa Cather is a successful example of Evelyn Underhill's assumption that the spiritual life is available to every human being. Underhill assumes and demonstrates that the spiritual life is part of our human nature, just as physiology and psychology are part of all human life.

At the outbreak of World War I, Underhill published *Practical Mysticism* because she believed that practical mysticism was the very activity needed most in a time of "struggle and endurance, practical sacrifices, difficult and long continuous effort." Whether national or personal, there are always such times, and so always the very activity needed most.

Underhill then defines her subject: "Therefore it is to a practical mysticism that the practical man is here invited: to a training of his latent faculties, a bracing and brightening of his languid consciousness, an emancipation from the fetters of appearance, a turning of his attention to new levels of the world. Thus he may become aware of the universe which the spiritual artist is always trying to disclose to the race. This amount of mystical perception—this 'ordinary contemplation,' as the specialists call it, is possible to all men: without it, they are not wholly alive. It is a natural human activity" (*Practical Mysticism*, p. 11).

I do not know and I doubt if anyone can know positively if Cather read Evelyn Underhill, but *The Professor's House* is, I believe, a clear demonstration of Underhill's ideas.

Underhill does not set her definition within the realm of religion, scripture, or any traditional practice of religion: mystic life can be expressed in a secular mind, and in a secular world because, "It is a natural human activity."

Professor Godfrey St. Peter, the man of the story is carefully described as a totally secular-minded

person. He reveals his ignorance of the New Testament by not even knowing the Magnificat, the well-known Song of Mary in Luke 1:46-55, despite being a cultured man and a professor of history. Cather never suggests that he goes to any church or has any traditional belief system. He knows nothing of revelation or scripture. Cather seems to be eager to discredit common assumptions that mysticism or any kind of religious or spiritual consciousness depends on these basic elements of religion. Making emphasis by contrast, Cather even has one character who is a practicing Baptist behave selfishly and jealously. She seems to be insisting on a secular attitude.

The growth of the professor's spiritual life, the "training of his latent faculties" is, however secular he is, the whole purpose of the story. In *Mysticism* Underhill says, "The mystic life involves...its capture of the field of consciousness; and the "conversion" or rearrangement of his feeling, thought and will—his character—about this new centre of life" (p. 68).

All the choices that the professor makes are the rearrangements of his "feeling, thought and will." The first basic rearrangement he makes is his choice to continue to use the third floor study in his old house. The family had built a new, relatively luxurious house that had ample room for his study, but he chose to rent his old study at extra expense. That choice also meant a certain abandonment of his wife and daughters and their lives, a "rearrangement of his feelings," even "a new centre of his life."

This crucial choice is therefore the title of the novel. It is literally crucial: a crossing of ways, and a cross he is eager to take up.

His field of consciousness is also undergoing a basic change. He pleads with the family seamstress, with whom he shared the study, to keep in the old study the dress forms that she used. It seems he began to prefer the symbols of his family rather than their actual presence and behavior. The seamstress also seems to be the rare counselor that he turns to: it was

she who taught him the Magnificat, and it was she who would have a vital role in his life. Underhill writes, "the destiny of the self depends on the partner the will selects" (*Mysticism*, p. 69). The educated professor chose the unlettered seamstress as his spiritual partner.

In *Mysticism* Underhill gives another definition. (The mystic life): "is active and practical...an organic life process, which the whole self does: not an intellectual opinion. Its aims are wholly transcendental and spiritual. It is in no way improving the visible universe. It draws the whole being homeward. It is an enhanced life, the remaking of character and the liberation of a new form of consciousness."

Professor St. John could be expected to express many emotions, but Cather is silent about all of them. He could express grief for the early and tragic death of Tom Outland. He could express some regret concerning his daughter Rosamund's excessive spending on her new home. He could express loneliness for his wife's lack of understanding of his needs. She chides him for sharing his thoughts with a student, and she doesn't understand why he doesn't want to go to France. Professor St. John is not interested in improving his visible universe; he accepts it the way it is. His tragic experience is the door to his "new center of life."

Despite his tragic experience, I do not feel sorry for him, but instead I am drawn to him as he grows and changes. Grief or anger do not even occur to him or to me. The aim of his life is transcendental; he goes beyond the question of tragedy.

The spiritual goal or desire of Godfrey St. Peter is perhaps achieved in his solitary days at the beach when his family was in France. He could have gone with them, and visited old friends, but he chose to spend the summer alone in his house and at the beach...

There are four of us in this story: the professor, Willa Cather, Evelyn Underhill, and myself. I hope that others will find themselves in this story and be moved to become practical mystics.