

The Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter

2016-2017

www.evelynunderhill.org

Annual Quiet Day 2017

The Homely Ways of the Spirit: A Day of Quiet Reflection with Evelyn Underhill

Leader: Bishop Frank T. Griswold, former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church

Saturday, June 17, 2017, 9:30-3:30
Nourse Hall, St. Albans Parish
Next door to the Washington National Cathedral
3001 Wisconsin Ave NW
Washington DC 20016



As he prepares to be our guide for this year's annual Quiet Day, Bishop Griswold writes "I was introduced to Evelyn Underhill at the age of 16, by a priest who lent me a copy of *Light of Christ*. From that day on, Underhill's practical, "homely" and no-nonsense approach to the inner life has been both an invitation and a steadying guide across the seasons of my life. As I look toward our day together, I am drawn to focus our reflection and prayer upon the Ways of the Spirit as a doorway into our availability to the unpredictable "wind" of the Spirit which "blows where it chooses."

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“On every level of life, from housework to heights of prayer, in all judgment and efforts to get things done, hurry and impatience are sure marks of the amateur.”

~ Evelyn Underhill

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The Annual Quiet Day 2016

The annual Evelyn Underhill Quiet Day was held June 18th, 2016 at Sayre House on the grounds of the Washington National Cathedral in celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the death of Underhill on June 15, 1941. The day was directed by Dr. Donyelle McCray who gave presentations on the “Spirituality of Risk.” Rev. Susan Thon offered the Eucharist.

Participants prayed for fellow English pilgrims who walked from the Chelmsford Cathedral to the Retreat House at Pleshey honoring this important anniversary in Underhill’s life of faith. Participants in the Washington Quiet Day carried out their own pilgrimage encircling the Cathedral and holding aloft a photograph of Underhill. Prayers of gratitude were offered for the inspiration and courage Underhill offered to all those who found meaning in her life and writing.



NEWS FROM ENGLAND

Evelyn Underhill Walk

On Saturday 18th June a small group of walkers, led by Canon Cilla Hawkes and Reverend Helen Pelly, made a pilgrimage from Chelmsford Cathedral to the Retreat House at Pleshey. The walk was commemorating Evelyn Underhill, whose 75th anniversary of death had been on the previous Wednesday.

The walk started at mid-day, and coincided with a meeting of Diocesan Synod. Bishop Stephen Cottrell spoke briefly about Evelyn Underhill’s significance, and then prayed the pilgrims on their way using one of her prayers and a special pilgrims’ blessing.

The first part of the walk followed the river Chelmer out of central Chelmsford, and included a short stop for lunch. The group then continued up the Broomfield Road, past the church of St Mary with St Leonard and then the Hospital, before turning up Woodhouse Lane into the Essex countryside. Although it was an overcast day, the rising temperature soon saw coats being removed, and by about 2.30pm some four miles had been covered as the group arrived at The Walnut Tree pub in the hamlet of Broad’s Green for a well-earned drink.

By three o’clock there were specks of rain in the air, but the walkers pressed on westwards using what were sometimes muddy footpaths, eventually catching sight of the church tower at Pleshey across the fields. With renewed purpose the final mile or so was soon achieved, and a warm welcome received at the Retreat House, in perfect time for a cup of tea and cake.

A pilgrimage includes a sense of destination – a connection made between departure and arrival. It also includes much conversation along the way. The walk on 18th June encompassed all these things, as well as honouring Evelyn

Underhill, who did so much to establish the Retreat House at Pleshey and who guided many different people in their Christian faith. The pilgrims also agreed that their route had reflected beautifully the mixture of urban and rural settings that represent the Diocese of Chelmsford, which reaches from the countryside of north Essex right down to the East London boroughs.

For Newsletter and Pleshey House of Retreat Program see retreathouse@chelmsford.anglican.org

“We know a thing only by uniting with it; by assimilating it; by an interpenetration of it and ourselves. It gives itself to us, just in so far as we give ourselves to it; and it is because our outflow toward things is usually so perfunctory and so languid, that our comprehension of things is so perfunctory and languid too... Wisdom is the fruit of communion; ignorance is the inevitable portion of those who ‘keep themselves to themselves,’ and stand apart, judging, analyzing the things which they have never truly known.”

~ *Evelyn Underhill*

The Spirituality of Risk

Donyelle C. McCray, Ph.D.

*Delivered at the Underhill Quiet Day
June 18, 2016*



I. The Soft White Bed

I'm often curious about how teachers like Evelyn Underhill spend their leisure time. Somehow it gives me a much-needed window into the personality. I was intrigued when I learned she enjoyed trips to Spain and Italy. Fondness for travel suggests something expansive about her. The fact that she liked the Norwegian mountains said something hardy about her. It helped me even more to learn that she liked sailing. That pointed to an adventurous streak – an interesting complement to an inner life characterized by doubts and insecurity. But I was really blown away when I discovered that during the 1920s, she and her husband Hubert owned a motorcycle with sidecar. They would ride out into the countryside in it together for fun. The idea of Evelyn Underhill barreling through the countryside in the sidecar of a motorcycle (or, who knows, it was the 1920s, driving a motorcycle with Hubert in the sidecar)! Either way, the idea of it affirmed once again, that she was a woman who knew something about spiritual life and its risks. When I learned of Underhill the biker, it gave a new edge to a line of hers I'd read before, "The art of life is learned only in the living—lookers-on know nothing of the game."¹ She is a spiritual mother to many of us in this room precisely because she was a woman who felt God beckoning her to swim in freedom. A healthy respect for risk appears as a thread through various dimensions of her work—especially letters, retreats, stories, and essays. What if today we imagined her driving the motorcycle and ourselves in the sidecar? It seems a fitting posture for thinking about risk and the claim it makes on our spiritual lives.

First, what do we mean by risk? It helps to start with the negative in this case. Risk is not synonymous with drama or shock. Underhill does not celebrate daredevils or incite people to take self-absorbed risks that glorify their own power. In Underhill's work, it is more helpful to think of risk as an occasion of real, not contrived danger, and as a divine invitation to rely entirely upon God, to abandon oneself to divine purposes that may or may not be understood.² Risk is the process by which we discover the boundary lines of our discipleship and face those demands that seem to be beyond our spiritual resources.

Often the spiritual task is not letting things go but holding them lightly—and this task is a difficult one whether

¹ Dana Greene, *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life* (New York: Crossroads, 1990), 77.

² Evelyn Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, ed. Grace Adolphsen Brame (New York: Crossroads, 1990), 231.

what we are trying to hold lightly is a situation, a possession, an agenda, or the opinion of another. Underhill sees risk as an occasion that teaches us the difference between being truly courageous or merely heroic, moments when we come to see that improvisation is holy work. The stickiest part about risk is the sense that some response is required of us, the inability to sit still indefinitely. And risks are fitted to our unique temperaments and to the current architecture of our lives. They are, in an uncomfortable way, ours, the kind of thing that crawls into one's lap that one must either pet or send meowing to the floor. Either way, the decision parallels what Underhill calls a "widening arc of consciousness."³ She explains it another way in *Life as Prayer*:

For genuine prayer in all its degrees, from the most naive to the most transcendental, opens up human personality to the all-penetrating Divine activity. Progress in prayer, whatever its apparent form, consists in the development of this its essential character. It places our souls at the disposal of the immanent Spirit. In other words, it promotes abandonment to God; and this in order that the souls's separate activity may more and more be invaded, transfigured, and at last superseded by the unmeasured Divine action. In Pauline language, maturity of soul is to be gauged by the extent in which the Spirit 'prays in us.'⁴

While there are some exceptions, the Spirit tends to beckon us out of bed and into loving action in the world. This call to get out of bed can be especially hard for those who make an idol out of comfort. Underhill does not see God, whom she likes to call the "Absolute," catering to human comfort. In "The Authority of Personal Religious Experience" she brings this point home:

Some months ago a lady was introduced to me who opened the conversation in these terms: 'My dear Miss Underhill, I do so want to tell you that I always keep your dear books on a table by my bed; and I don't know whether it is your dear books, or whether it is my soft white bed, but directly I lie down and I do have the most wonderful illuminations of the Absolute!⁵ . . . Had the lady . . . felt compelled to reduce the hours which she spent in that soft white bed; better still, had she been hauled out of it to kneel on the hard floor; then we might have felt more certitude about the authority of her visions of the Absolute . . . The person whose experience we may consider authoritative is one for whom vision and surrender are one thing, and a dynamic thing—the person who is forced to exclaim, 'Send me!' . . . Vision without love-impelled action should always be held suspect.'⁶

We might think of the soft white bed as a symbol for a spirituality that has comfort as its chief objective. With

³ Evelyn Underhill, *Life as Prayer and Other Writings of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. Lucy Menzies (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing), 51-52; Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 91.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

⁵ Evelyn Underhill, "The Authority of Personal Religious Experience," *Theology*, January (1925): 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

this distortion, the vision of Christian life veers toward romanticism. The issue is complex because prayer may be the only source of comfort some of us know—a true source of comfort, that is, not a surrogate comfort, like alcohol or consumerism. Now it isn't that Underhill sees no place for the soft white bed or for balance and rest; she does. It's just that the bed is not the telos. The Soft White Bed has an almost magical allure for contemplatives who are enamored by the safety God offers.

At its worst, The Soft White Bed entices us to put ourselves on God's throne, to pad ourselves from the reality of being human, to obscure our creaturely nature, and resist dependence on God. On our weariest days, the Soft White Bed looks up at us and asks, "Is there anything better than me? Am I not the point of Christian life?" There is grace in risk if through it we discover that comfort is not the point, if we discover that we are not God and lose any residual desire to be God. There is grace in risk if it somehow exposes our yearning for control and yields an openness to simply be in God's care on God's terms. Such awareness equips us to be people who live life rather than manage it or at least know the difference.

And in dethroning the Soft White Bed, Christian practice might have something meaningful and substantive to offer to those persons whose "backs are against the wall," people who, in the words of Howard Thurman, "need profound succor and strength to enable them to live in the present with dignity and creativity."⁷ These are the people who spend their lives providing luxuries for others though never sharing in that luxury themselves. People of prayer are not seduced by the power of the bed — an idea Underhill emphasizes repeatedly:

The fully-developed mystical consciousness is not passive, but dynamic and apostolic in type. . . its last and most perfect stage is not a peaceful "divine union" but a "divine fecundity," the attainment of a state of creative vitality, in which it gives "more abundant life" to the world.⁸

Or elsewhere,

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 love.⁹

She imagines the saints as those who go "down into the mess," whose holiness is not tantamount to tidiness but full engagement in God's creative action.¹⁰ And yet, from personal experience, Underhill knows that this kind of self-offering feels impossible at times.

⁷ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1949; Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 11.

⁸ Evelyn Underhill, "St. Paul & the Mystic Way: A Psychological Study," *The Contemporary Review*, June (1911), 695.

⁹ Underhill, *Life as Prayer*, 55.

¹⁰ Underhill, *The House of the Soul and Concerning the Inner Life* (London: Methuen, 1947; Minneapolis: The Seabury Press, 1984), 151.

Just as her retreat ministry is beginning to blossom, she describes a period when she feels summoned beyond her powers, to the edge of her knowing. In a 1921 letter to her spiritual director she writes:

In my lucid moments I see only too clearly that the only possible end of this road is complete unconditional self-consecration and for this I have not the nerve, the character, or the depth. There has been some sort of mistake. My soul is too small for it and yet it is the only thing at bottom that I really want. It feels sometimes as if, whilst still a jumble of conflicting impulses and violent faults, I were being pushed from behind toward an edge I dare not jump over.¹¹

Part of the fear is in becoming more of who she already is—and more of who God wants her to be. Part of the fear is in embracing dimensions of herself that she has not yet learned to trust. The strength to persevere does not come in success but in the experience of being borne up during the process. In Christ she finds an anchor, one who shows that it is possible to face the uncertainty that comes with offering ourselves to God.

Later, in a retreat, Underhill presents Christ as the model for facing risk:

“Look at the curve that includes the Upper Room, Gethsemane, Calvary, Easter and the forty days of radiant self-imparting. How is that curve in line with your own soul’s growth? Your idea of your own future? Your vocation? How much courage is mixed with your Christian joy?”¹²

* * *

Let us enter the silence with a prayer by Walter Brueggemann:

We confess you to be the God who calls,
who wills,
who summons,
who has concrete intentions
for your creation,
and addresses human agents
who do your will.

We imagine ourselves called by you. . .

¹¹ Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 78.

¹² Underhill, *Ways of the Spirit*, 161.

Yet a strange lot:
 called but cowardly,
 obedient but self-indulgent,
 devoted to you, but otherwise preoccupied.

In our strange mix an answering and refusing,
We give thanks for your call.
We pray this day,
 for ourselves, fresh vision;
 for our friends, great courage,
 for [sisters and brothers]¹³
 in places more dangerous than ours,
 deep freedom.

As we seek to answer your call, may we be haunted
 by your large purposes,
We pray in the name of the utterly called Jesus. Amen.

II. Dare We Worship?

Evelyn Underhill refused to domesticate the human-divine encounter. She saw risk as an inherent dimension of our relationship to God. Repeatedly, she describes worship as the occasion when, knowingly or not, we brush up against the Holy One. This element of surprise emerges in her own life as well. Consider a 1924 journal entry:

“This morning in prayer suddenly I was compelled to say: take all my powers from me rather than ever let me use them again for my own advantage. When I’d said it, some strange and quite unseizable movement happened in my soul—I knew I had made a real vow, a more crucial act of dedication than ever before and shall be taken at my word.”¹⁴

Her vow arises in what seemed to be a fairly routine moment of contemplation (if contemplation can ever be routine). Desire flames up out of nowhere. And that is the risk of worship, that we will be swimming along and suddenly find ourselves smitten. The risk is particularly high in adoring prayer when we turn away from ourselves long enough to marvel at the God and glimpse the grandeur of the Creator’s work. In the time that we have left, I will raise up three of the riskier dimensions of worship. I invite you to hear them as holy invitations.

¹³ Original reads “theological students.” From Walter Brueggemann, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: The Prayers of Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 35.

¹⁴ Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 89.

The Risk of Humility

The first risk is the risk of humility or self-oblivion, turning away from oneself. This turning away is hard because God created us as fascinating beings and gave us lives—things to do, talents to share and develop, insecurities to hide! Dare we turn away from ourselves? For many, this invitation is hard spiritual work because it requires stepping away from the mirror and sometimes from a pattern of seeing ourselves through the eyes of others.

Evelyn Underhill's chief spiritual distraction was Evelyn Underhill. Self-examination and confession had limited value in her prayer life because she was so distracted by her own shortcomings. It was more helpful to “keep on trying to look at Christ,” and pray in a manner that enabled her to get “smaller and smaller,” thereby gaining a “deep and clear sense of the all penetrating Presence of God.”¹⁵

Some people might bristle at Underhill's emphasis on becoming “smaller and smaller” and fear that this posture fosters docility, or complicity in her own gender oppression.¹⁶ I believe she survives feminist critique because she still honors the full dignity of the human person. For Underhill, stepping away from the mirror as necessary to venture forward as an engaged participant in the world rather than a self-absorbed spectator. God seeks to co-create with us, using our particular giftings and idiosyncrasies to pour love and light and music into the world alongside us. The risk is in giving up one's role as lead singer in exchange for a duet (or maybe a quartet). One might think of the Holy Spirit's work as gently convincing us that the duet is the better option. And, on those occasions when we do cooperate with God's purposes, the Spirit helps us shake off any self-consciousness that would inhibit the song.

Risk of Adoration

The second risk is the risk of adoration or marveling at God. This is the risk of dwelling in awe. One thing that genuinely worried Underhill was the paltry role of awe in institutional religion. Christianity without awe was “shallow religiousness:”

We are drifting toward a religion which consciously or unconsciously keeps its eye on humanity rather than on Deity, which lays all the stress on service, and hardly any of the stress on awe and that is the type of religion, which in practice does not wear well. . . It does not lead to sanctity: and sanctity after all is the religious goal.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid., 88

¹⁶ Ibid., 88

¹⁷ Ibid., 113-114.

Part of what doesn't wear well here is the tidiness, the lack of any sense of risk or any notion that God might reroute the course of our lives. Underhill believed God might whisper to us just as God spoke to Francis as he gazed at the San Damiano cross. So, she advises us to attend to God and devote ourselves to adoring union with God.

In these encouragements I hear echoes of a spiritual friend of hers, Julian of Norwich. Julian also speaks of attention or "marveling" before God. In medieval mysticism, marveling meant taking on the same spiritual posture as the Virgin Mary who was believed to be lost in adoration at the Annunciation. This posture was one marked by heightened receptivity to the divine. Rather than thinking in visual terms, it's best to think in terms of tactility, of being enveloped by God, or, in Julian's words, discovering Christ to be "oure clothing, that for love wrappeth us and windeth us, halseth us and all becloseth us, hangeth about us for tender love, that he may never leeve us."¹⁸ In adoration God swaddles us in love. Julian also uses womb imagery to make a similar point, saying, "We are beclosed in the fader, and we are beclosed in the son, and we are beclosed in the holy gost, and the fader is beclosed in us, the son is beclosed in us, and the holy gost is beclosed in us."¹⁹ Utterly enveloped by God, we discover a mysterious feeling of safety, akin to the eternal security that emboldened the saints.²⁰ Adoration steadily enlarged their conception of God's presence²¹ and fostered unusual vitality in their lives.²²

Risk of Community

Worship carries a third risk, the risk of community or kinship. Prayer knits souls together and this connection carries a degree of risk. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz says that making room in our lives for others requires giving up a degree of control, "adding new, unpredictable complications" to an "already complex life. . . for we cannot tell those we love when to need us."²³

Whether communal or solitary, prayer is the means by which the soul makes itself available to others. In prayer we cradle the concerns that burden others and invite God to make demands of us on their behalf. On the whole this knitting together is a beautiful thing. Practically though, it means we are bound up with personalities very different from our own, and also put in regular contact with the temperamental, the cranky, and those who, in

¹⁸ Julian of Norwich, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love*, edited by Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2006), 139.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 297.

²⁰ Evelyn Underhill, "St. Paul & the Mystic Way," 695.

²¹ Underhill, *The House of the Soul and Concerning the Inner Life*, 105.

²² Underhill, "St. Paul & the Mystic Way," 696.

²³ "Ladies Home Journal," Series 3, Box 1, Folder 2. Ada-María Isasi-Díaz Papers, Archives of Women in Theological Scholarship, The Burke Library (Columbia University Libraries) at Union Theological Seminary, New York, NY.

Underhill's words, "always ask for a cup of cold water at the wrong time."²⁴ She says this tongue-in-cheek but she lives through two world wars and witnesses a time of unprecedented violence and estrangement. While her horrors differ from the horror of the mass murders in Orlando, and the cumulative effects of the many mass shootings that preceded it, Underhill's invitation to kinship is not naïve. She is driven by a strong belief that God's will for human beings is loving kinship. And the absurdity of that vision testifies to its divinity.

Through worship Underhill comes to see herself as "so closely linked with others" that she became "a cell in a boundless living web through which redeeming work can be done."²⁵ She certainly has supernatural kinship in mind, but it's all the more miraculous when we consider how hard it was for her to find deep intimacy. Underhill and her mother had very different personalities and priorities and there was also a degree of reserve in her relationship with her father despite close and regular contact. She had no siblings. Her marriage to Hubert was warm and stable but there was no Antony & Cleopatra in it, no Heloise and Abelard. Evelyn and Hubert had an enduring friendship that seemed to benefit from time apart, and there was a good amount of time spent apart. All this to say Underhill's yearning for intimacy was great and the bonds she made with friends and her spiritual directors were critical to her thriving. I wonder if the deep kinship she finds in worship is sometimes a balm for what she did not find in her relationships, not a surrogate for what needed to happen in the woefully-imperfect realm of human relationships, but a place where she found the strength to do the hard work of reaching out to others again and again.

[R]eal spiritual work taxes to the utmost the limited powers of the natural creature. It is using them on a fresh level, subjecting them to fresh strains. And this means that our preparation for it, if we are beginners, our maintenance in a fit condition for it if we are mature, is an important part of our religious life. It will not be managed merely by suitable reading, church attendance, prayer circles or anything of that kind; but only by faithful personal attention to God, constant and adoring recourse to Him, confident humble communion with Him.²⁶

Is the risk of human intimacy part of the strain she speaks of? A challenge that won't be "managed merely by suitable reading, church attendance" and the like but "only by faithful personal attention to God. . .constant and adoring recourse to Him?"

Human relationships do not tell the whole story of kinship. God also invites kinship with the creation. And as a gardener, Underhill had a special appreciation for the risks and rewards of this union. In fact, all three invitations of worship, the invitation to humility, to marvel, and to kinship with creation, flow together in a piece

²⁴ Underhill, *Ways of the Spirit*, 171.

²⁵ Greene, *Artist of the Infinite Life*, 89.

²⁶ Underhill, *Life as Prayer*, 62.

she wrote early in her life, a story entitled, "A Green Mass," published in Horlick's magazine in 1904, as she is still coming to voice as a writer. I'll share just a selected portion here before we go back into silence:

When the message came to me, I went down to the river, and took a boat that I knew of, and went up the stream towards the hills. I went past the wharves of the ships and past the water-meadows. A fresh breeze was with me, brining traders up from the sea, and fishing-boats in from the estuary banks. But I went past all these, and past the towns, very far up the river.

It was after many hours that I came to place I looked for. At the end of a long reach between moorland banks, where the heather blazed more fiercely because the twilight time was near at hand, I saw two black and rounded headlands that stood out from opposite shores. They nearly met, I thought, in mid-stream. But a narrow water-gate was between them; it went thread-like into the heart of hidden country. With that gate I passed abruptly from the wide and serviceable river into another land.

I was in a valley of the hills, filled to the brim with a very quiet and glassy water that mirrored all day the hills, the woods, the infinite sky. It was a place of entire silence. . . Far away at the end, the hills approached one another, as if for another and an inner water-gate.

Through that inner gate also I went, and so to a second hidden valley of water, greater and more silent than the first. I am sure the serenity of that place was very seldom broken, so quiet and stately was the quality of its life. It was plain that the writhing trees which peopled the first valley of approach were of another nation than these keepers of the inner court. It ran before me, a very long and shining lake. Its steep converging banks met at a far away point in the heart of the land. And its margins, too, were hid by the trees; the dark and solemn trees that stood bowed like wise women seeking a lost secret in the glassy waters, and the trees that stood beyond them on the higher ground, close set in tiers and all very attent. Their hooded heads seemed instinct with some antique and sylvan wisdom. I fancied deep eyes bent on me as I passed. I had come a long way from the breezy river and the ships.

Now before me were more trees, and these again different; for the green hooded people went not beyond the precincts, but gave way to a severer majesty. A hill of firs, grey and pinnacled, stood at the end of the valley of water. Their fretted crowns climbed mysteriously into the heavens, tall and dim against the sky: a stronghold of some intangible chivalry. Then I knew that I had come nearly to the end of my journey: that I had gone deep into the immemorial country of the woods. . . Then I looked up, and saw the trees crowding circle-wise about me, one behind the other, dense and massy. I became aware of all the forest

pressing steadily and anxiously towards this place. But invisible hands kept them back from the ground that I stood upon, as if that spot were too sacred for actual life. I had come to the Amphitheatre of the Woods. I stood back like the rest; and, with all the forest, waited.

Now it seemed that the blazing sky took on a peculiar glory. Scents rose from the dusky grounds as of herbs, more precious than the poor mint that grew there, crushed till their essence was poured out upon the air. And an altar was set in the amphitheatre, and before it the fireless smoke of incense went up and one, of whom I may not speak, came, and stood by that altar. But no Confiteor was audibly spoken, and no Introit was sung; for these with whom I worshipped do by their act of living confess Him in beauty every hour of the day, standing always in His presence. . .

And I turned and saw them all assembled to the sacrifice. Yes! And not the great presences of the forest only; the deep-eyed elementals and the wild and airy fauns who watch us from the thicket; but all the humble furry timid creatures, the smallest and simplest of the children of God; flying and creeping things that live securely hidden in the branches; burrowing things held warm in the bosom of the earth. All the population of the woods had come to do honor to the rite. These were silent; but far away behind the trees, one sang – a wordless Gloria full of wild fervours, a passionate invocation of the Light of the Word.”²⁷

The story goes on a bit longer but Underhill has already made both her argument and her invitation: Forget yourself, press into the holy thicket, you’ll find good company there.

Donyelle McCray is Assistant Professor of Homiletics, Yale Divinity School.

²⁷ “A Green Mass,” Series 1.10, Folder 15, The Dana Greene Research Collection on Evelyn Underhill, Evelyn Underhill Collection at Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, VA

*“If God were small enough to be understood,
He would not be big enough to be worshipped.”*

~ Evelyn Underhill

Finding Evelyn Underhill

Susan Dean



One spring about twenty-five years ago, when my family still lived in Minnesota, I was trying to decide what to give up for Lent. My friends were mostly giving up chocolate or wine. Those choices would have been perfectly appropriate for me too, but I wanted something different that year, so I went to our associate priest to ask his advice. He suggested that instead of giving anything up, I read a book, and what he came up with for me was *Mysticism* by Evelyn Underhill.

It may help to know that I had only been back at church for a few years, having not attended for about twenty. I knew very little about theology or spirituality. So *Mysticism* — with its 519-page description of the unitive life, purification, voices and visions and a whole bunch of other words I didn't understand — might seem like an odd choice, but it turned out to be an inspired suggestion, and Evelyn Underhill became a life-long companion.

I still have that copy of *Mysticism*. I was fascinated by the lives of the mystics, but what touched me then, and still touches me most deeply, is that while we may not ever experience ecstasy or see visions, Underhill insists that we all have the innate ability to be mystics. We are all created to experience God directly.

Around ten years after reading *Mysticism*, I spent some time at a Jesuit retreat house in Sedalia, Colorado, mostly lying in a hammock under the trees. Each day I met with my spiritual director, a nun who listened carefully as I told her about my life and tried to see where God was in the midst of it all. For four days Sr. Eleanor said, "Just keep lying in the hammock."

The last day she said, "I'm going to ask you to pray about what you want," then left the room to get something for me. In one of those rare instances when an answer pops up immediately (well, yes, I had been lying in a hammock for four days), I heard two things: I want to be a priest and I want to build a house of prayer.

The first didn't surprise me; I had begun discerning whether to be ordained. The second — the house of prayer — shocked me. I didn't know where it had come from or what it meant.

I went off to seminary in Berkley, California and was ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church in Western Washington (count about another 4 years), but the house of prayer took much longer to unfold.

In July 2016 Underhill House — a quiet place to pause for prayer — opened on Capitol Hill in Seattle. Our ministry is named in honor of Evelyn Underhill because we believe our vision is congruent with both her life and her teachings. One thing she taught that we really take to heart is that the two most important spiritual practices are prayer and helping the poor.

In the Pacific Northwest the winds split up when they reach the Olympic Mountains and re-converge over Seattle, bringing our rain. We believe that our culture tends to split people apart, and Underhill House desires to be a place of re-convergence, a place where people from all walks of life can be together in a safe way.

Underhill House is a place of hospitality, where spiritually hungry people of all faiths, or no faith, people of means and people of low and no income, those who are home-blessed and home-less are all welcome. You can slip in, sit down and relax, and leave when you're ready. You can pray alone or, if you'd like, someone will listen to you for a short time and offer you a prayer.

Contemplation and action. Underhill insists that we need both. Prayer, she says, is the grass roots of change. So that's our starting place, and the place we return to.

Underhill recommends this: Try to arrange things so that you can have a reasonable bit of quiet every day.

Reasonable, I appreciate that word. What's reasonable quiet for me can change each day. Sometimes it's sitting at Underhill House for two hours; sometimes it's sitting under my blue hydrangea pulling weeds for ten minutes; sometimes it's taking a deep breath as I drive in heavy traffic. They all can make a difference in my life. If I can remember to be intentional, even the shortest pause can remind me that God is the Source of Love (as Underhill named), something I deeply need within myself.

At Underhill House we've been sitting at the edge of our courtyard entrance engaging with our neighbors for the last few months. One Thursday I watched as a young man glided down Republican Street in kind of a slalom fashion. He stopped rather abruptly right in front of me, folded up his scooter, read the sandwich board and asked, "Can I go in there right now?"

"Yes," I replied, "you can." He went in, sat for five or ten minutes, then left. I'm not sure, but I thought he seemed to fidget just a bit less. So here's my question: can we hop off our scooters for a bit of silence every day?

Underhill House: a quiet place to pause. A place to pray, meditate, reflect; a place to make meaning of your life; a place to rest in God and be reminded that you are loved and precious. Then you can go out and be the grass roots of change.

I believe Evelyn Underhill enjoys sitting in the silence with us. I remain grateful for her companionship. Underhill House: practical mysticism!

The Rev. Susan Dean is Executive Director of Underhill House, a ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of Olympia. Visit us in Seattle a half block off Broadway on Republican or at www.underhillhouse.org. We will welcome you!

Evelyn Underhill and C.S. Lewis: Elective Affinities

Ron Dart



It is this capacity for giving imaginative body to the fundamental doctrines of Christianity that seems to me one of the most remarkable things about your work.

~ Evelyn Underhill letter to C.S. Lewis, January 13 1941

Many with a minimal literary background will have read articles or books by C.S. Lewis. The Lewis of popular consumption is certainly not the more nuanced and layered Lewis. The more popular books by Lewis were, mostly, published in the 1940s-1950s and up to his death in 1963. There have been many letters, books, articles by Lewis published since his death, but, the C.S. Lewis of the 1930s was still in the budding phase with a few blossoms that hinted further fruit.

The rather abstract and initial autobiography of Lewis' journey to Christian faith, *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism*, left the publishing press in 1933. It is certainly not one of Lewis' better books, but there are hints in it of finer things to come. The emergence of Lewis, the Oxford don and Medieval literary scholar, was clearly established when *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* left the publishing tarmac in 1936. Who would have guessed by the mid-1930s that Lewis was about to launch as a significant writer of international breadth and depth, and that his first real work of imaginative fiction would appeal to Evelyn Underhill?

Evelyn Underhill in the mid-late 1930s was very much in her waning and autumn years. She was a generation older than Lewis, and was, probably, the most significant and substantive writer on mystical theology, the church, and public responsibility in England (and beyond) in the first half of the 20th century. She dared to question (as did most of the best and brightest of her generation) the dominating and reductionistic ideology of scientism and secularism. Underhill's recovery of the motherlode of the Christian mystical tradition (in all its pied fullness) and the relationship of the Christian contemplative tradition in dialogue with other religious traditions opened hitherto closed doors, breathed fresh spring air into musty rooms and crossed religious boundaries. Many of these obvious concerns were shared by Lewis and the Inklings.

The publication, then, in 1938 of the first of Lewis' space (cosmic) trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet* (that described Ransom's visit to Malacandra and back), was a surprise to many who knew nothing of this side of Lewis' imaginative life and it warmed Underhill to Lewis. Lewis was pleasantly surprised when he received a letter

from Evelyn Underhill on October 26 1938 applauding his insights and approach to a more mysterious world in *Out of the Silent Planet*. Indeed, Lewis had this to say in response to Underhill's letter: "Your letter is one of the most surprising and, in a way, alarming honours I have ever had. I have not been for very long a believer and have hitherto regarded the great mystical writers as a man in the foothills regards the glaciers and precipices" (October 29 1938). He then commented on some incisive distinctions made by Underhill when referring to *Out of the Silent Planet*, a novel that, in many ways, explored how a certain worldview, from a fuller and deeper perspective, could make planet earth appear the aberration and silent place from which the music of the spheres was stilled.

Underhill replied to Lewis in a short letter (November 3 1938) identifying very much with Ransom and wondering if Lewis had read much of *St. Catherine of Genoa* (a favourite of Underhill and Baron Von Hugel). The heart of the pointer was the process of transformation needed to truly inhabit the heavenly dimension, hence the necessity, when understood aright, of purgatory. It is significant to note that Underhill finished this letter in a most hospitable manner: 'If ever you are in London and feel able to come and see me, it would be a great pleasure to make your acquaintance.'

The letters between Underhill and Lewis in 1941, interestingly enough, continue the discussion of *Out of the Silent Planet*, ponder the relevance of Lewis' recent book, *The Problem of Pain* (1940) and, of suggestive importance, initiate a discussion of animal rights. Underhill had been living with a variety of physical ailments at the time, and she found, for the most part, Lewis' missive on pain and suffering of some explanatory worth. But, she had some questions about his attitude towards animals. Underhill took the position that animals in the wild could reflect the glory of God in a better way than tamed, or, worse yet, animals caged or merely used for the purpose of human use and consumption. Underhill was, of course, no naïve romantic but she felt Lewis went too far in the direction of equating tamed animals with a sort of Edenic ideal. Lewis replied to Underhill's letter (January 13 1941) by taking the discussion to a more nuanced and suggestive level. He ended the Letter (January 16 1941) by stating, 'I suspect we are not in great disagreement'. The two letters between Underhill and Lewis in 1941 do point the way, when unravelled and fleshed out in a fuller manner, to a fine discussion on the layered nature of the relationships between God, humanity and animals and, as such, anticipate, in a thoughtful manner, the animal rights movement.

The five letters between Underhill and Lewis reveal much about Underhill's willingness to encourage new writers, engage in thoughtful dialogue on mysticism-science fiction and go where few had gone (animal rights) at the time. It's too bad, in many ways that the elective affinities between Underhill and Lewis emerged as Underhill was nearing the end of her all too human journey.

Appendix

It is somewhat significant that the discussion about the suffering of animals that Lewis touched on in *The*

Problem of Pain initiated a lively discussion with C.E. Joad (Head of Philosophy at the University of London). The animated discussion between Joad-Lewis was published in the collection of essays by Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* as “The Pains of Animals: A Problem in Theology.”

Lewis included another article, “Vivisection”, in the same volume. There can be little doubt his interaction with Underhill was part of a larger discussion and that such literary dialogues about the suffering of animals and the role of animals informed much of Lewis’ description of oppressed and healthy animals in *Chronicles of Narnia*. It is a needful point to be noted in *The Horse and his Boy* (“The Hermit of the Southern March”: 10) that the wise hermit calls Shasta and the healed animals “cousins”—an uncommon notion of humans and animals at that period of time.

Ron Dart has taught in the Department of Political Science/Philosophy and Religious Studies at University of the Fraser Valley (Abbotsford, British Columbia) since 1990. He was on staff with Amnesty International in the 1980s. Ron has had an abiding interest in Evelyn Underhill and C.S. Lewis for many a decade.

“Every minute you are thinking of evil, you might have been thinking of good instead. Refuse to pander to a morbid interest in your own misdeeds.

Pick yourself up, be sorry, shake yourself, and go on again.”

~ *Evelyn Underhill*

“Prayer” from *The Essentials of Mysticism*

In the first place, what do we mean by prayer? Surely just this: that part of our conscious life which is deliberately oriented towards, and exclusively responds to, spiritual reality. God is that spiritual reality, and we believe God to be immanent in all things: “He is not far from each one of us: for in him we live and move and have our being.” “Prayer,” says Walter Hilton, “is nothing else but an ascending or getting up of the desire of the heart into God by withdrawing it from earthly thoughts.” It is “ascent,” says Ruysbroeck, of the Ladder of Love. In the same spirit William Law defines prayer as “the rising of the soul out of the vanity of time into the riches of eternity.” It entails, then, a going up or out from our ordinary circle of earthly interests. Prayer stretches out the tentacles of our consciousness not so much towards that Divine Life which is felt to be enshrined within the striving, changeful world of things; but rather to that “Eternal truth, true Love, and loved Eternity” wherein the world is felt to be enshrined.

The whole of a person’s life consists in a series of balanced responses to this Transcendent-Immanent Reality. Because we live under two orders, we are at once a citizen of Eternity and of Time. Like a pendulum, our consciousness moves perpetually—or should move if it is healthy—between God and our neighbor, between this world and that.

The wholeness, sanity, and balance of our existence depend entirely upon the perfection of our adjustment to this double situation; on the steady alternating beat of our outward adoration, and our homeward-turning swing of charity. Now, it is the outward swing which I want to consider: the powers that may be used in it, and the best way in which these powers may be employed.

First, there are three capacities or faculties which we have under consideration—the thinking faculty, the feeling faculty, and the willing or acting faculty. These practically cover all the ways in which the self can react to other selves and other things. From the combination of these three come all the possibilities of self-expression which are open to us.

In our natural life we need to use all of them. Do we need them in our spiritual life, too? Christians are bound to answer this question in the affirmative. It is the whole person of intellect, of feeling, and of will which finds its only true objective in the Christian God.

Prayer should take up and turn towards the spiritual order all the powers of our mental, emotional, and volitional life. Prayers should be the highest exercise of these powers; for here they are directed to the only adequate object of thought, of love, and of desire. It should, as it were, lift us to the top of our condition, and represent the fullest flowering of our consciousness. For here we breathe the air of the supernatural order, and attain according to our measure that communion with Reality for which we were made.

Prayer will include many different kinds of spiritual work; and also—what is too often forgotten—the priceless gift of spiritual rest. It will include many kinds of intercourse with Reality—adoration, petition, meditation, contemplation—and all the shades and varieties of these which religious writers have named and classified. As in the natural order the living creature must feed and grow, must suffer and enjoy, must get energy from the world and give it back again if it is to live a whole and healthy life. So, too, in the spiritual order. All these things—the giving and the receiving, the work and the rest—should fall within the circle of prayer.

Now, when we do anything consciously, the transition from inaction to action unfolds itself in a certain order. First, we form a concept of that which we shall do; the idea of it looms up in our minds. Second, we feel that we want to do it, or must do it. Third, we determine that we will do it. These phases may follow on another so swiftly that they seem to be fused into one; but when we analyze the process which lies behind each conscious act, we find that this is the normal sequence of development.

First we think, then we feel, then we will. This little generalization must not be pressed too hard; but it is broadly true, and gives us a starting-point to trace out the way in which the three main powers of the self act in prayer. It is important to know how they act or should act.

Prayer, as a rule, should begin with something we usually call an intellectual act, with thinking of what we are going to do. All the great writers on prayer take it as a matter of course that “meditation” comes before “oration” (or spoken prayer). Meditation is simply the art of thinking steadily and methodically about spiritual things. So, too, most modern psychologists assure us that instinctive emotion does its best work when it acts in harmony with our reasoning powers.

There are some who believe that when we turn to God we ought to leave our brains behind us. True, they will soon be left behind by necessity if we go far on the road towards God who is above all reason and all knowledge, for the Spirit swiftly overpasses these imperfect instruments. But those whose feet are still firmly planted upon earth gain nothing by anticipating this moment when reason is left behind; they will not attain the depths of prayer by the mere annihilation of their intelligence.

In saying this—in insisting that reason has a well-marked and necessary place in the soul’s approach to God—I am not advocating a religious intellectualism. I am well aware that it is “by love,” as the old mystic said, “God may be gotten and beheld; by thought never.” It is humility and love that are essential for successful prayer. But surely it is a mistake to suppose that these qualities cannot exist side by side with an active and disciplined intelligence.

Prayer, then, begins by an intellectual adjustment. By thinking of God earnestly and humbly to the exclusion of other objects of thought, by deliberately surrendering the mind to spiritual things, by preparing the consciousness for the inflow of new life.

But having thought of God, the self, if it stops there, is no more in touch with God than it was before. We may think as long as we like, but nothing happens; thought unhelped by feeling ever remains apart from its object. The intellect is an essentially static thing: we cannot think our way along the royal road which leads to heaven.

Where the office of thought ends, there the office of will and feeling begins: "Where the intellect must stay without," says Ruysbroeck, "these may enter in." Desire and intention are the most dynamic of our faculties; they do work. They are the true explorers of the Infinite, the instruments of our ascents to God. Reason comes to the foot of the mountain; it is the industrious will urged by the passionate heart which climbs the slope.

Experience endorses this emphasis on will and desire as central facts of our personality, the part of us which is supremely our own. In turning our will and desire towards Spiritual Reality we are doing all that we can of ourselves, we are selecting and deliberately concentrating upon it our passion and our power.

Now, intellect and feeling are not wholly in our control. They fluctuate from day to day, from hour to hour; they are dependent on many delicate adjustments. Sometimes we are mentally dull, sometimes we are emotionally flat. On such occasions it is notoriously useless to try to beat ourselves up to a froth: to make ourselves think more deeply or make ourselves care more intensely.

If the worth of our prayer life depended upon the maintenance of a constant high level of feeling or understanding, we would be in a dangerous place. Though these often seem to fail us, the reigning will remains. Even when our heart is cold and our mind is dim, prayer is still possible to us. "Our wills are ours, to make them Thine."

The determined fixing of our will upon God, and pressing toward him steadily and without deflection; this is the very center and the art of prayer. The most theological of thoughts soon becomes inadequate; the most spiritual of emotions is only a fairweather breeze. Let the ship take advantage of it by all means, but not rely on it. She must be prepared to beat to windward if she would reach her goal.

Evelyn Underhill, The Essentials of Mysticism, London: Dutton, 1920.

New and Noteworthy

“Praying with Evelyn Underhill: A Five Part Course” by Rev. Edward Carter, Canon Theologian at Chelmsford Cathedral. The course is available at www.chelmsford.anglican.org/evelyn-underhill. This site also contains six videos.

Dr. Robyn Wrigley-Carr, an Australian lecturer in theology and spirituality (Sydney) discovered two “Prayer Books” compiled by Underhill and used for leading her spiritual retreats at Pleshey (1929-1938). These contain the various retreat topics and prayers from theologians and writers of spirituality from the past plus original poetic prayers written by Underhill. Dr. Wrigley-Carr hopes to publish these materials. For further information contact robyn.wrigley-carr@ac.edu.au or Edward.carter@chelmsfordcathedral.org.uk.

The Annual Evelyn Underhill Lecture on Christian Spirituality was held at Boston College on July 16th 2016. Ilia Delio, OSF presented “Evolution and the Primacy of Love: Teilhard’s Philosophy of Love for the Direction of Human Evolution.”

“Life As Prayer: The Development Evelyn Underhill’s Spirituality” by Todd Johnson.
<https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/life-as-prayer>

“The Lessons Appointed for Use on the Feast of Evelyn Underhill,” June 15th.
<http://www.lectionarypage.net/Underhill>

Poems of Evelyn Underhill. www.poemhunter.com/evelyn-underhill/poems.

Quotes from Evelyn Underhill. www.goodreads.com/112836.

Excellent summary of the life and work of Evelyn Underhill. Orlando.cambridge.org.

“The Comparative Study of Mysticism,” The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion” OUP, 2015 by Michael Stoeber contains references to the contribution of Evelyn Underhill. Michael Stoeber’s “Mystical Concepts, Artist Contexts” appeared in *Mystical Landscapes from Vincent van Gogh to Emily Carr*. Ed. by Katherine Lochnan. NY: Del Monico Books, 2016. This book is the catalog for an exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Stoeber’s article contains several references to Underhill.

M.A. Dissertation by Sarah Jane Kinch, University of Winchester, 2016.

THE UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the possible characteristics of the spirituality that emerges from a potential relationship between Evelyn Underhill’s understanding of Mysticism and the philosophy of Henri Bergson. To do this it compares Underhill’s understanding of mysticism and her use of Bergson’s philosophical concept of Vitalism. This is done through setting her book *Mysticism* in its chronological context between Bergson’s two works *Creative Evolution* and *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* and comparing their understandings of mysticism. I then explore the philosopher Pamela Sue Anderson’s use of Bergson

for her understanding of A Feminist Mysticism of Action. Drawing on Anderson's use of the philosophers Simone de Beauvoir and Michele Le Doeuff, I ask if there is any way in which Underhill can be understood as providing a foundation for a feminist understanding of a mysticism of action. Crucially, in the context of the title of this dissertation and, given, Bergson's own acknowledgement of Underhill's work, I explore how much Bergson is potentially indebted to Underhill's ideas. This leads to an exploration of how we can be influenced by others in our intellectual development and the question of where an original thought might have its genesis in the given context. In concluding I briefly suggest reasons for why Underhill is overlooked today and suggest that it may be timely to reconsider her contribution to the philosophical understanding of Mysticism.

