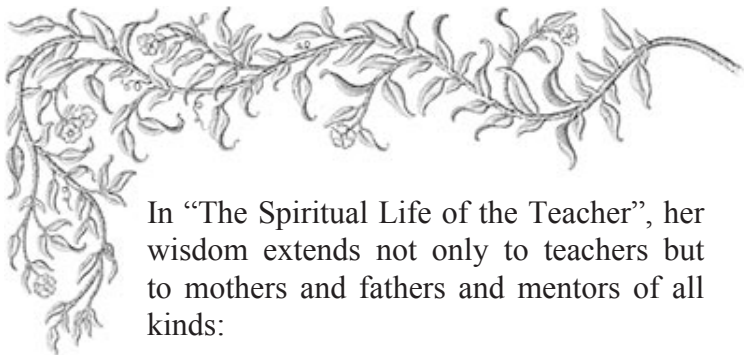


*H*onoring Evelyn Underhill

By Kathleen Henderson Staudt

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

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



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

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

Or again, further on:

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

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

“A real man or woman of prayer, then, should be a live wire, a link between God’s grace and the world that needs it. In so far as you have given your lives to God, you have offered yourselves, without conditions, as transmitters of his saving and enabling life: and the will and love, the emotional drive, which you thus consecrate to God’s purposes, can do actual work on supernatural levels for those for whom you are called upon to pray. One human spirit can, by its prayer and love, touch and change another human spirit; it can take a soul and lift it into the atmosphere of God. This happens, and the fact that it happens is one of the most wonderful things in the Christian life.” (55)

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

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

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