

# The Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter

2021-2022

[www.evelynunderhill.org](http://www.evelynunderhill.org)

*“We mostly spend our lives conjugating three verbs: to Want, to Have, and to Do. Craving, clutching, and fussing on the material, political, social, emotional, intellectual—even on the religious—plane, we are kept in perpetual unrest: forgetting that none of these verbs have any ultimate significance, except so far as they are transcended by and included in, the fundamental verb, to Be: and that Being, not wanting, having and doing, is the essence of a spiritual life.”*

— *The Spiritual Life.*



*Evelyn Underhill's grave and ledger stone at Hampstead Parish Church, London.*

## ANNUAL EVELYN UNDERHILL QUIET DAY

### “The Richness of the Unwalled World”

Bishop Porter Taylor

“What would it mean for a soul that truly captured [the contemplative life], in which the emphasis should lie on the immediate percepts, the messages the world pours in on us, instead of on the sophisticated universe into which our clever brains transmute them? Plainly, it would mean the achievement of a new universe, a new order of reality: escape from the terrible museumlike world of daily life, where everything is classified and labeled, and all the graded fluid facts which have no label are ignored. It would mean an innocence of eye and innocence of ear impossible for us to conceive; the impassioned contemplation of pure form, freed from all the meanings with which the mind has draped and disguised it; the recapturing of the lost mysteries of touch and fragrance, most wonderful among the avenues of sense. It would mean the exchanging of the neat conceptual world our thoughts build up, fenced in by the solid ramparts of the possible, for the inconceivable richness of that unwalled world from which we have subtracted it.”

—From *Practical Mysticism: A Little Book for Normal People* by Evelyn Underhill, 1914

“There is another world, but it's the same as this one.” This quotation has been attributed to several people, perhaps because at some point on our journey in this life many have had the same realization.

Evelyn Underhill directed people to discover another world exactly where they are. She asks us to escape from “the terrible museumlike world of daily life, where everything is classified and labelled” to a new way of seeing and being. To use a computer metaphor, we seekers need to move beyond our operating system and experience the world firsthand, so that we might “proclaim the Eternal Reality by [our]... existence.”

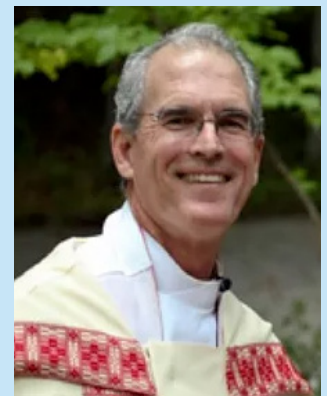
In this era of political discord, disorientation, deaths from Covid-19, and war crimes in Europe, Evelyn Underhill is a crucial aid. She calls us to rediscover the “richness of that unwalled world” that can only come from deep contemplation.

During the Vietnam War, many anti-war activists urged the Trappist monk Thomas Merton to leave the monastery and come and protest. Although he supported the peace movement with his writings, he refused to leave Gethsemane Abbey because, he said, “There needs to be one sane person left.” This is also the charge Evelyn Underhill gives us. Amidst social and political rancor, anxiety over a lethal virus, and unimaginable violence in Ukraine, there needs to be more than one sane person left.

Evelyn Underhill also defined our calling as nothing less than “to bring Eternity into time.” She said, “God is our only reality, and we are only real insofar as we are in God’s order and God is in us....So those who wonder where they are to begin might begin here, by trying to give spiritual quality to every detail of their everyday lives.” But our calling is not only to be connected to God. “We are transmitters as well as receivers,” Underhill wrote. We are also called to be “agents of the Creative Spirit in this world.”

Our time together on June 11 will focus on becoming open to the other world that is the same as this one, by encountering and embracing the wisdom of Evelyn Underhill and discerning how her wisdom can equip us to experience the richness of that other world.

*Bishop Taylor joined the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia as Assisting Bishop in July 2020 after retiring as Bishop of the diocese of Western North Carolina in 2016. In retirement, he also joined the faculty of Wake Forest University divinity School. He holds a Master of Divinity and a Ph.D in Theology and Literature.*



*Bishop Porter Taylor*

**Saturday, June 11, 2022, 9:30am-3:30pm**

Nourse Hall, St. Albans Parish  
On the grounds of the Washington National Cathedral  
3001 Wisconsin Ave. N.W., Washington DC 20016

Please bring a sack lunch

**Registration begins May 1, 2022**

**[Download Registration Form](#)**

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# A Memorial for Evelyn Underhill (1875 – 1941)

## An important anniversary

June 15th 2021 was the 80th anniversary of the death of a remarkable woman, Evelyn Underhill. She is one of only 18 modern women whose lives are commemorated in the Church of England's Calendar of Holy Days.

As a gifted writer and retreat leader she helped, and still helps, countless people around the world who are searching for a relationship with God. She asked the questions that Christians and others seeking God are still asking, and through her writing was able to address them in a way that is still meaningful in the 21st century.

## A new memorial

Evelyn Underhill is buried in the Additional Burial Ground of Hampstead Parish Church. Followers from all over the world come looking for her grave, but it is hard to spot because she is described simply as 'Evelyn', 'the wife of Hubert Stuart Moore' and 'the daughter of Sir Arthur Underhill'. There is no reference to her achievements.

Hampstead Parish Church, London, created a more fitting memorial for her, to provide a focus for those coming to honour her. A ledger stone has been designed by Lois Anderson, a well-known local artist. Around the edge will be the words "Evelyn Underhill 1875 – 1941 – Christian – Scholar- Spiritual Guide – *A Christianity which is only active is not a complete Christianity*".

## Commemorative events

The church installed this memorial in time for the 80th anniversary of her death on 15th June 2021. We hope that marking this notable anniversary will encourage new followers and a renewed interest in her work. A ceremony to bless the stone on this anniversary, as well as a special commemorative service on 13th June at Hampstead Parish Church, London.



*Evelyn Underhill's grave and ledger stone at Hampstead Parish Church, London.*

# New and Noteworthy

The 2021 Liddon Lecture “Evelyn: A Spiritual Ecumenist,” sponsored by the Society of the Faith, will be given by Dr. Robyn Wrigley-Carr on Zoom for FREE on Tuesday, November 2, 2021 at 3:45 PM EST. One can register at <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/the-2021-liddon-lecture-evelyn-underhill-by-dr-robyn-wrigley-carr-tickets-169345305367>

Dana Greene’s essay, “Evelyn Underhill and the Franciscan Tradition” will be forthcoming in *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*.

Dr. Kathleen Henderson Staudt, Review of *The Spiritual Formation of Evelyn Underhill*. By Roby Wrigley-Carr. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2020, 161-63.

Dr. Kathleen Henderson Staudt offered “Life as Prayer,” A Quiet Day at Christ Episcopal Church, Rockville, MD on June 12.

Dr. Clovis Salgado Gontijo, Associate Professor at the Jesuit College of Philosophy and Theology in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil, main interest is in the connection between the arts and spirituality. He writes that only Underhill’s *Mysticism* is available in Portuguese and he is interested in further translation of her work into that language. [clovisalgon@msn.com](mailto:clovisalgon@msn.com).

Rev. Dr. Bonnie Thurston offered a Quiet Morning on Evelyn Underhill, Oct. 2nd, at St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church, Wheeling, WVA for the Magdalene Chapter of the Daughters of the King entitled “Mysticism for Everybody.”

“The Mysticism of Ordinary Life: Whose Mysticism? Whose Ordinariness” was given by Prof. Andrew Prevot, Associate Professor of Theology at Boston College on July 10, 2021. This was the 20th Annual Underhill Lecture in Christian Spirituality.

Dana Greene presented “Evelyn Underhill: Foremother of Contemporary Spirituality” at the Center for Spiritual Deepening at St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church in Alexandria, VA. <https://www.centerforspiritualdeepening.org/past-events>

Dr. Kathleen Staudt is the Evelyn Underhill Association’s new president and Erica Aungst has joined the board.

Sarah Jane Kinch completed a M.A. at Sarum College, University of Winchester, U.K. in September 2016. Her thesis was “Evelyn Underhill: A Bergsonian Mysticism of Action?”

Rev. Dr. Jane Shaw blogged “[My Favorite Mystic—Evelyn Underhill](#)” and wrote on Underhill in *The Church Times*. <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2011/20-may/comment/in-praise-of-normal-mysticism>

Clovis Salgado Gontijo, “The Philosophy of the Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi and the Possibility of Nonreligious Spirituality.” *Contemporary Perspectives on Vladimir Jankelevitch: On What Cannot Be Touched*.” eds. Marguerite La Caze and Magdalena Zalkos. NY: Lexington Books, 2019. This article refers to Underhill throughout.

# “‘Curing Solitude’? Retreats and the Experience of Solitude in Community.”

By Rev. Dr. Jane Shaw, July 2, 2020

“The intense silence seemed to slow down one’s far too quick mental time and give one’s soul a chance. To my surprise a regime of daily communion and four services a day with silence between, was the most easy, unstrained and natural life I had ever lived. One sank down into it, and doing it always with the same people, all meaning it intensely, and the general atmosphere of deep devotion – for the whole house seemed soaked in love and prayer – cured solitude. <sup>[1]</sup>



Rev. Dr. Jane Shaw

This was the experience of the writer Evelyn Underhill when she went on her first retreat in the summer of 1922. She went to Pleshey, a recently established retreat house in Essex, alongside a group of elementary school teachers from the East End whom she did not know.

She had been a spiritual seeker for many years, on the margins of the church – a ‘freelancer’ as she often described herself – during which time she had written her most famous and enduring book, *Mysticism* (1911). She had only fully decided to be a member of the Church of England the previous year, and so it is in that context, perhaps, that the retreat ‘cured solitude’ – although maybe by that she meant spiritual loneliness?

Both the solitary and the communal are paradoxically essential to this notion of retreat, to this curing of solitude or loneliness. Underhill encapsulated that in her daily devotional regimen, shared with the same group of people in silence.

In these recent weeks of lockdown, as we have experienced forced solitude, so our minds may sometimes have turned to what it might mean to cure solitude or loneliness.

The idea of going on retreat, being alone amongst others, is not uncommon now – whether to a spa or a yoga retreat, or to somewhere one can learn to meditate or to pray.

It usually entails the withdrawal of the self from the hustle and bustle of day-to-day life by choice; entering a different community for a time in order to take stock, rest, refresh and reinvigorate oneself.

When Underhill went on that retreat in 1922, the notion of ordinary laypeople taking religious retreats was relatively new. Such retreats had hitherto been largely confined to the clergy (particularly Roman Catholic clergy). In 1912, the Jesuit Charles Plater published *Retreats for the People*, which was influential on this burgeoning movement across the denominations.



The championing of retreats for laypeople in the early twentieth-century Church of England resulted from three factors: the rise of Anglo-Catholicism and the reintroduction of monastic orders within Anglicanism (both of which had occurred in the nineteenth century); and a broader revival of interest in mysticism in the early twentieth century. Dedication to prayer was at the heart of all three, and the desire to encourage as many people as possible in a disciplined prayer life was a core purpose of a retreat.

Additional impetus was given to the retreat movement by the trauma of war. It was recommended that soldiers returning from the Front who had been shell-shocked might benefit from such retreats, and many of the new retreat houses laid on special programmes for veterans in the early 1920s.

Underhill soon began leading retreats, invited in 1924 by her friend Dorothy Swayne to lead one for the women from the Time and Talents Settlement House in Bermondsey (a support institution for young working women), where Swayne was Warden. Underhill became the best-known retreat leader of the period. There was a delicious irony to this: the Association for Promoting Retreats (founded in 1913) and Society for Retreat Conductors (founded in 1924) had decided that women did not have the necessary authority to be retreat leaders. Only male priests could do the job.

But Underhill already had a devoted following from her writings. *Mysticism* had introduced the subject to a wide reading public, and in her short volume *Practical Mysticism*, which followed in 1914, she suggested that anyone could be a mystic. *Mysticism* was not an esoteric pastime but something that could be learned, like playing a musical instrument.

People – especially women – flocked to her retreats at Pleshey to learn the art of prayer. In silence they formed community – and that community took on other lives outside the retreat, back in the world, as they met in regular prayer groups and formed new friendship circles. The women who came to Underhill's retreats were not necessarily ones with excessive leisure time, but rather women (many single, but not all) who made their own living as writers, scholars, translators, teachers and social workers.

Underhill described the importance of retreat in 'its power of causing the rebirth of our spiritual sense, quickening that which has grown dull and dead in us, calling it into the light and air, and giving it another chance'. "In our busy everyday lives, 'we lose all sense of proportion' and become 'restless, fussy, full of things that simply must be done, quite oblivious of the only reason anything should be done.'" For Underhill, retreats offered the chance to learn and maintain 'the art of steadfast attention to God' <sup>[2]</sup>. That single-minded, steadfast attention meant that a form of inner work – a kind of wrestling with God and self – could happen when the trappings of ordinary life were laid down for a period, and solitude within the safety of community embraced.

One striking image of that inner wrestling is that of the novelist Rose Macaulay at a 'Retreat for Ladies' laid on by the Society of St. John the Evangelist (SSJE) in London in about 1916.

The monk-priest running the retreat, one Father Johnson, who was to play a vital role in Macaulay's life several

decades later, recalled looking out of the window: “into the little, dull, square garden, and seeing Miss Macaulay pacing up and down very gravely and slowly. I think on the grass, for a long while, in steadily drizzling rain, tall and grave and thoughtful, wearing some sort of dark tweed suit – no overcoat or raincoat.”<sup>[3]</sup>

SSJE, the Anglican monastic order to which Father Johnson, leader of Macaulay’s retreat, belonged, had pioneered retreats to a widening group of people: Richard Benson, the Order’s founder in Cowley, Oxford, had written a tract on the importance of retreats as early as 1865. The hosting and leading of retreats remain central to their work today at their two houses in Massachusetts.

It is there that I have been shaped by numerous retreats over the last 30-odd years. It is there that I have seen and experienced how the transformation of self – and of self in relation to God – that can happen in a retreat occurs not simply through ones solo activities, nor even in the wisdom gleaned from retreat teachings. Rather, it happens through the experience of solitude in community: the taking of meals together in silence; sharing walks and worship alongside others, where no comment is necessary, or invited.

During this period of lockdown, most churches and cathedrals have used the internet to provide worship opportunities, with varying degrees of success. I suspect that how much success depends not only on how adept a priest is with technology (aside from the bloopers that went viral, like the C of E vicar who set fire to himself during his virtual sermon, and the Italian priest who accidentally activated the Instagram filters during a virtual mass) but also what worshippers bring to the experience.

Logging on to live evensong with the SSJE monks at 6 p.m. in Massachusetts (11 p.m. here in England), I can hear their familiar chanting; I am taken into a sacred space I know well; I can see the faces of monks who have shown me great kindness.

All of this conjures up the memory of being in solitude in their community.

If I had not had that experience I do not know whether logging into their evensong would have much meaning for me.

The SSJE monks have suggested creative ways of being on retreat at home during lockdown. On their website, you can find their suggestions for taking a day-long [‘Retreat-in-Place’](#): how to set the priorities for the day, what provisions you need, how to prepare and pray, and finally how to gather all the strands of the day together. For all who are able to put aside such time – I’m aware that remote working, plus childcare responsibilities, would make that difficult for many – such a retreat-in-place may offer relief from our current relentless online life.

But it misses out what is paradoxically so important about a retreat: the other people – the ones you never get to talk to, but with whom you share the meals, rituals and the rhythms of the day, the ones with whom you create briefly and fleetingly an intimate community as the context for your solitude.

*Jane Shaw is Principal of Harris Manchester College, Professor of the History of Religion at the University of Oxford.*



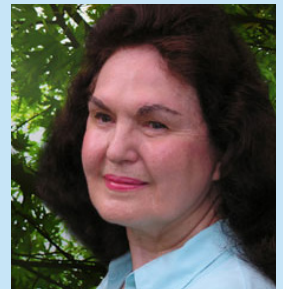
[1] Evelyn Underhill, *Fragments from an Inner Life: The Notebooks of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. Dana Greene (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1993) p. 113

[2] Evelyn Underhill, 'The Need of Retreat', originally published in *The Vision*, January 1932, and reprinted in Evelyn Underhill, *The Light of Christ: Retreats at the House of Retreat, Pleshey, May 1932* (London, New York and Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co., 1944) pp.102,107

[3] Quoted in Constance Babington Smith, 'Introduction', *Letters to a Friend from Rose Macaulay, 1950 – 52*, ed. Constance Babington Smith (London: Collins, 1961) pp. 17 -18. This volume contains the correspondence between Macaulay and Johnson who, by then, was living at the SSJE house in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

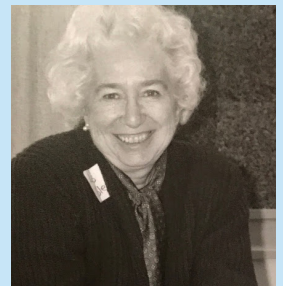
## In Memoriam

**Dr. Grace Brame**, important writer on Evelyn Underhill, died May 1, 2021. She was a graduate of Union Theological Seminary and received a Ph. D. from Temple University. She taught at Villa Nova and La Salle universities and was the author of four books and a retreat leader. She was as well an operatic singer who sang around the world, most notably in the USSR. For five years she served as a Lutheran pastor in Delaware. Her book, *Ways of the Spirit*, was an important contribution to Underhill Studies. May she rest in peace.



**John Manola**, left, age 103, of Philadelphia, died September 5, 2020 in Philadelphia, PA. John was an early and ardent supporter of the life and work of Evelyn Underhill. A man of great faith and love, John was an ordained minister and chaplain to the blind and a social worker. May he rest in peace.

**Lois Sibley**, age 88, of Glenside, PA, died April 1, 2020. Lois was an early editor of the EUA newsletter which was originally distributed in paper form. She was an avid advocate of Evelyn Underhill and greatly aided in spreading knowledge of Underhill's life and work. We are immensely grateful for her contributions to the EUA. May she rest in peace.



# Book Reviews

## ***Interviews with notable on the “Music of Eternity.”***

This is a seven-part series of interviews on Robyn Wrigley-Carr’s new book “Music of Eternity”, examining Evelyn Underhill on Advent. Interviewed are: Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, Rowan Williams, Dr Elaine Storkey, John Swinton, Brian Mc Laren, and Rvrd Dr. Sharon Prentis, and Kathy Staudt.

<https://homegroups.org.uk/series/music-of-eternity/>

## ***Music of Eternity: Meditations for Advent with Evelyn Underhill* by Robyn Wrigley-Carr, London: SPCK, 2021**

A newly published book of meditations for Advent by Australian scholar and writer Robyn Wrigley-Carr is titled, “Music of Eternity” — quoting Evelyn Underhill’s direction to “listen to the music of eternity”. The Rt. Reverend Stephen Cottrell, Archbishop of York, has recommended its reading and study for this season of Advent. The four stages of “listening to the music” are presented as “Prevenience” — perpetual coming and welcoming; “Advent”— await a mighty symphony of sound; “Emmanuel” — recognize and welcome the creator; and “Holy living” — awakening and embracing God’s coming. The volume’s four stages of study and prayer are appropriate for Advent study groups, for regular prayer groups, for a parish study series, and, of course, for one’s private focused devotions during the season of Advent.

***Donna Osthaus directed two Evelyn Underhill pilgrimages to England and Italy and serves on the board of the Evelyn Underhill Association, USA.***

## ***Music of Eternity: Meditations For Advent With Evelyn Underhill* by Robyn Wrigley-Carr. (SPCK: London, 2021).**

Advent is one of the turning points in the Christian liturgical year and such a turning season does welcome deeper reflections on the meaning of the faith journey. Evelyn Underhill understood this turn to inner depth in a substantive way and the role of Advent in such deeper dives for the eternal pearl. Robyn Wrigley-Carr has once again produced a masterpiece of insight and wisdom in her heeding and hearing the way Underhill internalized the music of eternity in her Advent reflections.

*Music of Eternity* has a compelling and apt “Introduction”, by the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell. In fact, *Music of Eternity* will be his Advent book for 2021—high praise indeed for such a beauty of a primer on Underhill and Advent. But, there is much more worth pondering as we pass through the portal of *Music of Eternity* into the sanctuary of Underhill and Advent, the author being the Beatrice of sorts.

*Music of Eternity* is divided into 4 sections: 1) Prevenience: Welcoming God’s Coming (God Is), 2) Advent: Awaiting God’s Coming (Christ Is Coming), 3) Emmanuel: Recognizing God’s Coming (Christ Comes), and 4) Holy Living: Embracing God’s Coming (God Has Come). Each of these main sections are broken down into smaller bite-size

pieces in which the meaning of Advent is probed in an ever fuller and more mature way and manner. Needless to say, the 4 sections correspond to the 4 weeks of Advent. In each of the sections, the author weaves together quotes from Underhill on Advent with her significant thoughts on the perennial relevance of both Advent and Underhill for us today on our all too human journey. The “Prologue” is worth many a meditative read just as the “Epilogue” (Come, Lord Jesus) and Appendix (Editing the Excerpts) makes for a fine finale to *Music of Eternity*. There is, also, at the end of each meditation section thoughts “For Discussion” and a “Prayer”.

I might add by way of a kindly criticism that it might have been valuable if some attention had been paid to Underhill’s more political and peace writings in the book, *Advent and Underhill*, in their time and ethos, certainly in the thick of tragic war and peace issues.

It would be somewhat remiss of me to ignore the evocative cover on the book. The obvious music of eternity that permeates the creative cover cannot be missed, each image more than a welcome to the senses to address the soul about Advent and yet a further journey. The winter blue sky, snow on the ground, flakes of white falling and yet flowers blooming (*eidelweiss*) from the snow, birds in song and an empty path and bench welcoming one and all to the journey. The courage needed to take the next invitational step forwards and onwards, to sit on the bench and listen, the path in the winter season a gift if understood aright. Such is the meaning of Advent, Underhill’s offered music and Wrigley-Carr’s interpretive gift of Underhill and Advent, a letter from eternity. Can we hear the music?



*Dr. Ron Dart teaches at the University of Fraser Valley, Canada, and is the author of some forty books. This review first appeared in Clarion, Journal of Religion, Peace and Justice, July 1, 2021.*

## Celebration of Evelyn Underhill on the Eightieth Anniversary of Her Death

June 14-18, 2021

On the week of June 14th the Retreat House at Pleshey, the Diocese of Chelmsford, Hampstead Parish Church, and the Evelyn Underhill Association, USA collaborated to sponsored a celebration of the life and work of Evelyn Underhill on this the eightieth anniversary of her death in 1941. Participants came from the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia.

The program opened with a beautiful tour of the retreat house and the village of Pleshey led by Canon John Howden, former warden of the house. It was a glorious, flower-filled presentation which proved why it was Underhill’s favorite house of retreat.

This was followed by a two-hour lecture retreat by Sarah Kinch, “Landscapes at Your Gates,” in which Kinch, who wrote her dissertation on Underhill, linked our living through the Covid pandemic with “Practical Mysticism.” Has the pandemic caused us to think and love more generously and expansively?

On Tuesday, June 15th, Underhill’s actual death day, Bishop Frank Griswold, former Presiding Bishop and primate of the Episcopal Church, spoke of Underhill’s inspiration in his life since he was sixteen years old in a lecture “The Inner Life in the Everyday World.” This was followed by an Online Party of Celebration with a dinner speaker, The Rev. Dr. Ellen Clark-King, Dean of Kings College London, the first woman to hold that position in the College’s 191 years and toasts offered by Susan Dean, executive director of Underhill House, Seattle Washington, and Kathy Staudt, president of the Evelyn Underhill Association, USA.

Wednesday, June 16th, from the very early morning in Australia, Robyn Wrigley-Carr, Professor of Theology and Spirituality at Alphacrucis College, spoke about her recent edition of Underhill’s prayer book. This was followed by a lecture, “Letters of Comfort and Hope in Living Our Faith,” by Val Thompson, spiritual director and chaplain at the House of Retreat, Pleshy.

Thursday, June 17th, saw another lecture by Robyn Wrigley-Carr and William Hyland, lecturer in church history in the School of divinity, University of St. Andrews. Their presentation, “Spiritual Friendship: Evelyn and Lucy Menzies, explored the relationship of these dear friends. This was followed by a Keynote Address by Jane Shaw, professor and Principal of Harris Manchester College, Oxford. Subsequently participants heard about new explorations of Underhill’s spirituality. Panel presenters included Dana Greene, Dean Emerita of Oxford College of Emory University and author of several books on Underhill, Todd Johnson, Vice President of the Liturgical Conference, USA, and James Thrall, professor of religious studies at Knox College.

The celebration’s final day, June 18th, included a presentation by Robyn Wrigley-Carr’s forthcoming book, “Music of Eternity,” 2021’s Advent Book for the Archbishop of York. The week-long celebration ended with a service in the chapel in the retreat house at Pleshey conducted by Canon John Howden and Bishop Frank Griswold.

This extraordinary event achieved its goals to celebrate Evelyn Underhill, to thank God for her legacy, to explore her links with the Retreat House Pleshey, to gain insight about the latest scholarship on her life and writing, and to discover how her writings speak to us today. Videos of the various presentations will be available at a later date.

# Authentic Prayer and Authentic Leadership: Reflections on Bishop Frank Griswold's talk on Evelyn's Day 2021

By Kathy Staudt, EUA President

In his talk on Evelyn's feast day, June 15, 2021, Bishop Frank Griswold both modeled and reflected on what it means to be a "person of prayer." He said he does not *study* Evelyn Underhill, but that he has found her to be a companion, experiencing in her teaching the way that Christ comes to us through the saints.



Kathy Staudt, EUA President

He began by reflecting and expanding on the importance of worship and adoration in the life of prayer, so foundational to all of Underhill's work. A person of prayer is someone who is attached to God at the very deepest level, and who is learning that praise, worship and service are all part of our "yes" to the Holy Spirit praying in us, a "yes" to who God has made us to be, to the mystery of being made in the image of God. In a church that often makes us feel we have to choose between prayerfulness and service, Bishop Frank reminded us that unless adoration and awe are right, our service will not be right.

Praise and reverence mean availability to the Spirit within us, with no agenda – just knowing "You are loved." This knowledge is transformative. Prayer is fulfilled in the love of God toward humanity, and whenever we pray, in whatever tradition we embrace, we are praying in and through the Word of God, the One who is the agent of Creation, working in us to transform us slowly but faithfully into transmitters of God's love in the world.

Having laid this rich theological foundation, Bishop Frank turned to the specific challenges of clergy and religious leaders. Echoing Underhill's firm and gentle wisdom, he insisted that this has to be real for us if it is to be real to those we serve. He invited us all to imagine the Risen Christ, saying "You can't just *think* of me. I am *with* you." A disciplined life of prayer opens us to this reality, and enables leaders to be present in ways that people know actually matters.

Drawing generously from his own experience, Bishop Frank described some of the challenges clergy face in the spiritual life. In the ministry of Word and Sacrament, for example, he noted that is easy to take any reading and let it serve my own ends. Do I let the Word open me? he asked, or do I decide what I want to say and manipulate it? Pushing against this temptation, he recalled early commentators who came to Scripture with joy, with an expectation of being renewed and made more available to God. This can happen, he suggested, in a regular discipline of praying Scripture in the daily office, even when there are long dry periods. Scripture is sacramental; it is inhabited by the Word, and in it, Christ the Word will accost us. Echoing Underhill's *Concerning the Inner Life*, Bishop Frank

reminded us that the heart of ministry is our prayer, and the quality of our presence is related to the depth of our prayer:

You can tell when someone is preaching/presiding out of their own experience of life in Christ. This insight, which turns up repeatedly in Underhill's teaching, was richly modeled in Bishop Frank's talk and in the conversation following it. We were blessed by his presence, by his obvious rootedness in the life of prayer, and by the wisdom he shared, in holy companionship with Evelyn Underhill.

*Dr. Kathleen Staudt is president of EUA and author of many articles as well as **At the Turn of a Civilization: David Janes and Modern Poetics.***

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## Evelyn Underhill and Jacopone Da Todi

By Dana Greene

I begin with a disclaimer. I am not a theologian or historian of spirituality but rather a biographer. I mention this because one of the descriptors of a biographer is as detective, one who searches for every clue in order to understand a life. I say this because it will help explain why I have chosen to speak about a great lacuna of EU life, the period after the Great War, 1918-1920. We know little about this time, but it is an axial point in Underhill's life, a turning from her life as a scholar of mysticism to a vocation as retreat leader and spiritual guide. By 1921 she has returned to the Anglican church from which she had been estranged for many years and she sought out the counsel of Baron F. von Hugel, a Catholic theologian. My question is what brought her to make these major decisions? Unfortunately, Underhill gives us very scant information about this period of her life, but now, on the 80th anniversary of her death, it's time to pursue it. To my lights, it is an important question which we need to understand.



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Underhill later described herself during this time as a “white-hot Neoplatonist”, “anti-institutional” and dominated by a “detached inwardness.” She said this was a time when “I went to pieces,” and that she lived into the Neoplatonic motto to be “alone with the alone.” That is about all we have; there are very few letters from this period. She had been a supporter of the Great War and had worked in the British admiralty. But what she called “the caldron of War” was brutal, many died and fighting dragged on for many years. At its end the Russian revolution commenced. Two of her nephews were killed in the war, and her best friend, Ethel Barker, died. By any measure, these were grounds for if not depression then a least a sense of lost.



What happened during these two years which explains her decision to reenter the Anglican church, seek out the counsel of Baron Fredrich von Hügel, and take up a new vocation? Underhill had been a very successful author; She claimed she was “professionally very prosperous and petted.” She had edited mystic texts and wrote on the lives of the mystics. Her most famous book, *Mysticism*, which was published in 1911 was a fat 500 page book based on 1,000 sources. Its subtitle explains its subject: It is “A Study of the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness.” Underhill was intent on saving the contributions of the mystics, those she called the great pioneers of human consciousness. But after the Great War the bottom fell out of her world. Underhill herself attributes her saving to von Hügel. She said, somewhat hyperbolically I think, that she owed her entire spiritual life to von Hügel. Robyn Wrigly-Carr has convincingly illustrated Underhill’s immense gratitude to her mentor. Clearly von Hügel was important in shaping her spiritual life, but my question is what lead her to be open to him? Earlier she had a testy relationship with him when he claimed in a very patriarchal manner she should hold off publication of *Mysticism* until he could correct her errors. She went ahead and published the book anyway. However, by 1920, when she was forty-five, she was desperate and knew she needed help. But why did she turn to him and reluctantly integrate herself back into the Anglican fold? How do we explain these decisions?

Underhill had been a prolific writer but in the year 1918 she published almost nothing, but gave herself over to writing a first biography of the 13th century Franciscan and mystical poet Jacopone da Todi. The city of Todi is in Umbrian, not far from Assisi. This biography, published in 1919, contained Jacopone’s life narrative and many of his poems or laude were translated by Underhill’s friend, Mrs. Theodore Beck. Underhill produced “Jacopone da Todi, Poet and Mystic 1228-1306, A Spiritual Biography with a selection from the spiritual songs.” In 2019, on the 100th anniversary of the publication of Underhill’s biography of Jacopone, the book was translated from the English into Italian and presented at an international conference held in the hill town of Todi.

Underhill’s biography of Jacopone was made possible because J. A. Herbert, Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Library and a friend, allowed her to use the Umbrian manuscripts housed there. Previously Underhill had mentioned Jacopone in her book “*Mysticism*” and she had published a chapter on Angela de Foligno, another Franciscan. Later she would published several articles on Francis of Assisi and Franciscan spirituality. But she began with Jacopone, immersing herself in the life of this strange, second generation Franciscan poet who wrote in the vernacular. Like Francis, Jacopone was originally a wealthy libertine who had a life crisis when his young wife died tragically. He ultimately entered the Franciscans as a lay brother and became a leader of the Spiritual Franciscans, those who supported reform of the order and of the papacy itself. For this he was persecuted, imprisoned and excommunicated by pope Boniface VIII. Jacopone was finally released, and his excommunication revoked five years later by Benedict XI.

In chronicling the life of Jacopone, Underhill was introduced to a Christocentric spirituality and a reconciliation between love of God and love of the suffering world. Love of God meant a life of both suffering and of joy. Detachment which she had sought earnestly was now only appropriate within the context of attachment to God. Ultimately her spirituality would be summed up in adoration of God, attachment to God, and cooperation with

God. Underhill maintained that the experience of God always had vocational implications. She wrote “Now the experience of God...is, I believe in the long run always a vocational experience. It always impels to some sort of service: always awakens an energetic love. It never leaves the self where it found it.” In the case of Jacopone the outpouring of his love of God was expressed in the many mystical poems he wrote in the vernacular, hence sharing his experience of suffering and joy with ordinary people. Underhill’s biography was the first life narrative of Jacopone in English making his poetry accessible to Anglophones. As Bernard McGinn has argued Jacopone da Todi is undervalued, but Underhill was one of the first to make his work and life available to the English-reading audience.

Underhill came to see that the mystical tradition flourished best within institutional religion and so she re-entered the Anglican church after many years. When a friend invited her to attend a retreat in the Anglican retreat house at Pleshey in 1922: she was heartened. Here was work she could do, a vocation she could embrace. She dedicated the remainder of her life to strengthening the spiritual lives of her contemporaries. For the next decade she took up what was called the care of souls, which she carried out through counsel of individuals, offering retreats, and publishing those retreats making them available to others. Remarkably, she gave a retreat for Anglican clergy published in 1926 and a year later she offered a retreat in Canterbury Cathedral, becoming the first woman to do so. As her friend T. S. Eliot said she was one attuned to the great spiritual hunger of her times, one conscious of the grievous need of the contemplative element in the modern world. Michael Ramsey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, attested Underhill did more to keep the spiritual life alive in the Anglican church in the period between the wars than anyone else.

Initially Underhill felt unworthy to take up this vocational work. She wrote in her diary: “In my lucid moments, I see only too clearly that the 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 at bottom the only thing 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.”

Von Hügel died in January 1925 so Underhill only received his counsel for about two years. She says she saw in this man the same “craving for God” that she found in Jacopone. It is interesting that von Hügel’s first book on the 15th century mystic, Catherine of Genoa, showed that Jacopone da Todi had a major influence on her. As well, Underhill saw in von Hügel the same commitment to Christocentric devotion she encountered in Franciscan spirituality. Von Hügel urged her to work among the poor and to remain within the Anglican communion nurturing the contemplative needs of her contemporaries. He understood that mysticism, the experience of God, needed a body, which was the church, otherwise it became strange, vague, and led to a desire for detachment and perfectionism. These were precisely Underhill’s maladies.

It was at this time that Underhill was introduced to another Franciscan, first through correspondence and then in person. This was Sorella Maria, founder of an ecumenical community of women in Umbria who followed the Primitive Rule of Francis and lived out commitments to poverty, prayer and hospitality. This “Least Sister,” as Underhill called her, personified the ideals of the Franciscan tradition and she would continue to influence Underhill’s life and work for

years. Underhill regarded her friendship with Sorella Maria as one of her greatest privileges.

It was only years later that Underhill clarified her understanding of the Franciscan tradition. She claimed Francis of Assisi could not be understood without realizing his simultaneous love of God and of the world. As she wrote: “the real greatness of St. Francis is the same as the greatness of the Christian religion...” For Francis, love and suffering were one, and will and love rather than intellect were the greatest human powers. Underhill attributed these same attributes to Francis’ disciple, Jacopone, who in his mystic poetry united the double truth of the sublime and the lowly, the simple and ordinary with the awe-struct sense of God.

Although Underhill’s encounters with Jacopone and Sorella Maria provided an alternative experience to her Neo-Platonic world view, it was von Hügel who provided immediate counsel. As she found resonances of Francis and Jacopone in von Hügel she also found commonalties between him and Sorella Maria. She wrote “it was wonderful to find how exactly Maria and von Hügel agree, in spite of great differences in mind and language, in all the deep things of the spiritual life.”

So although the evidences for Underhill’s life in the period 1918 through 1920 are few, I think it can be convincingly argued that she was prepared to move away from her Neo-platonic detachment to a fuller understanding of Christianity through her encounter with the Franciscan tradition in the life and poetry of Jacopone da Todi and the communal living of Sorella Maria. During the years 1918-20 it was her work on Jacopone which awakened her and then she was sustained by her friendships with von Hügel and Sorella Maria. This axial turning from scholar of mysticism to inspirer of the contemplative lives among her contemporaries was one of great moment and importance for modern spirituality. Here the mystical and the ordinary are linked and in this evolution of her theology, Underhill moved from a theocentric spirituality to a Christocentric emphasis.

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