

Evelyn Underhill

Jamaica Plain, October 10, 2004, Rev. Terry Burke

Evelyn Underhill was one of the foremost writers on spiritual matters of the 20th century. I'd read some of her books in Divinity School years ago, but thankfully, while preparing for the Mysticism in World Religions class, my friend Toni Lester reminded me of her. In the relentless busyness of our day-to-day lives, Evelyn Underhill is a good person to learn about, and to learn from her the importance of finding time for our spiritual lives.

Evelyn Underhill kept an embroidery in her bedroom with the one word "Eternity." She wrote especially about mysticism, trying to grow closer to God through prayer. In her time, mysticism was associated at best with monks and nuns, people apart from the world, and at worst with the occult and ouiji boards. Evelyn Underhill changed all that, and made mysticism an important topic for all manner of persons.

Evelyn Underhill was born in 1875 to a British Upper Middle Class family. Her father was a lawyer. Her family were Anglicans who might go to church on Christmas or Easter. She later wrote, "I was not brought up to religion." Evelyn attended and graduated from the University of London, where she studied botany, philosophy, languages, and social sciences. By the time of her college years, she had become a philosophical theist, believing in God, socialism, and helping the poor.

After college, a trip to Italy made her comfortable entering Catholic churches to look at the art work or light candles. Evelyn and a friend went on a retreat at a British Catholic convent; afterwards, she had a profound religious experience, something of the intensity of Isaiah's visionary call. Evelyn had an overwhelming experience of the truth of faith, which she placed in a Catholic context. In much the same way, a generation later, the German academic Edith Stein could read St. Teresa's autobiography on a weekend holiday and become convinced that it was "the truth."

Evelyn's fiancée Hubert, a friend since childhood, was horrified by her decision to enter the Roman Catholic Church. This was during the era when J.R.R. Tolkien's mother was cut off by her parents for converting to Catholicism. Hubert was a lawyer who liked to "mess about in boats." He was very "handy;" during WWI he invented a new type of splint that was named for him. Hubert especially detested the idea of confession in the Catholic Church.

A wise priest suggested that Evelyn tell Hubert that she would wait a year before converting. In the intervening year, the Pope issued an encyclical against all forms of "Modernism" or liberalism in the Catholic Church. Evelyn Underhill could only have been a liberal modernist Catholic, so she lost her spiritual home. She felt "stuck" spiritually.

Evelyn married Hubert and turned to writing. *The Grey World*, a novel of hers about the spiritual search, was very popular. She wrote poems and other novels. In 1911 she published a great scholarly work entitled *Mysticism*. The Boston Public Library has four copies of the work at their Copley main branch and it has never been out of print. In the book Underhill describes the stages of mysticism in the traditions of the world religions. She had a strong belief that all mystics were ultimately at one with each other. She also presented the mystic as doer, not dreamer; a closer relationship with the Divine brought a more abundant life of greater creativity and service to others.

Much the same way as Scot Peck's books like *The Road Less Traveled* reached spiritual people outside of the church in the 1980's, Underhill's books revealed a deep spiritual need. She had found her vocation - writing on prayer. Her many books and articles on prayer often tried to reach people who were not conventionally religious. For example, one of my favorite books of Underhill's is entitled, *Practical Mysticism, a Little Book for Real People*. She collaborated with the Indian poet Tagore on translations of the mystic Kabir, another figure who didn't fit well with the religions of his time.

As a result of her book on mysticism, Underhill acquired a "family" of persons for whom she was spiritual director, helping them grow in their relationship with God. A woman serving as a spiritual director had been unheard of. Underhill realized her own need for spiritual direction, and turned to the great German writer on mysticism, Baron von Hugel. Reading von Hugel convinced my teacher, Unitarian Universalist ethicist James Luther Adams, to be in spiritual direction in Paris in the 1930's. Adams then convinced me to start spiritual direction in the 1970's. Von Hugel wrote Underhill that her faith was too intellectual, and that she should spend more time with the poor for her own good.

Underhill found her way back to the Anglican Church, but as a very ecumenical Christian, who delighted in conferences and dialogue with Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. She was part of a society of women from many backgrounds who prayed on their own for the unity of the Church. Then Evelyn Underhill started leading spiritual retreats at a religious community in Pleshy, another first for a woman of her time.

Underhill was considered the greatest retreat leader of her time. A slight, smallish person, she has been described as having a wonderful smile, intense eyes, and a good sense of humor, especially when speaking on the most serious of subjects. She led retreats for lay people, Anglican priests, and other clergy. She especially warned the clergy to find time for prayer in the midst of their busy lives - that was in the 1920's and 30's! I think Evelyn Underhill would have approved of the Mass. Council of Churches' current program to Take Back Your Time, to take some time out of our working busyness for family, friends and spiritual life.

Evelyn Underhill was also the first woman to give various important titled lectures at Oxford and Cambridge. The University of Aberdeen gave her an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree; she made clear that she was never to be called Dr. Underhill and remembered how the Lord Rector of Aberdeen had pulled her hair as a child. She didn't like being made into a sort of cardboard saint; after reading a highly reverential review of a new book of hers, she cut her hair extremely short in response.

Writing, leading retreats, and giving spiritual direction was lonely, hard work. She was assailed by doubts about her faith and work. Usually, she was the only woman in her fields of activity. She developed severe asthma. Underhill took a year off from retreats and wrote a monumental study of worship. A pamphlet of Aldous Huxley's convinced her of the importance of pacifism, and she remained true to her Christian pacifism even during World War II. In a meditation written for the Fellowship for Reconciliation, she compared pacifists to 'redeemers who must be crucified for peace.'

Her health failing, Underhill agreed to take over her local church school confirmation class of 11-14 year olds when the priest fell seriously ill - something like having St. Teresa in your Sunday School! She was delighted when she asked the class, "Why do we praise God?" and one child answered, "To cheer Him up!" She died calmly at the age of 65, having written shortly before, 'trusting God means...through thick and thin.'

Evelyn Underhill the mystic was also a gardener who loved flowers. She loved the light in Norway on trips with her husband. She was a devoted friend, and a wonderful host who enjoyed having people over for dinner. She was a bookbinder whose work was bought by museums. She was especially a lover of cats; when something was really good she described it as "purry," and her cats wrote letters to the local papers. She cherished a cat crèche nativity set with all the animals cats made by some of her spiritual directees.

Evelyn Underhill is a good example of the creativity and more abundant life of service of someone far along mystical path of the love of God. She was not an academic or a theologian or a clergy person, but rather shows the beauty and power of an ordinary person in the light of God. In our busy, busy, busy lives, Evelyn Underhill reminds us to take time for the silence of God and eternity in our lives.

Reading from *Mysticism*, by Evelyn Underhill

Like the story of the Cross, so too the story of the human spirit ends in a garden: in a place of birth and fruitfulness, of beautiful and natural things. Divine Fecundity is its

secret: existence, not for its own sake but for the sake of a more abundant life. It ends with the coming forth of divine humanity, never again to leave us: living in us, and with us, a pilgrim, a worker, a guest at our table, a sharer at all hazards in life. The mystics witness to this story: waking very early they have run on before us, urged by the greatness of their love. We, incapable as yet of this sublime encounter, looking in their magic mirror, listening to their stammered tidings, may see far off the consummation of the human race.