



# The Evelyn Underhill Association Newsletter

## 2009

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### 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.

