

**THE EVELYN UNDERHILL
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SOAKED IN LOVE:

The 18th ANNUAL EVELYN UNDERHILL QUIET DAY



Evelyn Underhill described the Retreat House at Pleshey in a letter to her spiritual director Baron Friedrich von Hugel as follows: "The whole house seemed soaked in love and prayer...(the place) cured solitude and gave me at last really the feeling of belonging to the Christian family...I lost here my last bit of separateness and wish for anything of my own and gained a wholly new sense of the realness and almost unbearable beauty of Christian life." Using slide images of the house and grounds at Pleshey (a village in Essex), participants will reflect on the effect of this place on

Underhill's life and writing, and on their own special places of retreat.

The Quiet Day will be held June 16, 2007 from 9-3:30 p.m. at Sayre House on the grounds of the Washington National Cathedral and will be guided by Donna Osthaus, President of The Pilgrim's Guide and designer of two Underhill pilgrimages to Europe. For further information contact Kathleen.Staudt@gmail.com in April.

**EVELYN UNDERHILL:
THE MORAL MYSTIC
Gerald Loweth**

Those who have admired the writings of Evelyn Underhill have often focused on her retreat addresses, many of which have been reprinted from time to time. She has been a guide and resource for those who seek to deepen their relationship with God

through the practice and mystery of prayer. Behind this popular appeal, there was in Underhill a major contribution to the recovery of the Christian mystical tradition.

She believed that there was a pattern of growth implicit in this tradition. It was that people moved from an awareness, to purgation, to illumination and sometimes through a difficult time a "Dark Night of the Soul." Eventually, the patient mystic would be moved into a unity with the Divine. She called this "The Mystic Way."

But then she went through her own dark period. To some extent, this may have been the result of the tragedy of the First World War. The horror of that conflict had shaken Western optimism to the core. There had to be more to spirituality than personal growth; pious devotion is not enough.

Underhill made changes in her life. She asked Baron von Hugel, a scholar and author on the subject of mysticism, to be her spiritual director. She became active in the life of the Church of England. She began to conduct retreats. She was asked by the socialist William Temple, Bishop of Manchester, to give addresses at the ecumenical Conferences of Politics, Economics, and Citizenship (COPEC). Mysticism for her now included involvement in the world, dealing with the injustices and human degradation exhibited in poverty and prejudice. In one talk, in 1924, she spoke about the inadequacies of "sewing the miserable patches we call charity and social service into the rotten fabric of our corporate life." ("The Will of the Voice." **Mixed Pasture**, p. 86)

She now described a different pattern of mystical growth: in place of mysticism leading us only to unity with God—"The Mystic Way"—it now leads us instead toward cooperation with God's saving work in a broken world, challenging the wrongs of society. The pattern of mystical growth for her became Adoration, Communion, and Cooperation.

There was to be another development in her thinking: it was in liturgy. The Eucharist had long been private and personal in both Roman Catholic and Anglican churches. Study had been begun at first by historians who recognized the corporate sense of worship in early liturgy. Her spiritual director was now Walter Frere, Bishop of Truro and a leading liturgical scholar. This new interest led her to write her pioneering **Worship** in 1937.

Worship meant more to her than simply personal transformation. In our churches, people who share the peace within the liturgy in recognition of community and interdependence; and they are also expected to emerge from worship strengthened to deal with human need: "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord."

It has been noted by many that in these times people have turned away from religion and Church in order to engage in what is now loosely called "spirituality." As one writer has described this shift, this thinking "calls for a focus on interiority to the exclusion of the body and communal life, on private life to the exclusion of public life, on feeling to the exclusion of balanced rationality, and on exotic spiritualities to the exclusion of the essential feature of traditional religion."(Owen C. Thomas "Spiritual but

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not Religious: The Influence of the Current Romantic Movement." **Anglican Theological Review**. Summer 2006, p. 407)

Underhill moved in precisely the opposite direction.

She began with the private and personal in her early writings and especially in **Mysticism**, but eventually she described a mysticism which is nourished within the corporate life of the Church and which leads to social involvement. However, social concerns never left out the necessity for a contemplative foundation. The mystic activist Henri Nouwen hit the nail on the head: to be "real agents of change (we) have to be contemplatives at heart." (Henri J. M. Nouwen, **Creative Ministry**, Image Books, 1978, p. 87). It is to be a moral mystic.

WIT, LEARNING AND LOVE-ALWAYS: EVELYN UNDERHILL IN LETTERS

Carol Poston, who is preparing the collected letters of Evelyn Underhill for publication, offered the meditations for the 17th Annual Quiet Day on June 17, 2006 at Sayre House on the grounds of Washington National Cathedral. The morning meditation was "The Paradox of the Cross" and the afternoon's was titled "Between Two Wars." Both meditations relied on Underhill's letters, both published and unpublished. The following is Carol's summary of her comments.

I believe that it is through her letters that we can best get a window into Underhill's soul, to reveal her own spiritual journey and her own sources of solace, for she seemed to follow herself the advice she gave others in spiritual direction. In addition, I wanted participants in the Quiet Day to hear the genuine voice of this great woman, for the letters we do have in published form were pretty thoroughly edited by Williams and do not always reveal her own words. When I began collecting the letters ten years ago, I quickly learned that the Williams' edition was compiled and published a mere two years after her death by a man rather desperate for a job, for funds were tight during the war, and Charles Williams, in his own correspondence to his wife, made it quite clear that he was being paid a very welcome 50 pounds for the job.

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When I found originals of some of the letters at St. Andrews University, it also became clear that Williams had often edited out the warm and affectionate voice, which characterizes so much of her correspondence. The sad fact is that most of the originals of the letters in the Williams edition have disappeared, and neither Dana Greene nor I know where they are. We have, however, about 600 new letters that have never been published, including juvenile letters to her mother, love letters to her husband, travel letters, and many letters to friends perfumed with tenderness, warmth, and always wit.

I wanted to trace her own spiritual journey as well, so I used some passages from her novel A Column of Dust, where she speaks of life's "one formula, and that a paradox. It is the paradox of creation—the folly of the Cross" (164). I believe that she held this paradox before her the rest of her life and that incarnation—spirit dwelling in

flesh—was the central tenet in her theology. Todd Johnson speaks convincingly of Underhill's pneumatology, or spirit-based theology, and Underhill herself says that she came to Jesus by way of God. Still, I believe that this paradox of the Cross for her meant "living life hard, with both hands," and realizing that suffering will lead to resurrection. In fact, those who do not suffer cannot win the crown. And that is what the Church should be about. As she said to her friend and first spiritual directee Marjorie Robinson, "The keys of the Catholic position (and Anglicanism is of course a slightly diluted Catholicism) are A) The Incarnation and B) A mystical continuation of the Incarnation in the Sacraments" (May 2, 1907).

I also wanted to leave participants with some idea of how deeply held her pacifism was at the end of her life and that even in the face of war the Cross is the Way. She tells her friend "dearest Darcie" Otter that "we have got to decide what we think about the Cross because Christianity is a realistic religion" (1930). She deplores the killing about her, saying "How utterly mad we all are, deliberately killing, maiming, or destroying like this" (3 June 1940). The testimonial to peace at the end of her life refers not just to war; peace is more than absence of war, and I ended by quoting Underhill's essay in 1940 about pacifism, "Pacifism is only on safe ground where it is seen. . .not in isolation as an attitude towards the particular problem of war, but as part of the great task committed to humanity—the bringing forth of eternal life in the midst of time, or the setting up of the Kingdom of God" (Greene, 205).

Review:

Grace through Simplicity: The Practical Spirituality of Evelyn Underhill

by John Kirvan.

Ave Maria Press, 2004.

\$8.95.

The purpose of this little book is to make the spiritual experience and wisdom of Evelyn Underhill accessible and to invite the reader to meditate and pray her words daily for a month. Each meditation is structured in the same tripartite way: "My Day Begin," "All Through the Day" and "My Day is Ending."

"My Day Begins" includes some ten to fifteen lines from Underhill. "All through the Day" recapitulates one line from that selection, and "My Day is Ending" is Kirvan's prayer emerging from meditation on her words. As envisioned by the author, the book is a "gateway" into Underhill, steeping the reader in her insights and then leading into prayer. The quotes selected focus heavily on what Underhill calls Reality and the individual's lifelong journey to bring oneself into correspondence with that Reality. This focus is consonant with Underhill's principal contribution, namely to establish the human need to be in relationship with its source. As

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such the book serves to companion one on a spiritual journey through life. There are disappointments, however. Nothing is delineated by quotation marks, and no citations are given to enable the reader to track down the source for further examination. Nonetheless, this very brief and portable book will serve to introduce one of the foremost twentieth century spiritual masters.

Dana Greene



NEWS AND NOTEWORTHY:

Rev. Gerald P. Loweth received his doctoral degree from Trinity College, University of Toronto in June 2006. His dissertation was entitled: "The Evolution of Evelyn Underhill's View of Spirituality, Mysticism and Socio-Moral Action."

Rev. Terry Burke gave a sermon on Evelyn Underhill on October 10, 2004 at the First Church in Jamaica Plain, MA, Unitarian Universalist. Rev. Kirk Ala Kubicek of St. Peter's Church, Ellicott City, MD preached on Evelyn Underhill on June 19, 2005.

Jeffrey Kripal's **Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom**, University of Chicago Press, 2001, contains a chapter on Underhill.

Dana Greene led a Covenant Colleagues retreat on Evelyn Underhill in June 2006. She will give a short course on Underhill at the Atlanta Institute of Spirituality in June 2007.

Stephanie Ford will offer a workshop—Modern Spiritual Guides: Underhill, Merton and Nouwen—at the Florida Five Day Academy for Spiritual Formation in March 2007.

Susie Sheldrake reviewed **The Life of Evelyn Underhill: An Intimate Portrait of the Groundbreaking Author of 'Mysticism'** by Margaret Cropper and **Essential Writings: Evelyn Underhill**, selected and with an introduction by Emilie Griffin in **The Anglican Theological Review**, Spring 2004.

A wonderful new resource: Kessinger Publishing, a company devoted to publishing rare reprints, has recently made available many of Underhill's out-of-print books and many chapters and articles which until now have been inaccessible. Among some of the books the company has republished are: **The Gray World, The Mirror of Simple Souls, Mystics of the Church, One Hundred Poems of Kabir, Jacapone da Todi, Ruysbroeck, Theophanies: A Book of Verses, The Path of Eternal Wisdom, and Jacob Boehme**. These and many more are now available through www.amazon.com or directly from the publisher—Kessinger Publishing, P. O. Box 1404, Whitefish, MT 59937.

At the June 15, 2006 morning Eucharist at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church held in Columbus, Ohio, presiding Bishop Frank Griswold preached a homily on the Feast of Evelyn Underhill. To read the homily, go to www.episcopalchurch.org/75383_75902_ENG.

**CROSSING OVER TO GOD'S SIDE:
EVELYN UNDERHILL AND THE
PROBLEM OF SECURITY**
by Stephanie Ford

On June 15, 1941, the British spiritual writer Evelyn Underhill, fragile from debilitating asthma, succumbed to a cerebral hemorrhage. Meanwhile, a youthful World War II raged outside—her fellow Brits engaged in the feverish struggle to stop the spread of German domination. For Underhill, however, the question of security had been settled long before bombs damaged her beloved home city of London. Some years earlier, the Anglican spiritual guide had gone against the grain of national loyalties: she had become a pacifist. Persuaded by contemplation on the meaning of the cross, Underhill had in her own words, “crossed over to God’s side.” She became convinced that the law of charity alone sufficed.

What were the sources of Underhill’s conversion to a security in love, unfettered by the gut-wrenching fear that must have welled up in anyone who endured the German blitz of the small island country? I was asking this question while working on a dissertation about the prolific spiritual writer, having been struck by Underhill’s complete change of heart from her pro-war stance during World War I.

Born in 1875, the only child of well-to-do, nominally Anglican parents, Evelyn Underhill’s early life lacked spiritual nurture. Yet, even as a teenager, Underhill showed spiritual sparks, fanned into flame in young adulthood through Christian art and architecture as well as the writings of Christian mystics. By her early thirties, her conversion had deepened dramatically. Underhill’s pen flowed copiously in novels, poetry, and then scholarly books on mysticism. She was passionate about the spiritual life, lifting the voice of the mystic up amid early-twentieth-century exultation in scientific progress. Early on, she distrusted the promises of expedient materialism.

Still, my own question about Underhill’s transformation on the issue of war did not become urgent until I watched the Twin Towers plunge to the ground in New York City. That September, as a new professor at a Quaker seminary, I was deeply stirred by the peace witness boldly declared all around me. Of course, I agreed—retaliation would never repair the wounds suffered by the innocent. But I tried to be honest with myself about the issue of safety. I didn’t live or work in the Big Apple. Would I have had the courage to stand as a pacifist after watching the towers implode? I wanted to know how it was that Underhill could surrender her own security to an uncompromising pacifism.

Of course, Jesus was always challenging his hearers on questions of security. He urged a rich young ruler to sell his possessions and follow him. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his followers to invest everything in a mysterious intangible called the Realm of God. Moreover, he illustrated this complete reversal of values in parables like a shepherd’s leaving ninety-nine sheep safely tucked in for the night in order to search for the one that was lost. And certainly his disciples were eager to try on this new way of life in faith; they abandoned their nets and followed the itinerant preacher. But believing takes ongoing attentiveness, as Peter would discover. Longing to walk out on the water at Jesus’ bidding, Peter began in earnest but was soon overwhelmed by the treacherous instabilities of wind and water and sank.

In 1914 Underhill was just at the point of publishing her fifth book, *Practical Mysticism*, when World War I broke out. She was convinced that the mystic could and must speak to the gravity of the hour—to prepare the human spirit for conflict and to enable the soul to find the “eternal beauty beyond and beneath apparent ruthlessness.”¹ In her preface, she referred to Joan of Arc and Florence Nightingale, heroines of war times past who had acted “under mystical compulsion.” In a poem “England and the Soldier” written a year or so later, Underhill waxed sentimental, depicting village streets at dusk, fragrant autumn gardens, and the familiar sounds of home—all part of the maternal “peace of England” waiting to gather in her returning sons, alive or dead.² In lofty tones, the poet promised the soldier that he was “never alone,” that England shared his wounds.

But in 1917 the author’s inkwell ran dry. It was the same year in which two of her cousins, sons of her widowed aunt, were killed in action. Underhill would later tell her spiritual director that she had “fallen to pieces” during the war. Indeed, the fate of her cousins was felt in almost every British family, as one million men were killed—many of whom rotted on the battlefields of France, never returning to the mystical solace of the English soil Underhill so eloquently pictured. A deep psychic depression descended over Europe, and the menace of another large-scale war simmered below the surface.

No longer could Underhill support the lone mystic’s triumph of spirit over matter. In a 1921 article Underhill wrote, “We are not closed systems, but part of the texture of the universe; and, equally with it, channels of the power that inspires.”³ Becoming active again in the Anglican church of her childhood, and blessed by the spiritual guidance of the noted and wise Friedrich von Hügel, her heart turned to the body of Christ as a potential vessel of transforming love in the world. During the 1920s and 30s, Underhill led numerous retreats, gave talks, and directed more of her writing to lay readers.

She became alarmed at the spiritually empty, spotty attempts at charity in the church. Nevertheless, she also worried that a theology of “social Christianity” might hinder a deeper surrender to the Spirit if concern for material well-being overshadowed the priority of Christ. Drawing upon the spiritual writings of the sixteenth-century French cardinal Pierre de Bérulle, Underhill interpreted his three-part paradigm of adoration, communion, and action for a new generation. Adoration, she explained, begins in awe, the natural response that rises up within us during worship. Yet the adoration of God is never just a private enjoyment. Not only does it inspire communities into corporate worship, but it also teaches us through its many “hints and intimations” about the nature of God’s kingdom. Through worship, the heart may be realigned, redirected. From this place of awe, our inner securities begin to shift. God becomes “the one real Fact,” and our first desire becomes one of living in that truth. We “pass away from our preoccupations and sink down into the soul’s ground,” which is our grounding in God.⁴

Communion, as Underhill articulated it, flows naturally from adoration. From this posture of humble amazement, our souls are opened to the “purifying action of the

¹ Evelyn Underhill, Preface to *Practical Mysticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1915), xi.

² Evelyn Underhill, “England and the Soldier,” in *Theophanies* (London: J. M. Dent, 1916), 108–109.

³ “Sources of Power in Human Life,” in *Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, ed. with introduction by Dana Greene (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *The Golden Sequence* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1933), 166–67.

Spirit,” which “increases our capacity for God.”⁵ We now sense God’s presence in our very being; we can discover the guidance of the Spirit in the moment and thus discern what is real from what is false. “Dimly, yet quite truly, we begin to be conscious of a steady supple pressure . . . a loving peaceful joy in the great purposes of the Spirit, swamping all personal anxiety.”⁶ Only from secure grounding in the Spirit can our desire be translated into right action.

Now while Underhill was not in favor of sitting on the sofa waiting passively for God’s reign to manifest on earth, she was also convinced that prayer was a powerful tool of cooperation with God. “For all real prayer,” Underhill wrote, “is part of the Divine action. It is, as Saint Paul says, Spirit that prays in us; and through and in this prayer exerts a transforming influence upon the created world.”⁷ Through intercessory prayer, we might participate in opening a channel through which healing, insight, strength, and energy may flow—work beyond the grasp of our conscious mind. Boldly, Underhill declared, the praying soul aids God in bringing on earth the kingdom that Jesus revealed in his living *and* in his dying.

From her writings, we know that even as early as 1933, the spiritual foundation for Underhill’s pacifist stance was firmly in place. Yet, for many Christians who were inclined toward pacifism after the First World War, fears at the rising tide of Hitler’s militarism evaporated such vision. When the threat reached England’s shore, a British pacifist response became unthinkable.

Yet Underhill held unflinching conviction that absolute pacifism was the *only* legitimate response of the Christian to war. In “A Meditation on Peace,” an essay from 1939, Underhill declares, “Peace [is] bought at a great price; the peace of the Cross, of absolute acceptance, utter abandonment to God, a peace inseparable from sacrifice. The true pacifist is a redeemer, and must accept with joy the redeemer’s lot.”⁸ Because her very consciousness had been reformed by her meditation on Christ, Underhill could now perceive militarism from its underside, the same underside that a poor, radical rabbi in the first century was able to see.

So what gives one faith to refuse the use of violence when faced with unprovoked attack, military overthrow, or certain death? If asked such a question, Underhill likely would have responded that only a Spirit-driven love can enable a person to choose absolute pacifism. “For,” Underhill explains, “it is only when the secret thrust of our whole being is thus re-ordered by God and set towards God, that peace is established.”⁸ Such a path requires abandonment to divine oversight: “Here then the soul’s attitude must be undemanding and all-accepting: content to receive [the] Spirit’s revelation through earthly forms and figures, to gaze on the Cross and know that it offers us a truth we cannot fathom.”⁹ Underhill was convinced that God’s way, a way of nonviolence would ultimately bring spiritual transformation to our world. Trusting in transcendence, Underhill argued from the side of eternity: that the ultimate power of charity may even compel us to take an action that seems quite impractical and personally dangerous.

⁵ Ibid., 170.

⁶ Ibid., 171.

⁷ Ibid., 183.

⁸ Ibid., 201.

⁹ Underhill, *The Golden Sequence*, 123.

According to Underhill, such self-donation to divine charity does not weaken us; rather it enables our tiny souls to participate in God's larger story of redemption. Our calling as Christ-bearers is not passivity but rather an energetic submission to the way of the Spirit—praying for, instead of battling, one's enemies and publishing the ways of peace abroad. Underhill's confidence in this invisible web of transformation was security in the knowledge of God's infinite love for the world.

The sensitive Underhill had not missed the devastating lessons of the First World War, but neither was she blind to the hazards inherent in a nonviolent response. Underhill admitted that pacifism "was not expedient for getting results . . . [but]," she explains, "no other ordering of our existence can produce the best results."¹⁰ She was clear. Pacifism entails facing the "apparent defeat of the Cross," which the Johannine Christ surrendered to with hope, saying to his followers, "be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."¹¹ Identity in Christ empowers the pacifist to call the church to *dis*-identify with the military state and any hegemony of violence.

In these years of living with Underhill's story and alongside my Quaker companions, I have been persuaded to invest my security in nonviolent resistance. This is not an easy shift; nor am I finished with it. Underhill did not face questions regarding an ethical response to genocide, for example. I wonder what I would do if my home were plundered or my child victimized. To choose the path of nonviolent resistance, I must continually turn towards the voice of Jesus, knowing that I am certainly not immune to the distractions of turbulent winds and water.

Yet I remember well the clarity and security I felt when I first read these poignant words that Underhill composed in 1940, as war raged around her. I turn to them often.

*The pacifist is the one who has crossed over to God's side and stands by the Cross, which is at once the supreme expression of that charity and the pattern of unblemished trust in the Unseen. Thence, with the eyes of prayer, he sees all life in supernatural regard; and knows that, though our present social order may crash in the furies of a total war and the darkness of Calvary may close down on the historic scene, the one thing that matters is the faithfulness of the creature to its own fragmentary apprehensions of the law of charity.*¹²

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¹⁰Evelyn Underhill, "Postscript" to *Way of Peace*, ed. Percy Harrell (London: James Clark, 1940), 187–92. Reprinted in *Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, 206.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 206–7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 206.

Purpose of the Association:

The Evelyn Underhill Association exists to promote interest in the life and work of Evelyn Underhill. Each year the Association sponsors a Day of Quiet at the Washington National Cathedral, publishes an online newsletter, supports the work of archives at King's College, London and the Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, VA, and supplies answers to queries.

Bookstore:

Please visit our online bookstore, accessible from the opening page. Each sale provides a small commission to the Association to support its activities.

Donations:

Donations to the work of the Association may be sent to
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Chevy Chase, MD 20815.