



# The Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter

2008

## The Spiritual Life of the World

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### Day of Quiet Reflection

The 20th Annual Evelyn Underhill Quiet Day, The Call to God, will be held on Saturday, June 13, 2009 at Cathedral College on the grounds of the Washington National Cathedral. The Day will be guided by Dr. Kathleen Staudt, teacher, author and spiritual director. Registration materials will be available after Easter 2009. For information contact kathleen.staudt@gmail.com

### “Mysticism and Social Concern”

At the Evelyn Underhill Quiet Day in June 2008, Rev. Canon Dr. Gerald Loweth presented the following insights:

Evelyn Underhill is well known for her writings on the subject of Christian mysticism. She began her work in the early twentieth century at a time when this tradition was being looked at afresh. Among other writers of her time she was able to describe and define the mystic experience in terms of the encounter with God and its transforming affects on the person. She put this down in such works as *Mysticism and Practical Mysticism*,

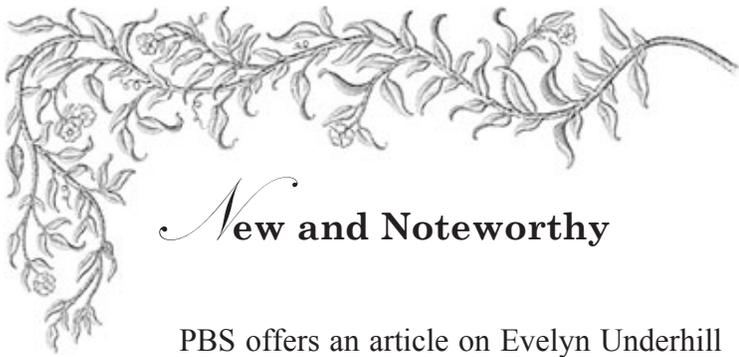
Following the turmoil of the First World War, Underhill began to undergo a change in her thinking. The fruits of her research into the mystical tradition were still alive and present in her new writings, but she expanded her thinking towards a more socially conscious and morally responsible context. She was now aware of the importance of the participation in the life of a religious community, and she become part of the Church of England.

She recognized the necessity to link the individual to issues of society, and she was recognized as a speaker and writer on the subject of social justice. Soon she went on her first retreat, and subsequently she became an acclaimed retreat leader. In all this work, she was able to take the writings and experiences of the classical mystics in the Christian tradition and make their insights relevant to the lives of ordinary people and to contemporary social conditions. 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 the last years of her life, Underhill became a part of a growing interest in liturgical reform in both Roman Catholic and Anglican churches. Where worship had become private and personal in both traditions, she helped to restore the corporate sense of worship and its movement of the participants into social involvement.

Finally, she took an unpopular stance on the issue of war and become a pacifist. This was a dramatic climax to a life which ended in London in 1942, in the midst of war.

“She recognized the necessity to link the individual to the issues of society..”



## *New and Noteworthy*

PBS offers an article on Evelyn Underhill under its program “The Question of God: Other Voices.” Go to [www.pbs.org/wgbh/question\\_of\\_god/voices/underhill](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/question_of_god/voices/underhill).

The 2008 Evelyn Underhill Lecture in Christian Spirituality, “A Spirituality of the Second Half of Life,” was given at Boston College on July 12th by the prolific author and spiritual guide, Kathleen Fischer.

Several of Underhill’s books are available on line. See Practical Mysticism at [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org) ; Mysticism at [www.onlinebooks.library.penn.edu](http://www.onlinebooks.library.penn.edu) ; Life of the Spirit and the Life of To-day at [www.ebooksread.com](http://www.ebooksread.com).

Dana Greene presented a workshop on Evelyn Underhill at the Green Bough House of Prayer, Adrian, GA.

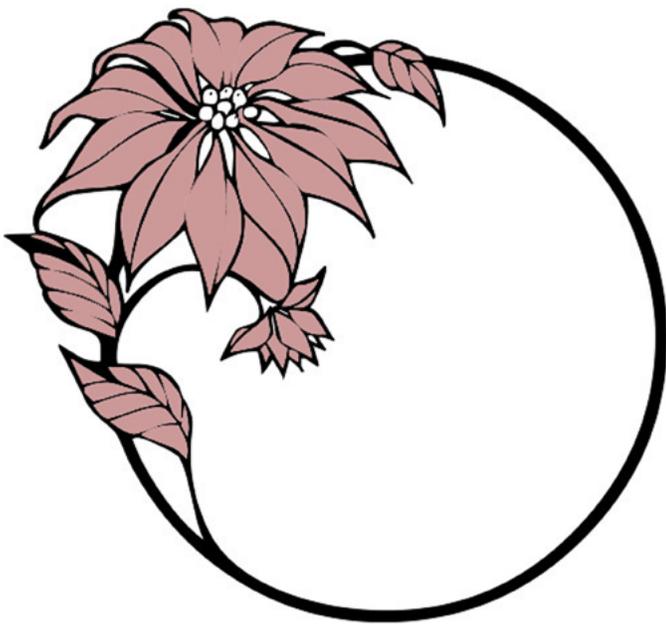
Each year the Retreat House at Pleshey in Chelmsford, UK offers a retreat on Evelyn Underhill. For more information go to [www.retreathousepleshey.com](http://www.retreathousepleshey.com).

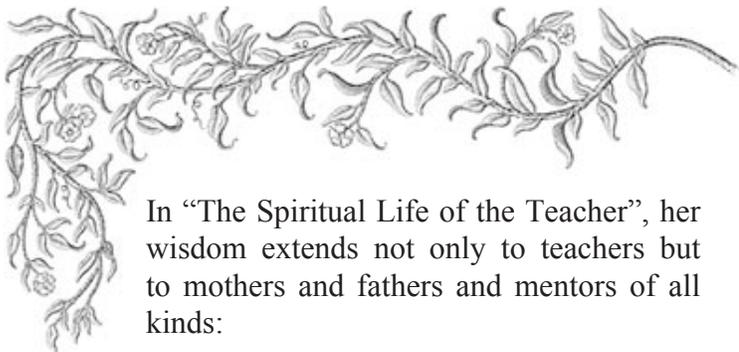
## *Honoring Evelyn Underhill*

**By Kathleen Henderson Staudt**

For many years now an important spiritual resting-point in my life has been the annual day of quiet reflection in honor of Evelyn Underhill, sponsored by the Evelyn Underhill Association at the Washington National Cathedral. It is always held in mid-June, on a Saturday close to the day when the Episcopal Church calendar observes Evelyn’s feast day, June 15. It is a beautiful time of year on the Cathedral close, usually with lovely weather, the roses blooming in the Bishop’s Garden, quiet places to walk and pray on the grounds or in the Cathedral. Always the day has included several hours of communal silence, punctuated by a leader’s reflections on some theme from the writings of this 20th century mystic, spiritual director and retreat leader.

Evelyn Underhill’s gift to the Church may best be summarized by the title of one of her early books: Practical Mysticism: A Little Book for Normal People. The first book of hers that I really read was called Life as Prayer, a volume of occasional talks, now out of print. I keep returning to two essays in this volume. “The Spiritual Life of a Teacher,” an address to church school teachers, seems to me to speak equally to the vocations of teacher and parent, two callings that I have always sought to weave together in my own life. “Life as Prayer,” the title essay, speaks to the way that I have experienced the mystery of intercessory prayer, and prayer in community. More widely available is her little book The Spiritual Life, a series of radio addresses offered on the BBC in 1938. There she speaks of the connection between the call to the interior life and the Church’s vocation to serve the needs of a suffering and broken world. Evelyn’s writing invites people to adoration, communion and cooperation with God, and depicts prayer as an immersion in God’s love, an activity natural to human beings formed in God’s image, and an exciting journey. “The life of prayer,” she writes, “is so great and various there is something in it for everyone. Or again, it is like that ocean of God in which St. Gregory said that elephants can swim and lambs can paddle. Even a baby can do something about it. No saint has exhausted its possibilities yet.” (“Life as Prayer,” p. 175)





In “The Spiritual Life of the Teacher”, her wisdom extends not only to teachers but to mothers and fathers and mentors of all kinds:

“In one way or another, you are required to be pupil-teachers, working for love. You must learn all the time, and give all the time; freely you have received, freely give. That is your Charter. Only do see to it that you fulfil the condition in which you can receive. The most up-to-date and efficient tap is useless unless the Living Water can come through and does come through.”

Or again, further on:

“God is always coming to you in the sacrament of the present moment. Meet and receive Him then with gratitude in that sacrament; however unexpected its outward form may be.” (Life as Prayer, 185) Here and elsewhere in her writing, this voice of quiet, grounded spiritual authority has named my experience. It is a joy to find in Evelyn an apparently “normal” person, an upper middle class, educated, married woman, like myself in some ways, whose work names and invites others into the depths of the life of prayer, grounded in what she describes elsewhere as “that deep place where the soul is at home with God.”

Evelyn Underhill is best known for her fat scholarly book, *Mysticism*, published in 1911 and continuously in print since then. It has always seemed clear to me that her scholarly work on the mystics grew out of a deep need to integrate her own spiritual experience with an intellectual understanding of human psychology and religious experience. Throughout her writing, she insists that the experience of the great mystics of all traditions is actually an experience available to all human beings in some way or another, that the greatest mystics’ experience differs from that of the rest of us “in degree, not in kind.” Most important, the life of prayer is never separate from our daily work in the world. Rather, if it is healthy, prayer calls us to participate in some way in God’s ongoing effort to heal and redeem all that is broken and hurting in the world. In “Life as Prayer,” she writes of prayer as a “mysterious, and yet very practical, work”:

“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. In so far as you have given your lives to God, you have offered yourselves, without conditions, as transmitters of his saving and enabling life: and the will and love, the emotional drive, which you thus consecrate to God’s purposes, can do actual work on supernatural levels for those for whom you are called upon to pray. 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. This happens, and the fact that it happens is one of the most wonderful things in the Christian life.” (55)

I return often to Underhill’s writing, fascinated by this intensely prayerful woman, who wrote articles, books, and letters of direction and led retreats at a time when there was no real category to describe her vocation. The voice that comes through her work reveals a personality that was consecrated, alive, ardent, joyful and very insistent, a strong personality, absorbed in the love of Christ, yet with a homey, conversational style that is engaging. I always feel that strength of personality among us when we gather for this Day of Quiet in Evelyn Underhill’s honor. Though the meditations we hear are based on her work, ultimately the gathering is not only “about” her. Rather, in coming together we accept an invitation to enter the life of prayer in community.

Even though I usually have a leadership position now, that June quiet day has become for me a time of re-rooting, reconnecting to my own deepening experience of God’s presence in my life. It is a time to rest with others in what Evelyn somewhere calls “that deep place where the soul is at home with God.”

Dr. Kathleen Henderson Staudt (Kathy) keeps the blog poetproph, works as a teacher, poet, spiritual director and retreat leader in the Washington DC area, and teaches courses in literature, theology and writing at Virginia Theological Seminary and the University of Maryland, College Park. She is the author of two books: *At the Turn of a Civilisation: David Jones and Modern Poetics* and *Annunciations: Poems out of Scripture*. This article first appeared in the June 2008 issue of *The Episcopalian*, [www.episcopalcafe.com](http://www.episcopalcafe.com)



Evelyn Underhill:

*More than a Beacon or Bridge:*

*An Artist*

By Bishop Robert Morneau

### Background:

Evelyn Underhill (December 6, 1875 – June 15, 1941) was a married lay-woman of the Anglican tradition. Her writings on mysticism, worship, and the spiritual life continue to influence individuals who are interested in the Christian tradition. Underhill wrote over thirty books, conducted retreats for laity and clergy, and was, like the rest of us, a struggling pilgrim seeking to understand and respond to the mystery we call God.

One of her greatest legacies was the retrieval of the Christian mystics. Her study of and love for the writings of such individuals as St. John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, and Meister Eckhart grounded Underhill in one of the richest dimensions of Christian spirituality.

Although attracted to Catholicism and receiving spiritual direction from Baron Friedrich von Hugel, Evelyn Underhill remained in the Anglican tradition. Her own spiritual growth involved a movement from a privatized faith to communal worship. On the practical level, she came to see the importance of expressing faith in action, especially by serving the poor. She also grew in her appreciation of the mystery of Jesus rather than focus exclusively on the Fatherhood of God.

In 1990, Dana Greene wrote Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life (New York: Crossroad and University of Notre Dame Press). This excellent biography presents a balanced view of a personality not easy to know and a life with relatively little drama. What Greene captures in this work is the development and maturation of a spiritual life, of a pilgrim seeking to understand the mystery of God and of a pilgrim pursued by an unrelenting Creative and Redeeming Love.

Here are several lessons that I have carried away from this treasured volume.

### Lessons:

#### *Lesson One*

*Underhill's great legacy: recognition of the primacy of adoration over asceticism.*

Prayer attends to God, and mortification concentrates on bending the individual will toward God, filling one with God and in the process making a saint. Yet for Underhill, emphasis on mortification is always subordinate to the responses of awe and adoration. This subordination is one of her most important legacies. (115)

On Ash Wednesday, the Gospel instructs us to pray, fast, and give alms. Prayer does attune us to the mystery we call God; almsgiving directs our energy and resources to helping those in need; fasting and mortification, disciplines that foster life, help to order our own houses so that we might be free to pray and be generous. But there is a hierarchy here. Prayer, that is, awe and adoration, are foundational in that this mutual communication with God gives us the proper perspective on mortification and the energy to serve others. Knock out this cornerstone of spirituality, and our houses will soon crumble.

#### *Lesson Two*

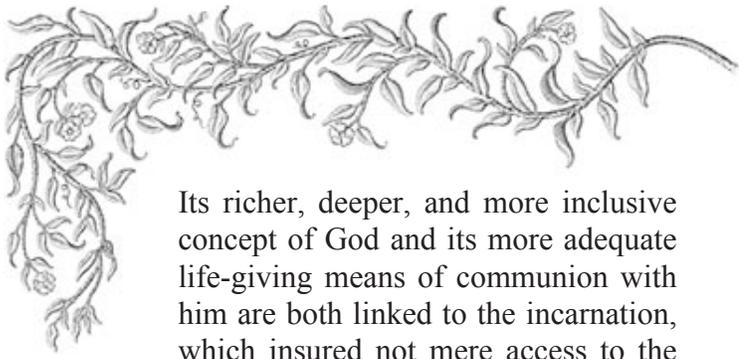
*Christianity is an organic process that emphasizes self-surrender, love, and fruitfulness.*

Equally important was her claim that Christianity was an organic process, distinct from the Neoplatonic philosophy which had greatly influenced it. Christianity, with its emphasis on self-surrender, heroic love, and divine fecundity represented true mysticism, she maintained, whereas Neoplatonism, holding out ecstatic union with the Absolute as its goal, had no place for participation in the infinite love which “overflowed” in gifts to others. (64)

#### *Lesson Three*

*Christianity's goal: the perfection of charity.*

In “Essays Catholic and Missionary” she claims that Christianity, relative to other theistic religions, is distinct in kind and superior in effect. *(continued on next page)*



#### *Lesson Four*

*There are four ways of experiencing supernatural reality.*

The book is a discussion of the four ways through which men and women experience supernatural reality: in history and the great acts of humanity; in human personality through incarnation, that is, in Jesus Christ; in sacrament and symbols that serve as bridges to the unseen; and finally in prayer, which transforms and sanctifies human life. (102)

God is revealed through history and Jesus, sacraments and prayer. Salvation history records the marvelous deeds of God, be they creation itself, the covenant, or the founding of community in Israel or the Church. Jesus, son of God and son of Mary, discloses the very essence of the Godhead, a God of love, compassion, and forgiveness. Through the sacraments, God keeps breaking into time at all the key moments of human life. And, as people lift up their minds and hearts to God, we experience the intimacy that the Deity offers us.

#### *Lesson Five*

Intercession means an offering of our will and love to God.

When Evelyn Underhill spoke of intercession she meant a general offering of one's will and love to God, through Christ, so that the one who offered might become a means through which God's mercy, healing, and power might reach someone and achieve, not a particular purpose, but God's purpose for them. (132)

Intercessory prayer is a tricky business. In asking the Lord's help for someone who is ill, or divine assistance in bringing about world peace, or grace to forgive an injury, the one making the request will be expected to become an agent of God's power. That's how sacramentality works – grace meditated through human agency. Thus, a passive intercessor who has no intention of taking on appropriate responsibility for the transformation of the world is simply barking up the wrong tree. Intercession doesn't work that way. Rather, when we dedicate our will to God and promise God our love, great things will happen, new miracles every day.

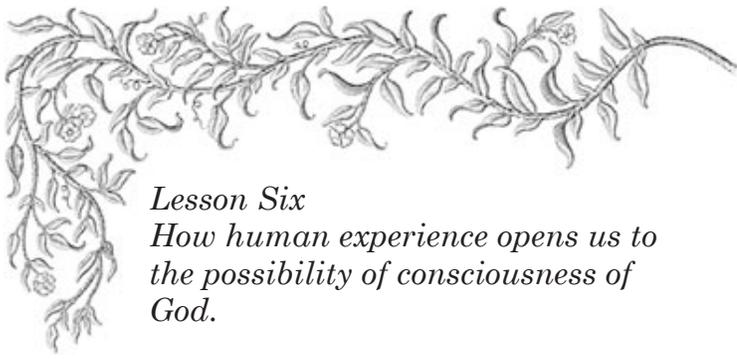
Its richer, deeper, and more inclusive concept of God and its more adequate life-giving means of communion with him are both linked to the incarnation, which insured not mere access to the Numinous but the ability to bring the Numinous into relationship with human life. An incarnate God is both infinite and personal, transcendent and immanent, Wholly Other yet in history and in each soul. Unlike forms of theism, Christianity's goal is not the attainment of an individual mystical experience, but the perfection of charity lived out in life. At its heart is not ritual obligation or creedal statement, but a life transformed by love. (103)

Two things are worthy of note here: Underhill's concept of God and her clarity about the goal of Christianity. The Christian God is incarnate while retaining the qualities of transcendence and infinity. Reason stumbles here before the light of faith. Our finite brains cannot comprehend divine mystery. What reason and common sense can comprehend and affirm is Christianity's claim that although mystic experience, ritual, and creeds have their place, and an important one at that, still everything revolves around love and charity. Only when life is transformed by love will the Kingdom come with its by-products of peace and joy.



“An incarnate God is both infinite and personal, transcendent and immanent.”

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*Lesson Six*  
*How human experience opens us to the possibility of consciousness of God.*

Although she studied history and art and was influenced by developments in modern psychology, philosophy and science, her focus was on human experience and the possibility it offered for the development of a consciousness of the transcendent, the eternal, the absolute, the infinite. Underhill asked the question so often ignored: What is the deepest human longing? She found her answer first in the experience of the Western mystics who claimed that it was to behold love itself – that is, God – and second, in the experience of ordinary life that offers the opportunity to respond with awe and gratitude to that love. (6)

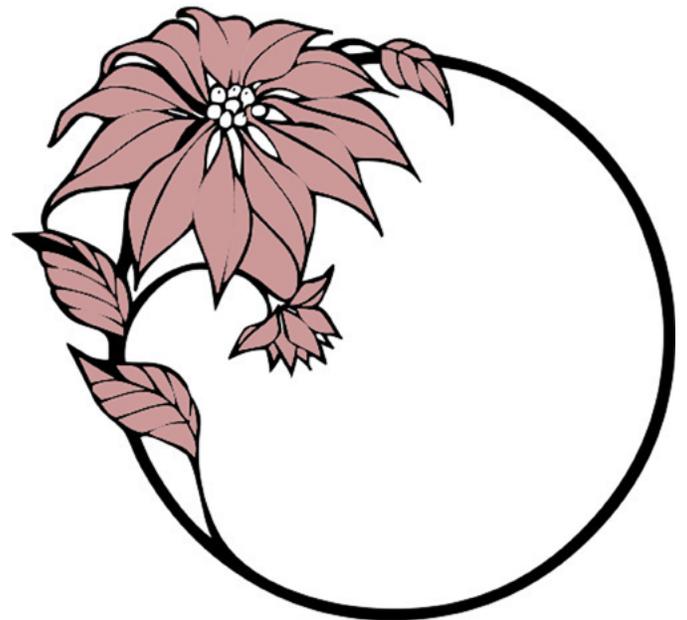
The field of human knowledge is vast: physical sciences, social sciences, humanities, philosophy, and theology. The human mind hungers for knowledge just as the heart hungers and longs for love. These infinite longings are always frustrated because of our intellectual and affective limitations. So, choices have to be made. The mystics opted for the mystery of love and strove to experience that love directly. Access to that love lay in many directions, the primary one being human experience wherein divine love felt, elicits gratitude, wonder, and awe. Consciousness is not limited to the realm of time and space; consciousness seeks the infinite and the eternal.

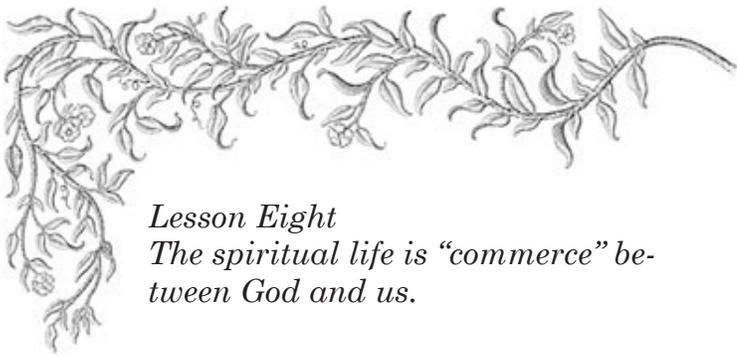
“Prayer is a way of being in constant union and dialogue with God.”

*Lesson Seven*  
*Prayer is a way of being in constant union and dialogue with God.*

Prayer, she says, does this work of transformation. It is not an action or a duty, or even an experience, but a vital relationship between the whole individual and the being of God. Initiated by God, it is nonetheless a mutual act, dependent both on grace and the will of the individual. More than a specific act, prayer is a state, a condition of soul at the heart of which is not intercession but adoration, the “awe-struck” love which brings with it a sense of humility and gratitude, a communion with God, and a self-offering. In short, prayer is the organic life, having adoration as its root, communion as its flower, and loving action as its fruit. (114)

Throughout the Christian tradition a constant theme is a holistic spirituality involving three elements: adoration (attention), communion (adherence), and loving action (abandonment). This way of life is grounded in prayer, that mutual dialogue wherein God and his creatures deepen their relationship. And the highest form of prayer is praise, a prayer grounded in adoration of divine love. The experience of prayer is transformative because it leads to gratitude, humility, and sacrifice. Prayer is the soul’s heartbeat.





*Lesson Eight*  
*The spiritual life is “commerce” between God and us.*

Her most basic premise about the spiritual life, namely, that there is a personal holy presence and energy in which all things live and have their being; it prompts in those who recognize it not only acknowledgement but adoration. This holy presence has its most profound revelation in Jesus, is witnessed to by the lives of the saints, and is available to each person. Participation in the holy presence is the spiritual life. It is not separate from life itself but is a particular way of apprehending it. The spiritual life is the “commerce” between a person and the holy presence – God – an exchange which can suffuse and take over all of life, radically transforming it as it gains control. (113)

To speak of the spiritual life is to speak of holy, gracious presence. Birds in the air and fish in the sea are immersed in a milieu so pervasive as to be unnoticed. Human beings are in a divine milieu, a sacred presence. The challenge is to be aware of and respond to the holy mystery in which we live. The invitation is to participate in this life, a life called grace, and to allow this abiding presence to shape our days. Once we are truly aware of God’s presence and acknowledge it, adoration becomes a possibility, even a way of life.

*Lesson Nine*  
*Underhill’s methodology involves close observation, inclusivity, and a sense of oneness.*

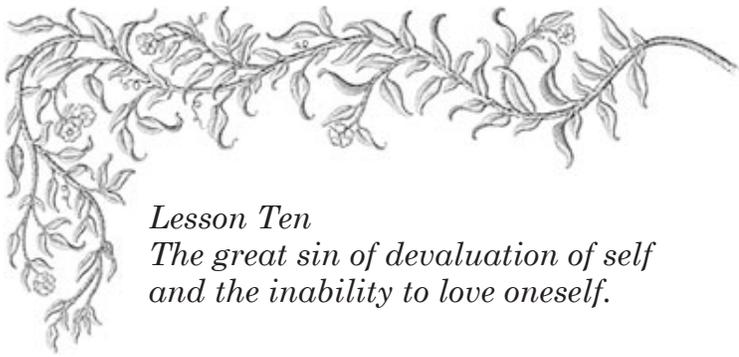
Here Underhill discloses her method and the source of her originality as a writer. Experience is the first guide in understanding one’s subject. The outer edges of experience are reached by what she called sympathetic imagination and imagined participation with the subject. From the time of her youth she wanted “to cultivate a habit of observation and interest in everything,” and to have a mind “wide to embrace all sorts of things” and a “sense of one-ness” with our kind. Identifying these values with “worthy womanhood,” she inculcated them so deeply that they became a way of understanding reality. Close observation, inclusivity, and a sense of oneness were the components of the methodology she applied both to life and to the study of the mystics. It was a learned methodology; one designated by social expectation of gender and the source of her perceptiveness both as a writer and a person. (48)

Finding one’s method is like finding one’s voice. It is a way of negotiating reality and making good use of one’s talents. Without a method we flounder and often get lost in the maze of things. Without one’s own voice there is no originality and sense of identity. Methodology draws us into the field of discipline and habit. To be practiced in noticing things, to appreciating them from the inside, and to nurture a sensibility of the oneness of being is a method both profound and effective. It is also a method that leads to wisdom and creative action.

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“This holy presence has its most profound revelation in Jesus..”

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*Lesson Ten*  
*The great sin of devaluation of self*  
*and the inability to love oneself.*

Underhill epitomizes what has been called the greatest female sin – the devaluation of self and the inability to love oneself. For most of her life, Underhill was unable to experience for herself what she saw so clearly in the lives of the mystics – unearned love that makes one lovable. It was her greatest failure. (150)

It could be argued that women have no corner on the sin mentioned above: “the devaluation of self and the inability of love oneself.” Is this not more universal than limited to gender? Are not all humans, male and female, vulnerable to low self-esteem, even self-disdain? For some graced reason, mystics knew themselves loved and responded to that blessedness by appropriating their intrinsic worth. This freed them to go forth and love others, helping them to discover their true value and worth. At times the mystics succeeded; at other times, the messages did not take root.

### ***Spiritual Insights***

Italy changed her life; it taught her that beauty was a way to the infinite life for which she longed. (12)

The avenues into God’s infinite life are many: truth, goodness, and beauty to name just a few. Often philosophers point the way into wisdom; saints are our guides into kindness; and, countries and their cultures can direct us into the radiant splendor we call beauty. Our holy longings are not without their resources.



Where the philosopher guesses and argues, the mystic lives and looks; and speaks, consequently, the disconcerting language of first-hand experience, not the neat dialectic of the schools. (50)

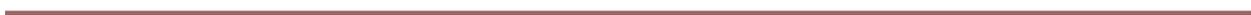
The discourse of first-hand experience is disconcerting because it is so intimate and private. It is the dialect of lovers and no one on the outside can comprehend its lexicon. Mystics will always seem strange, even to the contemplative, because of the uniqueness of their encounter with God. As for philosophers and logicians, anyone with a decent IQ has the key to their realm.

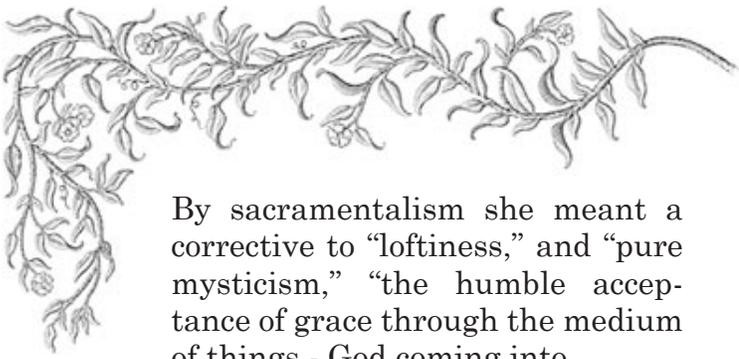


“The art of life,” she had written in 1911, “is learned only in the living – lookers-on know nothing of the game.” (77)

There is a certain knowledge obtainable by non-participants, but it is a second hand and often sterile knowledge. A case in point would be the scriptures: no one who does not live the word of God can really understand it. This was St. Augustine’s problem when he was wandering in the abstract philosophical world. Only when he began to live God’s will could Augustine understand its intrinsic meaning.

“Italy changed her life: it taught her that beauty was a way to the infinite life for which she longed.”





By sacramentalism she meant a corrective to “loftiness,” and “pure mysticism,” “the humble acceptance of grace through the medium of things - God coming into

our souls by means of humblest accidents – the intermingling of spirit and sense.” (89)

Sacramentality is not only a lofty word in the theological definition but one that tends to blur the beauty of the reality. For a sacrament offers the glorious mediation by which grace and nature begin their magic dance. A flower in the crannied wall, a burning bush, the lily in the field, a small host have the potential of drawing the human soul into God’s world. Grace can be a sneaky agent.



Like the artist, the mystic by giving full attention to one object learns its secrets. (125)

What we pay attention to is a primary indication of the meaning of our life. Artists are attentive to beauty, not just in general, but this beauty on the smile of a Mona Lisa. Mystics are attentive to love, not just an abstract love, but one incarnated in a divine manifestation. Artists and mystics are both seers and their gaze is so focused as to discover great secrets. Maybe not so much discover as to be open to a revelation of infinite worth.



“Lots of us manage to exist for years without ever sinning against society, but we sin against loveliness every hour of the day.” (16)

There are sins of omission and commission. Both diminish life. Our need for God’s grace is an hourly need since we are surrounded by loveliness (or as Gerard Manley Hopkins maintains: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God”). To by-pass beauty verges on sinfulness, not mere neglect. Blessed is that pilgrim who notices the loveliness of creation and responds in gratitude and joy.



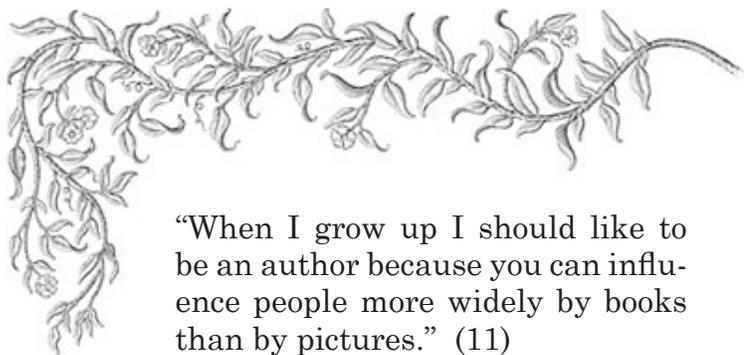
... adoration, adherence, and cooperation; together they make up the spiritual life. (125)

George Herbert, in his powerful poem, “Trinity Sunday,” prays to the triune God: “Enrich my heart, mouth, hands in me; / With faith, with hope, with charity; / That I may run, rise, rest in Thee.” Herbert knew the components of spirituality: the heart refers to adherence; the mouth to adoration and praise; the hands to co-operation and creative action. Any holistic spirituality has a cognitive, affective, and behavioral element.



What drove her was the belief that her times needed experiences of “God-intoxicated” spirits, with “the great qualities of wildness and romance.” (57)

Every meaningful life is a purpose-driven life. Some passion possesses the soul and takes it on a wild and romantic journey. For some, as for Evelyn Underhill, it is the conviction that people lack a personal experience of God. So she went in search of those pilgrims whose lives were “God-intoxicated.” She found them in the mystics and recorded for anyone who was interested what that divine intoxication looked like and how it transformed body and soul.



“When I grow up I should like to be an author because you can influence people more widely by books than by pictures.” (11)

Apparently, not everyone buys the claim that a picture is worth a thousand words. Such individuals also reject a further claim that our lives are lived on images. Yet, here is an author who drew pictures, pictures of mystics who went in search of God and were willing to pay the supreme price of self-surrender. Books do have tremendous influence and when they contain pictures that influence is magnified a thousand-fold.



[Underhill’s] search for the infinite life: it dominated all her life and work. In its service she became more than a beacon or bridge; she became an artist of the infinite life. (6)

Beacons illumine our journey and offer vision; bridges span our going from here to there. We are beholden to both. But then comes the artist who not only illumines our dark days and spans those abysses on our journey, but draws for us a portrait of Infinite Love, Light, and Life as experienced in the lives of the mystics. What gratitude we owe for such a service.



Robert Morneau is the auxiliary bishop of the Catholic diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin.

## How to Contact the Association

Feel free to contact us with questions, comments, contributions, new ideas.

### **EUA President**

Dana Greene  
(dgreen4@emory.edu)

### **EUA Vice President**

Kathleen Staudt  
(Kathleen.Staudt@gmail.com)

### **Charitable Contributions**

Milo Coerper  
7315 Brookville Rd.  
Chevy Chase, MD 20815

### **Newsletter Submissions**

Dana Greene  
(dgreen4@emory.edu)

## 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.

## Donations

Donations to the work of the Association may be sent to:

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

