



“Mysticism Revisited” A Panel Presentation

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Kathy Staudt has asked us to be personal in our responses to Evelyn Underhill today as well as to speak from our professional vantage points. That suggestion is quite easy for me to do inasmuch as I have spent the years since 1996 fairly intimately in her presence. Admittedly not as much as Dana or perhaps Todd, but intimately for sure because during that time I have been collecting, transcribing, annotating, and preparing for publication those most personal parts of her writing—her letters. Intimately because I very nearly felt her presence at my left shoulder as I struggled to decipher her dreadful handwriting--- her g’s and y’s that look the same; the many abbreviations that were all her own; and the continual grammatical error of never putting the apostrophe in the right place in contractions (i.e. had’nt for hadn’t). Intimately because I struggled to understand her references to events she mentions 100 years ago and more, not only because it was a century ago but also because it was a different culture, that of Victorian and Edwardian England followed by the terrifying run-up and battling through two world wars. It simply is not true that her class and income protected her from the greater societal movements in Great Britain between 1875 and 1940.

But also intimately because I carried her words and her powerful intellectual and spiritual presence with me as I went about my own personal life and academic life. More often than I can relate I found myself trying to remember what she had had to say about a circumstance that I too was facing, for Underhill’s letters—and life, I would venture—were not dry and abstract ruminations on philosophy. She lived life fully, “with both hands,” as she put it in a letter, and the very homely, sage, and wise voice of a witty, thoughtful, and merciful person stood me in good stead. A good example is the actual preparation of this little talk which I have been putting together the last few weeks. I have been in the process of moving—she has things to say about that, chiefly not to expect too much of yourself during that upheaval of changing households. I have also been ill, as it turns out with pneumonia, and her words were zinging through that experience. In a letter to a friend in Pleshey who was ill she wrote:

The actual illness & incapacity. . .may not be “the Lord’s will” & yet may provide just the medium wanted for His moulding action on your soul. . .and as to the notion that we are “fulfilling no place here” because we aren’t bustling about—that dear Darcie is surely ROT! Did Lady Julian in her cell “fulfill no place”? Each soul which tends to God in love, helps all other souls and if for a bit you’re obliged to stay quiet & learn to improve in this—what could be better?

I would like today to cite just a few areas where this new edition of Underhill letters casts light on areas of her life that we have not seen before, certainly in the Charles Williams edition which was published merely two years after her death and was, necessarily, incomplete, since Williams had to edit out references that may have done damage to the living but also because he had only the letters that were given him by Hubert and a handful of friends. The originals of those letters, by the way, have disappeared I believe, save for the ones addressed to M.R.

(Marjorie Robinson), which were preserved at St. Andrews University Library in Scotland and the two addressed to C.S. Lewis, which are preserved in the Lewis collection at the Bodleian Library at Oxford. When I possessed the originals, I published them exactly as they were written; Williams had taken a rather heavy editorial hand in excising and “improving” them, which was probably necessary in those war years because of cost of printing and paper as well as the fact that Williams himself was in need of money and was hastening to get the 50 pounds promised at their publication. It was wartime, after all, and the needs were great.

The biggest cache of letters by far is preserved at Kings College London where Hubert had them placed after her death, and here are preserved the only letters we have from her childhood at the rather ordinary school at Folkestone which constituted her only real formal education; they are addressed to her mother, or “Dearest Mudgie,” as she called her or “darling Mother.” Here we see very little evidence of the deep intellect and profound learning of the mature author of Mysticism. She was a young teenager fond of jokes and games. An early letter from June 1889 when she would have been 14 talks about the “parcel. . of five baskets of scrumptious strawberries, not a bit squashed” that she had received from her father, and the “grand game of hare and hounds” in the hills. It goes on to relate that:

Last Sunday we went to a lecture in the Church; it was on Milton’s Paradise Lost and was horribly uninteresting, all about dogmas and conclusions to be drawn from the poem & such stuff & what Satan was like, just as though Mr. Wakefield had seen him. . .

The letter, however, has a brief epigram “Roll on thou long & horrid term time roll” a reference to Lord Byron’s poem “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage”, which says, “Roll on thou deep and dark blue ocean—roll!” Another letter carries an epigram that says, “46 days. . .21104 hours. . .66,240 minutes. . .3,974,400 seconds TILL THE HOLIDAYS!!!!!! hip, hip, hooray.”

We have here also the earliest known letter to her then friend and later husband Hubert, written when she was 15 commiserating with him about not having done well in his exams and apologizing for not writing more often, saying that “there had’ been a row’ & Miss C--- commanded me to cease from ‘frittering away my time in letter-writing’; however I have got Mother’s sanction to this letter.” She mentions in the same letter that there had been “a Confirmation” (whether it was her Confirmation is not clear), and that “oh! I forgot, that won’t interest you” presaging the disagreements that lay ahead for them when they do decide to marry and Hubert (like many another Victorian men, by the way) has trouble with her possible conversion to Roman Catholicism. (Of course, the main reason she did not convert was the papal encyclical condemning Modernism).

As a professional woman in the twentieth century, I was also impressed and heartened at the seriousness with which she undertook her own education and research, for the amount of reading and learning behind not just Mysticism but all her other books were impressive by any standards, indeed remain impressive today. Underhill was not a desultory writer fingering her pen lightly across “women’s” subjects. In an early letter to the Royal Society of Literature (membership open by invitation only), she has learned that the Society’s bylaws forbid her subsequently to publish the lecture she had prepared for them, and she informs them tartly, “Had I seen these [bylaws] before accepting the invitation to read a paper, I should have felt compelled to refuse, as I invariably reserve complete freedom of action in regard to any lecture I deliver. . . I [therefore] regret that I shall not be able to give myself the pleasure of reading a paper before [the Society].” By the way, the Society changed its bylaws after that. She went on to write the scholarly entry on Mysticism in the Cambridge Medieval History, to become the Theological

Editor of the estimable Spectator, and to write nearly 40 books and innumerable poems and articles.

Yet throughout what continued to be an illustrious career, she never sought acclaim or publicity. In 1937 after she had written the four broadcasts for the BBC which were to be published as *The Spiritual Life*, she wrote in dismay to her friend Agatha Norman:

My broadcasts are being advertised in the most awful way by Hodder & Stoughton—just as if they were toothpaste or pills. They've just sent me with pride a photo of a 'display' in Mowbray's at Oxford which really makes me feel quite sick. I now know what a publisher with 'a keen sense of publicity' means from the author's point of view—quite shameless! Did I tell you they wanted to send me to Bournemouth in a large car to give a lecture in W.H. Smith's on What to Read in Lent? After which I was to be Rolls Royced home again. Said but mick when I indignantly refused.

Finally, I think we are better able to see how her ideas on mysticism developed into a deep moral and spiritual life, which she always insisted was accessible to all. I would not say it was evolutionary, as some scholars do, but rather incremental and deepening, growing as she grew finding God and self in the same search, in what she calls in a letter to Lucy Menzies "the double simultaneous outstretching . . . [that] only can open the heart wide enough to let in God. The non-religious socialist seems to stretch out one hand, and the non-social pietist the other. But one without the other is useless."

That search had nothing in common with "a pleasant Sunday afternoon." In a letter to her fellow writer May Sinclair she discusses her notion of true mysticism, which is not obliteration of the subject-object relation between God and human, the annihilation of the self but rather, "the perfect self-surrender of love, which leaves personality intact & yet makes that personality an unresisting divine instrument." To Rufus Jones, the great Quaker mystic and scholar, she says in 1933, "'The Golden Sequence' means more to me than any of my other books partly because it represents the precipitation of all I have come very gradually to think feel & know; & partly because the actual writing of it had to be done in considerable mental & spiritual tension & suffering."

Too often, in short, Underhill has been pictured as a demure and pious woman best at home behind a tea table. The letters show quite a different person, a lively energetic witty woman who loved people and adventure. She was into fashion in her early years and shopped for hats and tea gowns in Paris. She loved cars when they came out and fast travel, cruising about Italy at the top speed of 40 mph. and at night! In fact, one of the reviewers of my book suggested something intriguing to me. After Underhill took C.S. Lewis to task in a letter for saying that "the tame animal is in the deepest sense the only natural animal. . . the beasts are to be understood only in their relation to man," she responds to him, saying that his is "frankly an intolerable doctrine" and "a bit smug & utilitarian. . . over against the wild beauty of God's creative action in the jungle & deep sea." She continues, "Your concept of God would be improved by just a touch of wildness." My reviewer wondered whether those words came back to Lewis when he sat down to create the great Aslan and the brave beavers in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* some years later.

Yet she knew suffering and illness and the madness of war and the hurt that can happen between friends. Throughout she kept a light heart and an open mind. She agreed to serve on the Archbishop of Canterbury's investigation into Spiritualism but resigned with a lengthy letter outlining what she saw as "the hopelessly supernatural character of the spiritualist outlook. It is all about man, his survival, prospects, etc., hardly at all about God. .

.the whole outlook is utilitarian. Not the glory of God, but our own consolation. ... I do not mean by this that I disbelieve in the existence of 'psychic phenomena', [but] I think this investigation which is really scientific and not religious in character. . . should be left to the SPR or some similar body, and the church should stick to her supernatural job as the Body of Christ."

The last letter cited in the book is her last one to the members of her Prayer Group during World War II when she was sequestered alone in her room in Hampstead. I keep it for last because it is perhaps her last best thought about living the truly spiritual life: (page 351):

Christianity can never be merely a pleasant or consoling religion. It is a stern business. It is concerned with the salvation through sacrifice and love of a world in which, as we can all see now, evil and cruelty are rampant. Its supreme symbol is the Crucifix—the total and loving self-giving of man to the redeeming purposes of God.

Because we are all the children of God we all have our part to play in His redemptive plan; and the Church consists of those loving souls who have accepted this obligation, with all that it costs. Its members are all required to live, each in their own way, through the sufferings and self-abandonment of the Cross; as the only real contribution which they can make to the redemption of the world. Christians like their Master must be ready to accept the worst that evil and cruelty can do to them, and vanquish it by the power of love.

Every member of the Prayer-Group is asked to pray specially this Whitsuntide and particularly between Ascension Day and Whitsunday, for the renewal of the Holy Spirit of Power in ourselves and the whole of the Church, that: He may 'kindle our cold hearts and light up our dark minds,' showing us God's Will for the future and enabling us to do our part.