

The Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter

2018-2019

www.evelynunderhill.org

SINGING THE LIFE OF PRAYER

Day of Quiet Reflection with Evelyn Underhill's Chosen Hymns

Saturday, June 8, 2019, 9:30am-3:30pm

Nourse Hall, St. Albans Parish*
Next door to the Washington National Cathedral
3001 Wisconsin Ave NW
Washington DC 20016

**Please note change of venue*
Please bring a sack lunch

Registration opens: May 1, 2019

[Download Registration Form](#)



Kathleen Henderson Staudt

Evelyn Underhill's notes toward the retreats she gave at Pleshey, as well as her later writings on worship and prayer, include mention of hymns that were important to her both in preparing retreats and hymns and in her own devotion. On this day of quiet reflection we will listen to the poetry of some of Evelyn's favourite hymns, sing some of them together, and experience how song and hymnody can become ways of prayer.

Kathleen Henderson Staudt, poet, spiritual director and scholar, teaches at Wesley Seminary and Virginia Theological Seminary and offers retreats and educational programs on spirituality, poetry, prayer and the creative life. An officer of the Evelyn Underhill Association, Kathy has served for many years as facilitator of our annual Evelyn Underhill Day of Quiet Reflection. She is the author of two books and many articles on the modern British artist and poet David Jones, and has published three volumes of poetry, most recently *Good Places*.

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“Evelyn Underhill: The Hidden Life”

Deborah Smith Douglas

Have you ever had the opportunity, maybe at a wedding or a folk-art festival, to observe or take part in a traditional circle dance?

From outside the circle, the dancers appear to be moving in opposite directions: those in the foreground moving to the right, those on the far side moving to the left.

Only by being part of the circle can one see and experience the unity and shared direction beneath the external appearance of opposition and contradiction.

So it is with the life of Evelyn Underhill.

Viewed from the outside, Underhill’s life can be seen as having two different patterns and trajectories, both of them partial, superficial, and misleading.

One of these errant perspectives on her life suggests that it was one of smooth unruffled professional and public success amid privileged circumstances. That view goes something like this:

Underhill enjoyed remarkable, improbable success as a writer and pioneer in the Church of England’s retreat movement (though there is an implicit asterisk among some academics: “for a woman”). She had no formal theological training or religious education, held no university degree, and lived a conventional upper-middle-class life in Kensington, complete with yachting holidays, trips abroad with her mother, a genteel social life replete with servants, cats and tea parties.

She is nevertheless, albeit sometimes reluctantly, acknowledged to have been an extraordinary scholar and linguist.

Her groundbreaking work *Mysticism*, published 1911, is considered a classic and has never been out of print in more than a century. Her other massive scholarly work *Worship* published in 1936 (twenty-five years later), remains a standard text for the study of liturgy.

She was the first woman outside lecturer in religion at Oxford, 1921, the first woman invited to give a lecture to Anglican clergy, the first woman to be included in a Church of England commission.

She was enormously influential in the Anglican retreat movement between the wars, conducting several retreats a year, usually at her beloved Pleshey, a retreat house in the Essex countryside. Her most abiding legacy remains not her scholarly works but those retreat addresses, mostly gathered, edited and published after her death by her friend and colleague Lucy Menzies.

That is one way of seeing her life from the outside of the circle.

Another way her life can be—and has been—seen from the outside, is as having an uneven, even broken trajectory, that ended in disarray.

Yes (says this perspective), Underhill enjoyed a period of remarkable, even brilliant, productivity and promise. However, her life was “punctuated by spiritual lapses, numerous conversions and unusual experiences, some of them paranormal.” (Harvey D. Egan, “Evelyn Underhill Revisited,” *The Way* 51/1 Jan 2012, pp 23-39)

EU might, concludes this academic, be considered a mystical scholar of some skill, but “not herself a mystic in the strict sense, [merely] a more usual ‘mystic of everyday life.’”

Furthermore, after her successes and popularity in the 1920s and 30s, everything seemed to unravel at the end of her life: she strongly and publicly embraced pacifism before and during World War 2 (a wildly unpopular position that cost her reputation dearly); the asthma that had plagued her whole life became debilitating; she ended her life ill and in exile from her beloved home, in some of the darkest days of the war.

Nevertheless, we are privileged to know better than either of these careless summations of Underhill’s life imply.

Thanks almost entirely to Dana Greene, we can step inside the circle dance. Thanks to Dana’s discovery and careful reading and editing of EU’s private notebooks, published as *Evelyn Underhill: Fragments from an Inner Life* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse 1993), we can see the unity of her life, the authentic pattern of her spiritual life and growth, hidden beneath both the superficial perspectives of worldly success and emotional instability.

Underhill’s real life in and toward God, her valiant struggles with depression, ill health, and a preoccupation with her own faults—her struggles and surrenders and transformations—are apparent only when we have eyes to see what is hidden beneath the superficial views of her life as either anomalous achievement or ultimate disintegration.

Her deep true life was, while she lived, “hid with Christ in God” as Paul described the life of a Christian in his letter to the Colossians.

George Herbert’s famous poem on that biblical verse embodies the meaning within itself: the text itself is hidden within, held by, embraced and contained within, the poem. Paul’s words run obliquely all the way through, literally from the first word to the last.

Colossians 3:3
George Herbert

My words and thoughts do both express this notion,
That Life hath with the sun a double motion.
The first Is straight, and our diurnal friend,

The other Hid, and doth obliquely bend.
One life is wrapped In flesh, & and tends to earth:
The other winds towards Him, whose happy birth
Taught me to live here so, That still one eye
Should aim and shoot at that which Is on high:
Quitting with daily labour all My pleasure,
To gain at harvest an eternal Treasure.

The line that is hidden unseen (without the italics) is of course integral to the whole poem.

The central image is of the sun, and its “double motion:” its transit during the day from east to west is obvious, but it disappears below our horizon at night. The sun’s other “motion,” the journey from west to east again, is hidden from our sight.

We see the sun’s transit as though from the outside of the circle dance it makes in the sky. But if we could stand inside the circle, we could see and know the whole reality of its integrated motion, its dynamic unity.

And so it is with Underhill’s deep inner life, hidden within/beneath the appearances.

That dynamic development, that profound secret transformation, is nothing less than the soul’s journey home to God. What can look from the outside, like mere pain or failure, weakness, brokenness, darkness, is an essential part of the mysterious growth of the spirit.

In Underhill’s life, this development is not entirely hidden: Todd Johnson, a seminary professor at Fuller, writing about the development of EU’s spiritual life (“Life as Prayer: the Development of Evelyn Underhill’s Spirituality” *Theology: News and Notes*, fall 2009) points out that there are clues in her writing that indicate the deep interior shift in her theology and prayer that occurred in the years between the publication of *Mysticism* in 1911 and the publication of *The Spiritual Life* in 1937.

In *Mysticism*, Underhill uses the classic 3-fold paradigm of the mystic way—purgation, illumination, and unification—but expands it to a 5-fold scheme, significantly adding a stage of conversion at the beginning and a stage of surrender between illumination and unification.

But the whole process remains in that approach essentially esoteric, philosophical and psychological, largely private and inward, otherworldly and universal rather than explicitly Christian.

The structure of the *Spiritual Life* published in 1937, is on the other hand both less esoteric and simpler—a 3-fold pattern of adoration, adherence, and cooperation—and deeply Christ-centered.

Based on the 17th c. French school of spirituality established by Cardinal Bérulle whom Underhill admired, this

pattern begins in adoration: putting God at the center of one's life, nothing is or could be more important.

Adherence means what it sounds like: a passionate clinging to God, a deep union. Margaret Cropper, EU's biographer and friend, wrote a prayer that Underhill included in her own prayer book that expresses this adhering to God in strong language: "Abide in us, Lord God, that we may abide in you: LOCKED to you, spirit to Spirit in the deep mystery of God and humanity." (Evelyn Underhill's Prayer Book, edited by Robyn Wrigley-Carr, London: SPCK 2018, 45)

The third stage of the spiritual life is cooperation: our whole lives offered in sacrificial love as living intercessions for the world God longs to mend and save.

I contend—and I'm hardly alone in this—that her own life did indeed follow this 3-fold path of spiritual development. Contrary to popular academic opinion, she did not just write about it; she lived it.

The question is how did that change occur in her? What moved her from the esoteric and abstract to the concrete, personal and passionate?

Many events and people prepared her for that transforming encounter with God:

The first would have to be, I believe, the so-called Great War—the war that was to end all wars, the war that would be over by Christmas—during which EU worked as a translator for the Admiralty in naval intelligence and during which, by her own admission, she "went to pieces." (Having learned something myself about the Admiralty under Churchill's leadership from Erik Larson's book *Dead Wake: the Last Crossing of the Lusitania*, I can see how working in naval intelligence would have shattered anyone with a conscience. In any event, she would have been prevented by the Official Secrets Act from the relief of speaking of this to anyone.)

By the end of the war she was exhausted, spent, confused: "frantic and feverish," she wrote, experiencing "darkest depression...unbearable strain and loneliness...[when] religion itself seemed savage and unrelenting." (quoted in Margaret Cropper, *The Life of Evelyn Underhill*, first published in 1958, reissued by Skylight Lives 2002, 87,88)

That crisis propelled her in 1921 to the Roman Catholic layman and spiritual director Baron Friedrich von Hügel, "to whom she owed her whole spiritual life." His guidance led her to Pleshey, the Anglican retreat house in Essex where she made her first retreat in 1921; that experience led her back to the Church of England, from which she had exiled herself and which was to be her ecclesiastical home for the rest of her life, and the context for her ministry of retreat leading and spiritual direction.

It was also the soul-shattering experience of the war that led her, in 1919, at the invitation of Amy Turton, an English lady living in Siena, to join the Spiritual Entente, a kind of informal secret fellowship ("no meetings, no rules") of Italian Catholic and English Anglican women bound to intercessory prayer and work for peace

within an ecumenical spirit. The Entente's founder, Sorella Maria, was a remarkable Italian Franciscan nun with whom Underhill only met face to face one time (in 1925), but who had a profound effect on Underhill's own understanding of the spiritual life as one involving sacrifice and suffering.

It seems to me (thanks again to Dana Greene's recovery of EU's private notebooks) that all these forces—EU's breakdown during the war, encountering Sorella Maria just after the war, putting herself under obedience to Baron von Hügel, making her first silent retreat at Pleshey, reconciling herself with the Church of England and finding both a home and her vocation there—came to a point of critical mass in the retreat she made at Pleshey in 1923.

Reading her entries from that retreat has given me a powerful sense of that spring week as a fulcrum—a “supported point of balance that allows for a pivotal shift.”

She wrote cryptically but lyrically that week of an experience of Christ in prayer: a visceral awareness of what she called “an edgeless penetrating love and joy,” the certainty that God was in the darkness as well as the light—a personal encounter with Christ that changed everything.

In the same retreat she wrote in her journal of two other experiences that reflect this pivotal shift within her to a deep peace and trust in God—a peace and trust—a “supported balance”—that had long eluded her, and that allowed for the healing of her wounded and restless spirit.

One entry contains a poignant insight that was definitive for her and has become important personally to me, of the way we are connected to God in our ministry of intercession:

“The Good Shepherd, leaning over to save the sheep, clings with one hand to the Rock, rescues with the other. So must we. Perhaps the secret of intercession is just this outstretching to others while we adhere to God.”

I love her early use of the word adhere... a great illustration of the kind of “clinging” that that second stage in the development of the Spiritual Life entails.

EU doesn't say, and of course we have no way of knowing, but given the phenomenal popularity of this Victorian genre painting by Alford Usher Soord—more than 300,000 prints of it had been sold in Britain by 1916—she may well have seen it and be remembering it, there may well even have been a print of it somewhere at Pleshey.

Whether or not Underhill had this painting in mind, it is a powerful image of Jesus and the lost sheep, and of the simultaneous clinging to God and reaching to another that is indeed at the heart of intercession.

Two days later, in the same retreat, Evelyn recorded what has become one of my favorite passages in all her writing, and certainly my favorite mental image of her:

“Last night after Compline,” she wrote, “I went alone on to the roof, in great peace and acceptance though without vivid awareness—just thinking Christ too prayed like that—high up alone, out of doors at night—one comes closest

to His ideal prayer...deep quiet and a kind of return to joy.”

What had been “frantic and feverish” in her is now quiet and at peace: “converted” and “surrendered” indeed.

It was some time after that quiet nighttime solitude that she included in her personal collection of prayers, this one by Rabia Basri, an 8th c. Sufi mystic, the first female Muslim saint—a prayer that breathes the same peaceful spirit of intimate love and trust: “O Lord, the stars are shining and all things take their rest; kings have shut their doors and every lover is alone with the beloved. And here I am alone with you.” (Evelyn Underhill’s *Prayer Book*, edited by Robyn Wrigley-Carr, #39)

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, has said that the spiritual life is “not about developing an individual technique for communing with the divine, but the business of becoming a means of reconciliation and healing” in the world. (Boston: Shambhala/New Seeds 2007, *Where God Happens* pp 32-33)

Evelyn couldn’t have said it better herself. She expressed it in active terms of great energy, explicitly electric:

“A real man or woman of prayer should be a live wire (she told a gathering of the United Free Church of Scotland in 1928), 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 yourself, without conditions, as transmitters of God’s saving and enabling love. And the will and love, the emotional drive which you thus consecrate to God’s purposes, can actually do work on supernatural levels for those for whom you are called upon to pray. “Life as Prayer,” in *Collected Papers of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. Lucy Menzies (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1946), 62

That image of an electrical current that we receive from God and transmit to another in prayer is a kind of riff on the image of the Good Shepherd: clinging to the Rock with one hand and extending the other to someone who needs a living connection to that Rock.

To be a mystic is not to cultivate levitating ecstasy, it is simply to be a person “who knows for certain the love of God,” to be someone who has had a deep encounter with God in a hidden way—and who has then been catapulted from that transforming encounter into the world as an instrument of healing and reconciliation.

Evelyn Underhill’s life was, I have suggested, “hidden” in God: but how that unseen life did shine forth and bear fruit. After that pivotal retreat in 1923, everything in her life began more and more to coalesce around that hidden core, giving power and a coherent unity to all she did. Because everything she did came “from the center, where she was anchored in God.”

She walked the mystic way she described; in the company of the great mystics she so admired, her whole life began in adoration, led to being “locked” to God in firm adherence, and ended with deep complete self-offering, cooperating with God’s purposes.

I suspect that for each of us, as well as for EU, there is a deep unity, a profound abiding in God, hidden within and beneath the surface of our ordinary lives: a movement from a turbulent, noisy, or even a shattered place to a quiet depth which in turn led to apostolic work in the world.

Jesus promised his disciples that the Holy Spirit would bring to their remembrance all that He had said to them. It is good from time to time to give ourselves the quiet opportunity to let the Spirit do just that.

It might be rewarding to spend some time looking back over your life, with God beside you, to trace that pattern in your own experience, and thank God for it.

Mark Foley is a Carmelite priest who has written a superb little book: *The Context of Holiness: Psychological and Spiritual Reflections on the life of Therese of Lisieux* (DC: ICS Publishing 2008). Whether you have any interest in the “little flower” or not, the author makes a compelling case for life’s trials and sorrows being the very ground of our transforming encounters with God—not impediments to our growth but the means of it. As it was with Therese, and Mother Teresa, and I suspect all the saints, it is in the darkest places that God will find us. The spiritual life is not an encapsulated sphere, cloistered from the realities of our lives, sealed off from the dark nights and raging storms, the deep wounds and huge losses we bear. All those things are the very context of holiness, not obstacles to it. It is God who integrates all the apparent contradictions and oppositions into harmony and union.

You might want to prayerfully perform a kind of Rubin’s vase experiment, using that famous reversing-form image where one’s mind instantly processes visual information to see either a black vase or two white faces. The Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin developed this a century ago to show how we at first assume only one interpretation of the information, but also how that process can be reversed, and a less immediate “meaning” can be seen.

In this reverse-ground form image, one usually sees a dark chalice against a light ground; only later can one teach one’s mind to see instead two light profiles face to face against a dark ground.

Perhaps you can revisit in memory an experience which you assumed at the time and have ever since archived as failure or fear or sorrow, a debilitating loss—and reverse it in your mind, to see that in the very midst of that darkness, God was present (if unseen), and using the darkness as the opportunity for an encounter, face to face.

What seemed at the time to be merely a bitter cup may reveal itself in retrospect to have been the very place of resurrection as the Celtic saints might say: a time and place where God was with us.

Evelyn Underhill was clearly a person of indelible faith and profound prayer: a mystic who “knew for certain the love of God.”

And so may we be.

Even if our own lives appear from the outside of the circle to be broken or marked by contradiction, we can trust the

“double motion” of unseen grace at work, unifying and directing all things.

Our lives—like Underhill’s and Saint Paul’s and George Herbert’s and all the saints’—are hid with Christ in God. Whether that is apparent to the world or not, we can rejoice in that hidden life and in the unity and purpose that underlie all appearances to the contrary.

May Evelyn Underhill companion and guide us as we too walk the mystic way, deeper into the realms of the holy, every day of our lives.

Deborah Smith Douglas is a spiritual director, writer, and Camaldolese Benedictine Oblate. This presentation was first given at the Underhill Quiet Day in June 2018.



~ Evelyn Underhill, “The Spiritual Life” ~

“Most of our conflicts and difficulties come from trying to deal with the spiritual and practical aspects of our life separately instead of realizing them as parts of one whole. If our practical life is centered on our own interests, cluttered up by possessions, distracted by ambitions, passions, wants and worries, beset by a sense of our own rights and importance, or anxieties for our own future, or longings for our own success, we need not expect that our spiritual life will be a contrast to all this. The soul’s house is not built on such a convenient plan; there are few sound-proof partitions in it.”

Reflections on the Evelyn Underhill Prayer Book

ed. Robyn Wrigley-Carr
London: SPCK, 2018

Reflections: Ann Loades

Robyn Wrigley-Carr wrote her doctoral thesis in the Divinity School, St Andrews University, having discovered there the primary location of books and other materials relating to Friedrich von Hügel, focussing on his work as a 'spiritual director'. It was almost inevitable that she would also develop a focus on the work of Evelyn Underhill, and some familiarity with the work of Evelyn's friend, Lucy Menzies. The latter became Evelyn Underhill's collaborator as writer, researcher and co-'retreat director' at Pleshey in the Chelmsford Diocese from 1924 onwards (p.8). It is all too easy to overlook the importance of what they achieved together given the long-standing discomfort in Christian institutions about women as authoritative teachers and guides, notwithstanding the unambiguous evidence provided by the publication of Evelyn's major work on *Mysticism* in 1911, never out of print in its various editions and revisions. Offering Evelyn's gifts to the Church of England as a 'retreat director' was one very effective way of familiarising those who attended with the traditions of both the Christian and to some extent, non-Christian traditions of prayer, whether or not they were acquainted with the major publication of 1911 and the series of shorter books she published subsequently.

In giving retreats twice a year at Pleshey and in a group of other diocesan houses, Evelyn necessarily had to focus on gathering together her resources both in the prayers she offered to those gathered for retreats, and for the six retreat addresses she published subsequently (listed on p.9). Thanks to Dr Wrigley-Carr, her prayers can now be re-read in tandem with the fortuitous re-discovery of not one but two of Evelyn's hand-written Prayer Books. These Dr Wrigley-Carr has most skilfully combined into one publication, beautifully presented in a volume of a hand-held size, and a jacket which replicates the binding of one of the re-discovered books, the binding very probably the personal handiwork of Evelyn herself, given her skill in this craft.

Dr Wrigley-Carr rightly focuses on the importance of von Hügel in steering Evelyn into overt identification as a member of the Church of England, the church of her baptism, her confirmation (a somewhat miserable episode which had become the responsibility of the boarding school in which she had spent some of her adolescent years) and her marriage. Those familiar with her life-story will recall that the crisis over 'Modernism' at the time of her marriage clarified for her the importance of attending to new sources of knowledge whilst attending to and reinterpreting the tradition she came publicly to inhabit. With that tradition in its various forms she was already well acquainted. Written before she turned to the writing of *Mysticism* and the exploration of her re-commitment to the Church of England over a period of time, Evelyn's three novels –often overlooked- reveal her extensive knowledge of and empathy for liturgical worship and its resources, some of which in any case she had experienced

not only in visits to Roman Catholic churches but to a range of ‘Orthodox’ traditions both in London, and, crucially, in travelling in mainland Europe over many years.

Dr Wrigley-Carr has most judiciously marshalled Evelyn’s two prayer books into one coherent whole, but has also provided ‘Author biographies and liturgical sources’ (pp.131-132) in the order in which their authors appear in her edition of the prayers. Especially helpful are also some notes on the ‘Church Liturgies’ on which Evelyn drew – one of the most exemplary and ecumenical members of the Church of England in her day, the fruits of which were to appear in her last major work on Worship (1936). This edition of her prayers is not, however, organised along the pattern of the liturgical year, given its origins in resources for conducting retreats. Its users could well enjoy finding their own ways of appropriating its contents, and find it refreshing and indeed sometimes surprising. Evelyn’s voice brings other voices alive, and in joining Evelyn’s voice with theirs in a clear and constructive way, Dr Wrigley-Carr most commendably brings her into our own times and places.

Ann Loades CBE is Professor Emerita of Divinity, University of Durham and Honorary Professor in the School of Divinity, St Andrews, Scotland.



Reflections: Carol Poston

While doing dissertation research on Friederich von Hugel at Pleshey Retreat House, Robin Wrigley-Carr came upon two small bound volumes of Evelyn Underhill’s prayers and has edited and published them into a single, attractive small volume. The editor has gathered the two original books into one, not duplicating from the second book entries that had already appeared in the first. Since she uses Underhill’s original page numbers to distinguish each set of prayers in the first volume, she is unable to do so after that but rather continues pagination with her own consecutive numbering in order to avoid starting over. That fact (and the additional fact that there are regular page numbers as well) might make it confusing to readers who would like the repeated prayers noted in some way, thus indicating Underhill’s favorites.

In addition, the title could be misconstrued to mean that Underhill used it only privately, but in fact these prayers were shared at certain intervals during the three days of prayer with her retreatants at Pleshey. A less ambiguous title might have been The Prayer Books of Evelyn Underhill, since to Anglicans the Prayer Book usually refers to the Book of Common Prayer.

Wrigley-Carr has provided us with a graceful introduction focusing upon the contributions of von Hugel to Underhill’s prayer life, a real addition in my mind. She also lists of the authors of some of the prayers and has calculated that the source that appears most frequently is The Imitation of Christ. Authors from the third to the

twentieth century are represented, the latest being Underhill's friend Margaret Cropper. All the other prayers (and a majority of the original second volume) are presumably prayers written by Underhill herself. This volume bespeaks the wide reading and learning that underlay her preparation for those retreats.

Underhill's revisions are noted, and they awaken this reader's interest. The editor cites several times when Underhill's pencil hesitates between "God" and "Christ," marking out "God" for "Christ," perhaps a sign of some theological hesitancy. She also notes where Underhill herself seems to have revised her sources by words struck out or replaced—whether because the original was not accurate or because she has settled on a better word, we do not know.

In Underhill's prayers we occasionally see poetic cadences borrowed from the psalms and occasionally a striking image from her poetic style—for example "the hills of God, the snowfields of the Spirit" in number 103. Prayer number 80, for example, is so poetically arranged that one is tempted to think that that it came from another source.

Editorial decisions can always be debated, but this editor would have retained Underhill's careful language and quite clear spellings. Replacing "Do Thou bless" simply with "bless" does violence to Underhill's beautiful cadences. Her orthography corrections seem sometimes inconsistent-- retaining "judgement" but correcting "neighbour" to "neighbor" seems inconsistent. Finally, even 21st century readers should have no trouble "thee" and "thou" in literary work. Changing "O Thou" to "O God" and freely substituting "fruits meet for repentance" to "fruits in keeping with repentance" seem hardly an improvement, since that original language is still part of our hymns and of Rite I in the BCP, as in "it is meet and right so to do."

These reactions pale in the face of the fact that we see here Underhill's poetic style and great learning put to the task of her own devotions and those she served in the retreats.

Carol Poston is professor of English emerita, St. Xavier University



Three Evelyn Underhill Anthologies

Reviewed by Carl McColman

March 12, 2018

Evelyn Underhill, Ordinary Mystic

It's no secret that I consider Evelyn Underhill one of the most important Christian mystics of the twentieth century.

She's nowhere near as well-known as Thomas Merton or Simone Weil or Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, but her contribution to Christian spirituality is as great as each of those more renowned figures. Evelyn Underhill's biographer Dana Greene has called her an [Artist of the Infinite Life](#). For Underhill, Christian mysticism is shaped by two key characteristics: artistry and ordinariness.

She recognized that one of the essential features of the contemplative life is beauty: we are drawn to God not only because God is good, and true, but also because God is beautiful.

If God's truth inspires philosophy and God's goodness inspires ethics, then God's beauty inspires art — and mysticism, therefore, is an adventure into reality (truth), holiness (goodness) and glory (beauty). A true mystic is a true theologian, a true saint, and a true artist — an artist of the inner life.

But if all that sounds rarefied, Underhill also was one of the first important figures to champion the humility, ordinariness, and indeed “normalcy” of the mystical life. I still chuckle over the subtitle of one of her best books, [Practical Mysticism](#) — “A Little Book for Normal People.” She worked hard to dispel the notion that mysticism only belonged to the super-holy, the super-religious, the super-pious. On the contrary, the contemplative life is the ordinary state for Christian maturity.

In this sense she anticipated by over a half a century Karl Rahner's famous warning: “The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all.” Underhill provides the hopeful alternative to Rahner's challenge: Yes, we are all called to be mystics — and it is a life that is within our grasp, for it is meant even for “normal” people like you.

If you're new to Evelyn Underhill, you might wonder where to begin with reader her books. She was a prolific writer, publishing over 25 books in her lifetime with various reissues, collections, and other editions of her work appearing ever since. What's the best book (or books) to start with?

So today I'd like to recommend my three favorite anthologies — collections of the best writings by Evelyn Underhill. Any one of these serves as a marvelous introduction to her writing and shows how she is a key figure in twentieth century spirituality. Unfortunately, all three of them are out of print as of 2018 — but used copies can easily be found on Amazon, Ebay, or other sources. I've linked the title of each book to its page on Amazon, in case you feel

inspired to go shopping.

Evelyn Underhill died in 1941, and only a dozen years would pass before the first anthology of her writings was published: [An Anthology of the Love of God](#). Edited by a Scottish bishop along with one of Underhill's close friends, the selections in this volume include some of Underhill's poetry, along with a generous array of excerpts from her prose works, all organized around the central theme of Divine Love. "All her books are variations of this central theme," writes Bishop Lumsden Barkway in his introduction to the volume.

Over the course of the book we see just how nuanced was Underhill's understanding of Divine Love. Beginning with "the nature of our love," subsequent sections explore the love of God, the love of Christ, and of the Holy Spirit; the church and the sacraments as fountains of love; the mystics as exponents of love; prayer as the expression of love, and holiness, penitence, discipline and service as the manifestations.

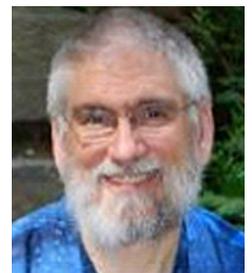
About a decade later came the publication of [The Evelyn Underhill Reader](#), published in the USA by Abingdon Press. This collection features some helpful introductory material, including a brief biography of Underhill and a list of all her book published during her lifetime and over the first few years following her death.

The anthology itself is arranged topically: the first section deals with Mysticism, followed by sections on the Virtues, Spiritual Disciplines, Prayer, and Christ, Church, and Sacraments. What I like about this anthology is that many of the selections are lengthy, really providing a good snapshot of the author's mind at work.

A more recent collection is [Radiance: A Spiritual Memoir](#), published by Paraclete Press in 2004. This book offers a more chronological approach to Underhill's writing, arranged from "Early Writings" to "Applied Spirituality" to "Understanding Mysticism" to "Mature Insight." In keeping with its theme of "memoir," this book offers the most intimate glimpse into Underhill not only as a writer but as a woman of faith, drawing selections not only from her published work but also from her letters and her journals.

So whether you want to understand Evelyn Underhill in the light of one unifying theme, or several topics that were central to her work, or in the light of her own life journey, these three anthologies offer three different but complementary approaches to her work. Get them and read them all. And then you'll be ready to start tackling her many books themselves, one by one.

Carl McColman is a Lay Cistercian and a prolific author and blogger on Patheos.



Pioneers of Modern Spirituality

By Jane Shaw

Many people today think of themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious.’ What riches and resources does the Anglican tradition have to offer to those who are spiritually curious but on the margins of, or outside, the church, as well as to those inside the church?

Pioneers of Modern Spirituality introduces four Anglicans who identified the ways in which people were disaffected with institutional religion across the twentieth century, and yet remained on a spiritual quest. All four sat at the edges of the church - sometimes even outside it - at moments during their own spiritual journeys. Each called the church to an engagement with the world and a rediscovery of the depths of its own tradition. Each, in their own sphere, encouraged a revival of spirituality, and a renewal of the great Anglican heritage of prayer, beauty, worship, community-building and social justice.

Pioneers of Modern Spirituality tells the stories of four of these Anglican pioneers whose stories have often been forgotten:

- Evelyn Underhill, a writer and spiritual director;
- Reginald Somerset Ward, a priest and spiritual director;
- Percy Dearmer, a priest and scholar;
- Rose Macaulay, a novelist, who shares her chapter with Hamilton Johnson SSJE, a priest and monk, the person who gently guided her back to faith when she was 69 years old.

“Each of them is worth a fresh look in their own right. Each has something to teach us about prayer, worship, and how we cultivate a relationship with God. Each was something of a pioneer, but has been somewhat neglected in recent years.”

A final chapter explores what these figures have to teach us about spirituality, the church and mission today.

*Jane Shaw is a British historian and Anglican priest. She is Professor of Religious Studies and Dean for Religious Life at Stanford University, USA, and was previously Dean of Divinity, a Fellow of New College, Oxford, and Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Her books include *Miracles in Enlightenment England* (2006), *Octavia, Daughter of God* (2011), and *A Practical Christianity* (2012). *Pioneers in Modern Christianity* was originally delivered as the 2017 Sarum Lectures.*



Into the Region of Awe: Mysticism in C. S. Lewis

InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove Illinois, 2005

David C. Downing

Reviewed by Ron Dart

There are a variety of portals into reading and interpreting the life and varied publications of C.S. Lewis. There has been an unfortunate tendency to equate Lewis with variations of evangelical Christianity (such a misread), but Lewis was much more a catholic Anglican. Then, there are those who argue Lewis is more of a rationalist (makes for a good Christian apologist). Or, there is Lewis the romantic or the rationalist-romantic. Is there more to Lewis, though?

There sheer beauty and strength of David C. Downing's *Into the Region of Awe: Mysticism in C.S. Lewis* is the way he convincingly highlights how Lewis is much more than a rationalist or romantic or some combination thereof—in short, Lewis is at core and centre a mystic. And, to the pertinent point, who are the writers Lewis was most indebted to? Downing suggests there are three writers that have had a substantive impact on Lewis's mystical vision: George MacDonald, William R. Inge and of prime importance Evelyn Underhill. Underhill is referenced more than any other writer in *Into the Region of Awe* as directly and indirectly influencing Lewis's notion of mysticism. It is also worthy of note to remember Underhill-Lewis corresponded for a few years before Underhill's death, the correspondence initiated by Underhill as a result of reading Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet*.

Into the Region of Awe is divided into ten compact, succinct and insightful chapters: 1) Introduction: The Overlooked Lewis, 2) The Mystique of Mysticism, 3) Mystical Elements in Lewis' Life, 4) Christian Mysticism as Lewis Knew it, 5) The Mystical Way in the Space Trilogy, 6) Finding Words to Explore the Mind of God, 7) Mystical Elements in the Narnia Chronicles, 8) Lewis' Critique of Mysticism, 9) Learning from the Mystical Way and 10) A Brief Timeline of Christian Mystics. It is significant that Underhill is on front stage in most of the chapters and referenced many times in the compact missive by Downing. The fact that Downing has focussed, in his read of Lewis and mysticism, on the *Space Trilogy* and *Chronicles of Narnia* speaks much about how Lewis did some of his best theology via literature and, more to the point, his mystical writings emerged through the genre of literature (albeit his *Space Trilogy* and seemingly children's literature, although the *Chronicles* can be read at different layers and levels). Needless to say, Underhill had a literary bent also. I might add, by way of conclusion, that Lewis' interest in the mystical was shaped and informed as much by Underhill as by Bede Griffiths and a more serious study of Lewis, region of awe and mysticism, to be credible, would definitely need to include Lewis' decades long friendship with Bede Griffiths.

Evelyn Underhill, like Inge and MacDonald, were a generation older than Lewis and each of them matured in an age and ethos that tended to be both suspicious and cynical about religion and mysticism. But, it was Underhill and

Inge, in their different ways, who challenged the reign of positivist philosophy and a certain notion of science that tended to be reductionistic. Underhill, Inge and MacDonald realized that the mystical way, once banished, left the human soul bereft of deeper sources of meaning and purpose—they were, in many ways, the heralds of the mystical way. Lewis read and inwardly digested their writings and he, wisely tracked by Downing, carries forward the fullness of the mystical way—such is the contribution of Downing to Lewis’s full renaissance notion of the all too human journey. But, as mentioned above, Lewis and Underhill sans Griffiths weakens an argument for a person who substantively shaped Lewis’ notion of mysticism.

Ron Dart has taught in the Department of Political Science/Philosophy/Religious Studies at University of the Fraser Valley (Abbotsford, B. C.) since 1990. He was on staff with Amnesty International in the 1980s and he has published more than 35 books.



New and Noteworthy

Kathleen Staudt, “Introduction to Evelyn Underhill, ‘Church Congress Syllabus, No. 3: The Christian Doctrine of Sin and Salvation, Part III: Worship.’” *Anglican Theological Review*, Summer 2018, Vol. 100, 465-480.

Dana Greene will be the keynote speaker at the Jacopone da Todi festival in Todi, Italy in May 2019. Her presentation—“Evelyn Underhill, recovering mysticism, remembering Jacopone”—will celebrate Underhill’s 1919 publication of the first biography of the thirteenth century mystic, Jacopone da Todi.

Jane Shaw’s “Varieties of Mystical Experience in William James and Other Moderns” appeared in *History of European Ideas* Vol. 43, Issue 3, 2017, 226-40. This article places James’ work in a broad context and explores the contributions of both W. R. Inge and Evelyn Underhill in relation to James.

“Evelyn Underhill” an article on her pacifism by Daniel Buttry appeared in *Interfaith Peacemakers*.

www.readthespirit.com/interfaith-peacemakers/evelyn-underhill.

“Happy Birthday, Evelyn Underhill.” By Carl McColman.

www.patheos.com/blogs/carlmccolman/2017/12/happy-birthday-evelyn-underhill/

December 6, 1941 is the birthday of Evelyn Underhill.

“Evelyn Underhill” by Ann Loades. An engaging introduction on the life, work and times of Evelyn Underhill. The talk was given at St Lawrence Church, Winchester, England on 30 May 2012.

Search on [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com).

The House of Retreat at Pleshey in the diocese of Chelmsford and Evelyn Underhill’s favorite retreat house will offer an Evelyn Underhill Weekend, June 13, 14, 15, 2019.

www.retreathousepleshey.com

“Intelligence Meets its Maker,” a booklet about Evelyn Underhill by Christopher Weymouth.



Pleshey, Underhill’s favourite retreat house

Project Canterbury has digitized a number of Underhill’s lesser known books.

See anglicanhistory.org/women/underhill

The grave stone of Underhill in St. John-at-Hampstead churchyard can be seen at www.findagrave.com/memorial/22871/evelyn-underhill.

Logos publishers has released 11 volumes of Underhill’s writings which are searchable with the accompanying software.

IN MEMORIAM

Fay Campbell, a great lover of Evelyn Underhill, died age 84, in Cocoa Beach, Florida on July 28, 2018. May she rest in peace.

Doris Shaughnessy Barlow, born on June 15th, Evelyn Underhill’s death day, left this world at age 94, on September 16, 2018. Doris too was a great admirer of Evelyn Underhill.