



The Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter 2007

The Spiritual Life of the World

Day of Quiet Reflection

The 2008 Quiet Day will be held on Saturday, June 14th in Cathedral College on the grounds of the Washington National Cathedral. The Day will focus on Evelyn Underhill's blending of personal prayer, corporate worship, and social justice into a coherent life, one accessible to others through her writing.

This year's Day will be guided by Rev. Canon Dr. Gerald Loweth. In his recent dissertation Canon Loweth examined Underhill's transition from a focus on private prayer, to worship, to a deeper involvement in the social issues of her time. In his two presentations, Canon Loweth will guide participants in exploring the connection between "personal" spirituality and social action. The Day, which runs from 9-3:30 p.m., will offer opportunities for private prayer and Eucharist.

Canon Loweth was ordained in the Diocese of Connecticut, served a number of years there and in the Diocese of Honolulu, and finally moved to Canada for study and parish work. He is retired and is a spiritual director for the theological students in the Faculty of Divinity of Trinity College, University of Toronto. He is married to The Rev. Elizabeth Ockenden Loweth and has four grown children and eight grandchildren. For further information contact Kathleen.Staudt@gmail.com in April.

"Soaked in Love and Prayer" By Donna Osthaus

The 2006 Quiet Day explored Evelyn Underhill's relationship to her beloved Retreat House at Pleshey, a place she first visited in May, 1922. She wrote to her spiritual director Baron Friedrich von Hugel that she had found the House "soaked in love and prayer".

The feelings she expressed on her first visit to Pleshey seem to have come as a surprise. In spite of all of her deep reading, writing, and wide exploration of the spiritual life, she had struggled with a feeling of spiritual homelessness. After many years she had made a decision to remain in the Anglican Church, but we don't know if or where she regularly worshipped. On one of our pilgrimages we discovered that she had donated a book to the library at St. Paul's, Vicarage Gate, the Anglican church closest to her house. But the person we talked to at the church had no real sense that she had worshipped there. It was at Pleshey that Underhill finally found a spiritual home, one that was steeped in centuries of Christian worship.

The village of Pleshey has a rich history going back to Roman days. What today is called "The Street" is a Roman road that runs from east to west. On the south side of this road there is a mound enclosed by the moat that forms the border of the Retreat House garden.

In 1066 William the Conqueror gave the land at Pleshey to a Norman ally, Geoffrey de Mandeville. All around the settlement de Mandeville planted 'pleached' hedges – closely woven thorn hedges. Later when the Earl of Hereford and Essex enclosed his lands with these hedges he called place "Plessie". The word took on the meaning of an "enclosed space." Today "hedging prayers" are said by Friends of Pleshey in the Retreat House Chapel. Pleshey is now "hedged" with prayer.

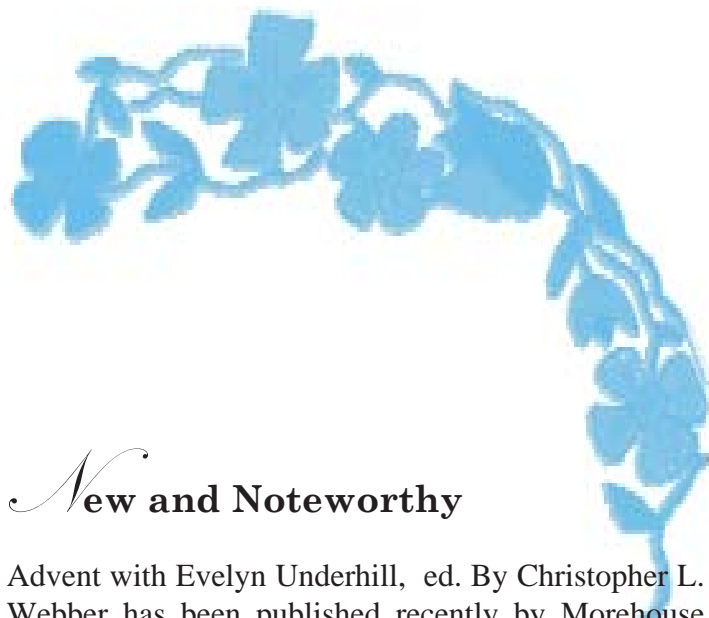


Thomas of Gloucester, uncle of Richard II, built the first house of prayer at Pleshey in the 14th century. In 1906, two members of an Anglican missionary community called "The Congregation of the Servants of Christ," came to Pleshey looking for larger quarters. They built the present Retreat House. When the Diocese of Chelmsford was formed in 1914, the sisters left and established a house at Burnham in Essex, where they are today. The House they had built became the first Diocesan Retreat House in England.

In 1928 Underhill's directee Lucy Menzies became Warden and was able to bring about the construction of a Chapel. Reflecting on Pleshey's long history, Underhill wrote this at the time of the dedication of the Chapel:

"Perhaps the fact that the whole House and its garden have ever been for those who love and serve it, holy ground, may have something to do with the way in which this new expression of the inner life of Pleshey seems to have come into existence fully charged with the spirit of prayer, already offering to all who enter it 'the silence of eternity interpreted by love.'"

Donna Osthaus is founder and president of The Pilgrim's Guide and designer of two Evelyn Underhill pilgrimages to Europe.



New and Noteworthy

Advent with Evelyn Underhill, ed. By Christopher L. Webber has been published recently by Morehouse Publishing Company.

Dana Greene taught a course on the spirituality of Evelyn Underhill at the Atlanta Institute for Spirituality sponsored by Spring Hill College, Atlanta.

Several dissertations on Evelyn Underhill have appeared:

"Evelyn Underhill, Baron Friedrich von Hugel, and Institutional Religion" by M. O'Connor, Monash University, Australia; "Evelyn Underhill after 'Mysticism': An Assessment of Her Later Years." M. A. Dissertation, Mc Gill University, Canada; "Mystic Moderns: Agency and Enchantment in Evelyn Underhill, May Sinclair, and Mary Webb." James Homer Thrall, Duke University, 2005; "The Influence of the Visual Arts in the Spirituality of Evelyn Underhill." Marie Crowley, Australian Catholic University, 2005; "Reflections on Their Relationship in the Works of Evelyn Underhill, Simone Weil and Meister Eckhart," by Debra Jensen, University of Toronto, 1995.

The Graduate Theological Foundation in South Bend, IN has an Evelyn Underhill Professorship in Historical Theology. The position is currently held by Jane Shaw, Dean of Divinity, Chaplain and Fellow of New College, Oxford University.

Justine Scott-McCarthy authored "Edges of the Mind: Psychic Margins and the Modernist Aesthetic in Vernon Lee, Evelyn Underhill, May Sinclair, Deon Fortune and Jane Harrison. University of London Press, 2001.

Evelyn Underhill continues to be the subject of journal articles. Below find some previously unlisted articles about her:

"Evelyn Underhill: The Practical Mystic" by Michelle Sauer in *Women Medievalists and the Academy*. Ed. Jane Chance. (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin press, 2005), 182-99.

"Evelyn Underhill." By James Whitlark in *Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century British Women Poets* ed. By William Thesing. (Detroit, MI: Thomson Gale, 2001), 283-92.

"Contemporary Mystic Study: Thomas Merton as Supported by Evelyn Underhill's Stages of Mystical Development" by Mary Damian Zynda. *Merton Annual*, 1991, 4, 173-202.

"T. S. Eliot and Evelyn Underhill: An Early Mystical Influence" by Donald Childs, *Durham University Journal*, Dec. 1987, 80, 83-98.

An Invitation: To Know the Transcendent through the Immanent

By Martha Gross

In her writings, Evelyn Underhill challenges the reader to go deeper -- beyond words, beyond labels, and even beyond dogma-- to encounter Living Reality, The Absolute Fact, God. She identifies the human tendency to miss the symbolic or sacramental dimension of things, and to cling to labels as if they are reality itself. She likewise faults Christians for not looking deeply enough and hence not finding the self-disclosure of the Living God in Creed, liturgy, scripture and religious imagery. Throughout her writings Underhill invites us to open ourselves to the sacramentality of life. It is there we can find the Transcendent God – a God who is present, active and communicating in both the secular and religious moments of our lives.

How, one might reasonably ask, can people open themselves to perceiving the Living God in ordinary, secular experiences? Underhill maintains that everyone is capable of this deeper perception or contemplation. The key, she writes, is to know a thing through uniting oneself with it, and thereby losing oneself and one's egocentric self-awareness in the process, much as a lover does with the beloved. If one can avoid the urge to objectify an experience and simply experience it fully, one can enjoy a heart knowledge that defies description. This is perception at the level of pure sensation. Like a great poet or artist, the contemplative heart no longer sees a beautiful thing labeled "flower" but basks in the simple sensation of being in wordless communion with it. Contemplation or intuitive perception is the doorway to encountering God, Who communicates Himself in the particulars of nature. As Underhill wrote in *Practical Mysticism*: "...behind the special and imperfect stammerings which we call color, sound, fragrance and the rest, we sometimes discern a whole fact – at once divinely simple and infinitely various – from which these partial messages proceed, and which seeks as it were to utter itself in them."

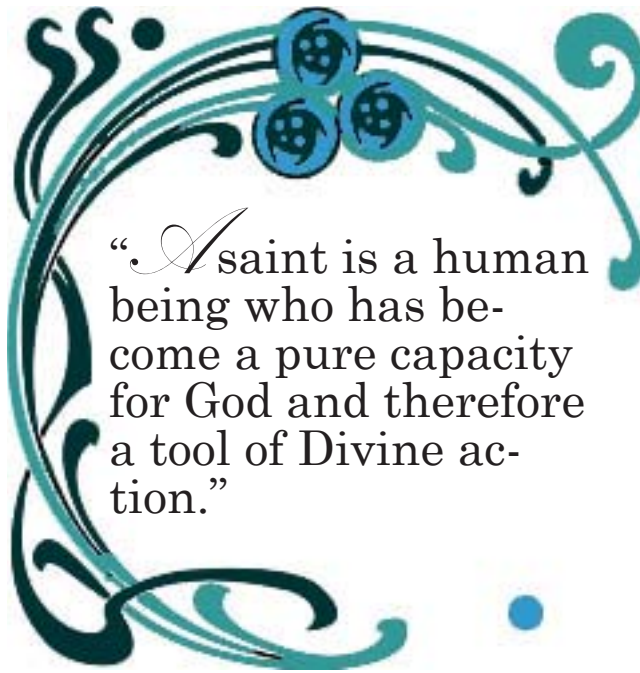


Underhill claims that the mystics or saints cultivate a contemplative mindset with passion and purity of heart. Consequently their unitive experiences transform their consciousness. For most ordinary, what she calls "normal" people, this transformation of consciousness does not take place. For Underhill the mystic's intuitive knowing is as one looking through a windshield to what lies beyond. If the glass is smudged with self-absorption and egocentricity, one has trouble seeing. The cleaner the windshield, the more clearly one can see through it. We must learn to see things, not as they are to us or for us, but as they are in themselves. Self-absorption keeps our focus on the windshield; purifying ourselves of self-interest focuses our attention outward and invites us to unite with Reality beyond ourselves.

Just as we miss Reality in the natural world when we treat it as an object we can use for our own ends, we miss the opportunity to know God when we use religion as a means to meet our own trifling wants and agendas. Underhill likens religion to a pantry with inexhaustible spiritual nourishment, yet many continue to starve because they do not know either what they have or how they can access it. The key, once again, is shifting the focus away from self to God, so one might see through the religious cipher to the God Who Is, and Who actively reveals Himself and gives Himself to the soul. Christianity is not a moral system or even a lovely arrangement of lofty ideas and ideals, but a process of losing of self in order to find oneself in God.

In both the secular and religious worlds we find Underhill coaching us to open ourselves to the God Who Is and, according to the Nicene Creed, Creator of both the "seen and unseen." To do so we must train ourselves in contemplation, purify ourselves of self-interest, and look beyond even dogma and liturgy in order to know and unite ourselves with the God Who Is, Reality Itself.

Martha Gross holds both an MTS and a Certificate in Spiritual Direction from Spring Hill College. She draws on the insights and writings of Evelyn Underhill in providing spiritual direction and leading retreats.



The following article, published in "The Anglican Theological Review," Fall 2006, Vol. 88, Issue 4, 519-36, is listed under the 2007 Newsletter link on the Newsletter page of the website.

Evelyn Underhill's Quest for the Holy:
A Lifetime Journey of Personal Transformation

NADIA DELICATA*

"What is it to be holy?" This question fashioned Evelyn Underhill's life. The young Underhill struggled with lack of intimacy and a disembodied spirituality. Her arduous spiritual searching drove her from pursuing magic, to a meticulous empirical study of the mystics, to facing personal tragedy in the First World War. Her gradual purification and transformation flourished in her encounter with Baron Friedrich von Hügel, her spiritual mentor. In the process, she rediscovered her Anglican roots, and gave her ultimate assent to Christ. Underhill's mature witness to the Christian life is revealed in her final "personal little hook" and testament, "The Golden Sequence: A Fourfold Study of the Spiritual Life."

*Nadia Delicata is a doctoral candidate in systematic theology at Regis College, University of Toronto.

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

Mr. Milo Coerper
7315 Brookville Rd.,
Chevy Chase, MD 20815.