



The Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter

2009

Interview with Dr. Carol Poston

In January 2010 a new edition of the letters of Evelyn Underhill will be published by the University of Illinois Press. *The Making of a Mystic* is edited and with an introduction by Dr. Carol Poston, professor emerita of St. Xavier University, a scholar of English literature and author of *Reclaiming Our Lives* and editor of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The Evelyn Underhill Association (EUA) is grateful to Dr. Poston for her willingness to be interviewed for its newsletter.

EUA: Dr. Poston, you spent ten years completing this volume. Why did you undertake this work?

Carol Poston: I was reading one of the excerpted Underhill books for my own Lenten discipline, and I found myself asking where this wonderful and wise woman came from, being interested always in how women manage to educate themselves in a world that generally denies that. I had a sabbatical coming up, and I began researching and was hooked. This looked to be one of the most valuable pieces I could do to forward an understanding of this great woman.

EUA: Why was a new edition of the letters important? What does your work add to our understanding of Underhill's life and contribution?

Carol Poston: The first, and only edition, of her letters was compiled a mere two year's after Underhill's death in wartime, when Charles Williams needed the money. As a result, while immediate, they are also hastily compiled, heavily edited, and far from complete.

EUA: Why are Underhill's letters important?

Carol Poston: They are a mirror into her soul. We see her questioning, growing, changing, suffering, and laughing. We see the daughter, the lover, the wife, the friend, the writer as well as the spiritual director.

EUA: Were there surprises in doing your research?

Carol Poston: Yes, indeed. She showed such a lively physicality as a young woman--hiking, biking, living life in big gulps; her devotion to being a professional writer and a hard-headed business woman. She comments on world events, and we see her views on the war and pacifism starting to take shape. She has often a malicious sense of humor.

EUA: What gave you most pleasure in producing this volume?

Carol Poston: Living with her for a decade. Her wisdom and wit accompanied me on my own spiritual journey. I read what she read and I internalized her spiritual guidance. She continues to accompany me.





*I*nterview with Dr. Carol Poston (continued)

EUA: Has your view of Underhill changed as a result of this work?

Carol Poston: Yes, she is humanized for me. She never was a little lady in a parlor dispensing religious advice--she had contempt for that, really. But I hadn't realized how flesh-and-blood she was. And I had little idea of the depth of her learning and reading. Todd Johnson says that she was 50 years ahead theologically.

EUA: Do you have advice for readers?

Carol Poston: *The Making of a Mystic* is a beautiful book. Hold it, read it, come back to it often to savor it. It's the book equivalent of the Slow Food Movement in a Big Mac world.

EUA: How is EU relevant in the 21st century?

Carol Poston: We are seeing a rebirth in what some call the "new mysticism" or, in Dorothy Soelle's words, the "democratizing" of mysticism. Walter Brueggeman calls this contemplative discipline "a long, loving look at the Real." That is precisely what EU speaks of early on as "the mystic way," later "the life of the Spirit," and her life was all about it. In addition, I believe that many are perceiving the futility of war, the necessity of peace-making to preserve our fragile world, and there she is as timely as ever.

EUA: Thank you, Dr. Poston, for this fine contribution.



Holiness: The Vocation of Every Christian

A Day of Quiet Reflection in Honor of Evelyn Underhill

Saturday, June 19, 2010
At Sayre House, on the grounds of
Washington National Cathedral

As the foremother of much contemporary spirituality, Evelyn Underhill reclaimed the notion of holiness as the vocation of every Christian. In this day of quiet we will explore together Underhill's particular insights into holiness, that capacity for God which is in each human, and the Christian mandate to be "vessels" for the "redeeming, transforming, creative love of God."

In addition to two presentations, the Day, which runs from 9-3:30 p.m., will offer opportunities for private prayer, corporate silence and Eucharist.

LEADERS

Dana Greene

Dana Greene is dean emerita of Oxford College of Emory University and author of *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life* and editor of *Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy* and *Fragments of an Inner Life: The Notebooks of Evelyn Underhill*. She is president of the Evelyn Underhill Association.

Kathleen Henderson Staud

Kathy teaches at the Cathedral College, Wesley and Virginia Theological Seminaries and the University of Maryland. She is a poet and spiritual director and author of *Annunciations: Poems out of Scripture*.

Milo Coerper

Milo is an Episcopal priest and a lawyer. He is a trustee of Friends of Canterbury Cathedral in the U.S. (FOCCUS)

REGISTRATION

online at www.EvelynUnderhill.org



The Call of God

by Kathy Staudt
(Quiet Day 2009)

In her introduction to “The Call of God” (also used as introduction to an earlier retreat on “Inward Grace and Outward Sign,”) Evelyn suggests how questions about vocation emerge naturally as soon as we do the sort of thing we’re doing today – as we make space and time to turn our hearts wholly to God, moving out of ourselves and resting in that loving presence, in a spirit of adoration. She is speaking to people who have gathered in a beautiful place – the crypt of Canterbury Cathedral -- to place themselves, as we are doing, in the presence of the beauty and holiness and insistent love of God. The result of taking this kind of time for retreat, she writes, “will be a new and more vivid sense of His reality and claim on us:

We will be driven to ask two questions which the honest soul, alone with God, is always driven to face. The first is “What am I for?” The second is “How am I doing my job?” All necessary self-examination is comprised within these two questions.

What am I for?

Just what this place which has taken us into its heart is for: to express in my life something of the glory, power and unchanging beauty of God by my very existence, by my love and my actions. I am here to add to the praise offered by the world, to fit into God’s scheme, and to translate something of His spiritual reality into the terms of human life. For this I must accept discipline, submit my will, use my talents, kill all self-interest, and cooperate with my fellow human beings.

I do not exist for myself or for society. I do not exist for the sake of my family or nation. I exist for God, for consecration. My service is for God.

Emphatic, hard to hear, but clear throughout Evelyn’s writing, is the conviction that the response to God’s call is NOT ABOUT ME, but about God. Not about making me a better person or helping me to “fix” what’s wrong with my community, family, or relationships. (continued on page 5)

100th Anniversary

The year 2011 marks the 100th anniversary of the publication of Evelyn Underhill’s pioneering *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness*. When it appeared the book was an immediate success, was widely reviewed, and saw twelve editions, the last appearing in 1930. It seems never to have been out-of-print and is now available on the world wide web. Until the late 1970s this 500-page book, based on a thousand sources, served as the best single introduction in English to the subject of mysticism. Some assumed that its author was male since it was unthinkable that a woman, one with no academic or ecclesial appointment, could have written such a compelling, erudite book.

If Underhill had never written another book, *Mysticism*, would have ensured her position as a foremother of contemporary spirituality. The question is what can **You** do to celebrate this important anniversary? Can you bring in a speaker, sponsor a workshop or retreat, have a book discussion, or a commemorative service to honor this anniversary? You have time to plan. If you need assistance, suggestions or materials, please contact EUA at dgreen4@emory.edu. Wherever you are, this is your opportunity to commemorate this extraordinary woman and her contribution to contemporary spirituality.



The Making of a Mystic

Ed. Carol Poston

University of Illinois Press

378 pages \$75

Substantial correspondence from an exceptional writer, poet, pacifist, and mystic.

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) achieved international fame with the publication of her book *Mysticism* in 1911. Continuously in print since its original publication, *Mysticism* remains Underhill's most famous work, but in the course of her long career she published nearly forty books, including three novels and three volumes of poetry, as well as numerous poems in periodicals. She was the religion editor for *Spectator*, a friend of T. S. Eliot (her influence is visible in his last masterpiece, *Four Quartets*), and the first woman invited to lecture on theology at Oxford University. Her interest in religion extended beyond her Anglican upbringing to embrace the world's religions and their common spirituality.

In time for the centennial celebration of her classic *Mysticism*, this volume of Underhill's letters will enable readers and researchers to follow her as she reconciled her beliefs with her daily life. The letters reveal her personal and theological development and clarify the relationships that influenced her life and work. Hardly aloof, she enjoyed the interests, mirth, and compassion of close friendships.

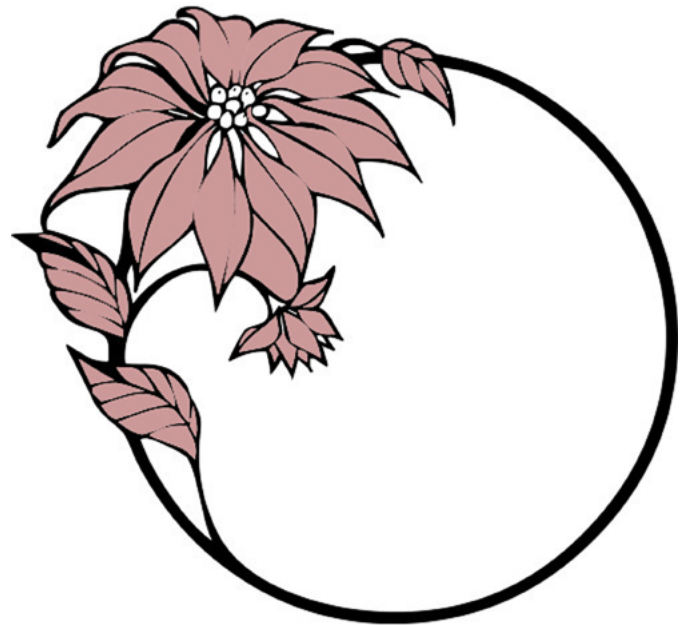
Drawing from collections previously unknown to scholars, *The Making of a Mystic* shows the range of Evelyn Underhill's mind and interests as well as the immense network of her correspondents, including Nobel Prize laureate Rabindrinath Tagore and Sir James Frazier. This substantial selection of Underhill's correspondence demonstrates an exceptional scope, beginning with her earliest letters from boarding school to her mother and extending to a letter written to T. S. Eliot from what was to be her deathbed in London in 1941 as the London Blitz raged around her.

"This correspondence reveals the intimate Evelyn Underhill--friend, spiritual guide, wife, pacifist--whose life spanned the age of Victoria through the horrors of two global wars. These letters serve as a companion piece to Underhill's pioneering books on mysticism and the spiritual life and explore the making of this foremother of contemporary spirituality. Carol Poston has retrieved a treasure for all of us."

- Dana Greene, author of *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life*

"Evelyn Underhill's public voice was strong and confident, often choosing language from the middle of the road, while her private writings often reveal tremendous insecurities and perspectives from the margins. These letters are a rich resource for those of us who study Underhill's life and writings."

— Todd E. Johnson, coauthor of *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue*





The Call of God

(continued from page 3)

It's a call into the freedom that makes us able to love God and those God loves. It's about God. But that doesn't mean the call of God takes us out of our ordinary lives. Rather, according to Underhill, awakening to the Reality of God brings us back into the nitty-gritty of the everyday world, where we are gradually being transformed into bearers of the ineffable love of God into the ordinary world where we find ourselves.

... our favorite distinction between the spiritual life and the practical life is false. We cannot divide them. One affects the other all the time: for we are creatures of sense and of spirit, and must live an amphibious life. Christ's whole Ministry was an exhibition, first in one way and then in another, of this mysterious truth. It is through all the circumstances of existence, inward and outward, not only those which we like to label spiritual, that we are pressed to our right position and given our supernatural food. For a spiritual life is simply a life in which all that we do comes from the centre, where we are anchored in God . . . ' (32)

We want this, don't we? A life in which all that we do comes from the centre, where we are anchored in God. This is what we come seeking on a day like this.

So how do we live into this "amphibious life" of sense and spirit that Underhill describes, living our everyday lives in ongoing communion with the supernatural and abiding love of God. It all begins in "Adoration," and with adoration comes a degree of inevitable humility. In both "The Call of God," and *The Spiritual Life*, Evelyn returns to the dramatic story of the Call of Isaiah, in Isaiah Chapter 6. (This is the appointed reading for the celebration of Trinity Sunday in the Revised Common Lectionary – so many of us will hear it again in church tomorrow.)

For her this story establishes the "pattern" of God's way of working with us:

It shows us the awakening of a human being to his true situation over against Reality, and the true object of his fugitive life. There are three stages in it. First, the sudden disclosure of the Divine Splendour – the mysterious and daunting beauty of Holiness, on which even the seraphs dare not look. The veil is lifted, and the Reality which is always there is revealed. And at once this young man sees, by contrast, his own dreadful imperfection. "Woe is me! For I am a man of unclean lips!" The vision of perfection, if it is genuine, always brings shame, penitence, and therefore purification. That is the second stage. What is the third? The faulty human creature, who yet possesses the amazing power of saying Yes or No to the Eternal God, is asked for his services, and instantly responds. "Who will go for us?" "Here am I! send me! There the very essence of the spiritual life is gathered and presented in a point: first the vision of the Perfect, and the sense of imperfection and unworthiness over against the Perfect, and then because of the vision and in spite of the imperfection, action in the interests of the Perfect – co-operation with God. (83-5)

"The veil is lifted, and the Reality which is always there is revealed."



The Call of God

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“The vision of perfection, if it is genuine, always brings shame, penitence and therefore purification.” Here is a place where, as a practical matter, it is easy for many of us to get stuck. One of the greatest obstacles to responding to the grace of God’s call – a call to communion/cooperation with the Love that is the ground of the whole universe – is our sense of our own unworthiness, imperfection/inadequacy. But despite of her use of strong language about “killing all self-interest, it needs to be said that Evelyn is NOT advocating a process of fierce self-critique or scrupulosity. We know from her journals that she struggled, herself, with excessive self-criticism and her letters to directees suggest that she came to see excessive scrupulosity as another kind of self-occupation, failing to trust God’s redeeming power. Self-offering/self denial is not the same as fierce self-shaming, or seeing ourselves as never being “good enough” (that’s still self-focus; God desires to make us whole; our call is to consent to that, for God’s purposes and not for our own self-improvement.) The message, then (often conveyed by Underhill in letters of direction) is more precisely “Get out of yourself and trust God to work with who you are.” – This is an important part of our response to God’s call.

Evelyn points out that Isaiah’s reaction is a natural one:

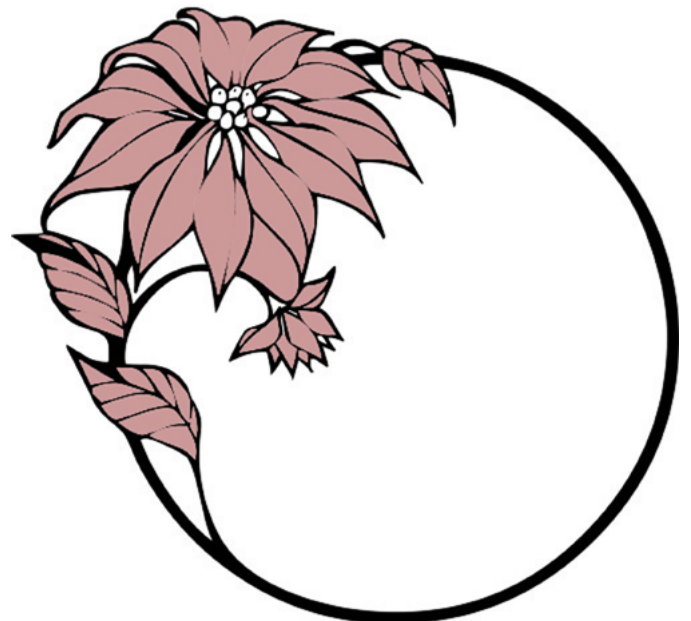
Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips.” But the point of the story is that once he has acknowledged this, the angel comes swiftly to cleanse his lips and make him worthy. He does not stay, groveling and held back, contemplating his unworthiness and complaining of vocational or spiritual paralysis He admits it honestly to God and then gets on with the work, responding to God’s call with his emphatic and willing, “Here am I, send me!

Having awakened to the beauty and reality of God, we are invited into “Communion” with the Creative spirit at work in reality. Evelyn likens this communion to a creative process. In *The School of Charity*, she speaks of how God invites us to look upon all of creation, “things visible and invisible, whether we like them or not” and “see them with the eyes of the Artist-Lover.” Her vision is not of a God who has a linear “plan” that we must acquiesce to whether we like it or not, but rather of a creative spirit.

Creation is different from mass – production, she insists in *The Spiritual Life*:

Creation is the activity of an artist possessed by the vision of perfection; who, by means of the raw material with which he works, tries to give more and more perfect expression to his idea, his inspiration or his love. From this point of view, each human spirit is an unfinished product, on which the Creative Spirit is always at work (43).

Our conscious spiritual life, lived in response to the call of God, begins when we become aware of God’s creative action in our lives (I think this is what we experience as “call”)





The Call of God

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Though it may begin with momentary flashes of mystical insight, the Call of God as Underhill understands it is enacted in everyday life. She emphasizes this in the beautifully incarnational language of her earlier retreat, “The Call of God” – just a few quotes here:

We are trained through ordinary events and objects, not by peculiar religious experiences. It is better to stay where we are, be gentle and peaceful, and acknowledge that ordinary life. Even the most homely incidents will serve the purposes of God. Our Lord is more likely to come to us in His garden clothes than in robes of glory (p. 231)

When we do not know what the will of God is, surely His will is that we should do our best and use common sense and initiative as we remain open to His strength and surrendered to His love. If we do, surely He will protect us in the ultimate consequences and as regards what really matters which may not be at all the same as what we think matters. (232)

This practicality is expressed with a more visionary ring in *The Spiritual Life*, though she is equally insistent here that the mature, fullest, most joyous human life is one lived out in cooperation with the creative spirit of God, alive and active in the world. She writes:

We are the agents of the Creative Spirit in this world. Real advance in the spiritual life, then, means accepting this vocation with all it involves. Not merely turning over the pages of an engineering magazine and enjoying the pictures, but putting on overalls and getting on with the job (78)

So now we come back to this ordinary mixed life of every day, in which we find ourselves—the life of house and work, tube and aeroplane, newspaper and cinema, wireless and television, with its tangle of problems and suggestion and demands – and consider what we are to do about that; how, within its homely limitations, we can co-operate with the Will. (78-80)

This is where she talks about how spirituality and politics inevitably come together, because looking at things “from the angle of eternity” will determine our political/moral views and choices about life - - these become “decisive for the way we choose to behave about that bit of the world over which we have been given a limited control”

Here is the heart of all vocational discernment, all exploration about “What am I for?” and “How am I doing my work?” What IS that “bit of the world” for you? The place where you are called to cooperate, publicly or privately, obviously or quietly, with the creative life of God, always at work in the world around us. This is a core theme in Underhill, especially in the later writing. in *The Spiritual Life* about connection between the spiritual life and life in the practical realm.

There is bad news and good news here, for the life of cooperation with God. We know that from the life

“the Call of God as Underhill understands it is enacted in everyday life”



The Call of God

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of Christ, which leads to and through the Cross. In *The Spiritual Life*, Evelyn shows how this cooperation with God leads to a greater clarity about the brokenness of the world, and a willingness to accept the cost of discipleship.

To say day by day “Thy Kingdom Come” – if these tremendous words really stand for a conviction and desire does not mean “I quite hope that some day the Kingdom of God will be established, and peace and goodwill prevail. But at present I don’t see how it is to be managed or what I can do about it.” On the contrary, it means, or should mean, “Here am I! Send me! -- active, costly collaboration with the Spirit in whom we believe

Here am I! send me!” means going anyhow, anywhere, at any time. Not where the prospects are good, but where the need is great; not to the obviously suitable job, which I’m sure that I can do with distinction; but to do the difficult thing, or give the unpopular message, in the uncongenial place. “And Moses said, Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?” But he did it. Indeed, it is a peculiarity of the great spiritual personality that he or she constantly does in the teeth of circumstances what other people say cannot be done. He is driven by a total devotion which overcomes all personal timidity, and gives a power unknown to those who are playing for their own hand or carving their own career. (85-6)



“Active, costly collaboration with the Spirit in whom we believe.” Here’s where the difficult, and challenging part of Underhill’s theology of vocation comes in, and we know she experienced that challenge herself. We have a letter she writes to her spiritual director in 1921 where she describes a sense of call that she is receiving quite clearly, and the awareness of both her own limitations and the depth of her desire. She has just come up against her own limitations and experienced, to her surprise and without great effort, a quiet assurance of forgiveness. But she is still in a swirl, and she writes to her director from a place where perhaps some of us are or have been

In my lucid moments I see only too clearly that the only 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 the only thing at bottom 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.

It was about this time that this quiet shy, intellectually absorbed introvert first stepped out into public retreat work, slipped back into the Anglican church, and put herself under Baron von Hugel’s direction. She is recognizing the call she would later describe as “active, costly collaboration with the Spirit in whom we believe.” And over the course of her ministry she came to see, and to articulate beautifully, how this call to collaborate with God’s creative spirit in “unconditional self-surrender” becomes a call to the cross. This is at the heart of what she comes to believe and to preach about the call of God – and it is both profoundly challenging and ineffably good news. We grasp it in different ways, at different places on the journey, and so I will leave this reflection on the “call of God” with a passage from the chapter of *The School of Charity* that she entitles “Glorified,” a place where she considers the example of Christ, the cost and the promise of the life of self-consecration to which she knew herself to be called, and to which she calls each one of us.



The Call of God

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At the heart of Christianity, the clue to its astonishing history and persistent power, we find a contrast, a crisis, a transformation. The contrast is that between the life before and after Calvary. The crisis which marks the transition is the Passion; that great gesture of unblemished charity in which, as St. John says, “we know love.” The transformation is that of man’s limited nature, his narrow self, as we know it here, into something new, strange and lovely ; possessed of a mysterious power and freedom, a fresh kind of life, and spending this life within our everyday existence to serve and save men. Only a spiritual sequence which is completed in this life-giving life is fully sane and fully Christian. The Pattern which is shown to us is a pattern which lives and moves and changes as we must live and move and change.

Those who give themselves to the life of the spirit are brought bit by bit, as they can bear it and respond to it, to that crisis in which all they have won seems taken away from them; and they are faced by the demand for complete self-surrender, an act of unconditional trust. But this is not the end of the story. The self-abandonment of the Cross is a transition from the half-real to the real; it is the surrender of our separate self-hood, even our spiritual self-hood – the last and most difficult offering of love – so that we may enter by this strait gate, so hard to find and so unpromising in appearance, that life-giving life of triumphant charity for which humanity is made. Only those who are generous up to the limits of self-loss can hope to become channels of the generosity of God. In that crisis the I, the separate self, with its loves and hates, its personal preoccupations, is sacrificed and left behind. And out of most true and active death

to self, the spirit is reborn into the real life: not in some other transcendental world, but in this world, among those who love us and those we love.

So the Crucifix, which is the perfect symbol of generous sacrifice, is the perfect symbol of victory, too: of the love which shirks nothing and so achieves everything, the losing and the finding of life. “He was crucified, dead and buried – rose again and ascended.” With this double statement the Creed, the rule of prayer, reaches its climax, and shows us in a sentence the deepest meaning of our life: declaring in plain language that unlimited self-offering is the only path from man to God. (*The School of Charity*, pp. 63-64.)

How do we Hear what God wants of us? She returns, as we do now, to the need for silence, and quiet, adoring resting on God – My prayer for you, as we return to this silence, is that you will come to a deeper awareness of God’s love, yearning to hold, love, shape, transform us so that we can be agents of the divine mercy in the world. May the silence bring each of us to respond, in quiet adoration, to the One who calls us, purifies, equips and invites us: “Here am I: send me.”

“Only those who are generous up to the limits of self-loss can hope to become channels of the generosity of God.”



Annual Quiet Day 2009

About 25 participants gathered on Saturday June 6, 2009 for the annual Day of Quiet Reflection in honor of Evelyn Underhill. The focus was on the way that Underhill's work refuses to separate the mystical from the practical, inviting us into the "amphibious" life to which we are called. The living room of Sayre House, adorned with fresh peonies and with the light of a cool, silvery summer day streaming in the windows, became a place of prayer and devoted attention as we shared silence together. Lynne Shaner led the morning meditation, inviting us to recognize the beauty of holiness throughout the work of the mystics, and providing some quotations about the mystical life to draw us more deeply into our shared silence. Many of us shared Eucharist in the Great Choir at the Cathedral, where celebrant the Rev. Perrin Radley spoke in his sermon about the centrality of the Cross in Underhill's teaching. Kathy Staudt opened the afternoon with a meditation about Underhill's writings on the Call of God, reminding us how for Underhill, the call of God is "not about me," but is focused on God, and leads us to and through the mystery of the Cross. In the midst of her meditation we heard in the background the joyful shouts of young men from St. Albans school, processing to their graduation in the cathedral, in a delightful moment of intersection between the practical and spiritual in our lives. We ended with shared prayers of Thanksgiving for the day, the learning, the community and the gift of silence.

How to Contact the Association

Feel free to contact us with questions, comments, contributions, new ideas.

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Purpose of the Association

The Evelyn Underhill Association exists to promote interest in the life and work of Evelyn Underhill. Each year the Association sponsors a Day of Quiet at the Washington National Cathedral, publishes an online newsletter, supports the work of archives at King's College, London and the Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, VA, and supplies answers to queries.

Donations

Donations to the work of the Association may be sent to:

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