

Evelyn Underhill:

More Than a Beacon or Bridge:

An Artist

By Bishop Robert Morneau

Background:

Evelyn Underhill (December 6, 1875 – June 15, 1941) was a married lay-woman of the Anglican tradition. Her writings on mysticism, worship, and the spiritual life continue to influence individuals who are interested in the Christian tradition. Underhill wrote over thirty books, conducted retreats for laity and clergy, and was, like the rest of us, a struggling pilgrim seeking to understand and respond to the mystery we call God.

One of her greatest legacies was the retrieval of the Christian mystics. Her study of and love for the writings of such individuals as St. John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, and Meister Eckhart grounded Underhill in one of the richest dimensions of Christian spirituality.

Although attracted to Catholicism and receiving spiritual direction from Baron Friedrich von Hugel, Evelyn Underhill remained in the Anglican tradition. Her own spiritual growth involved a movement from a privatized faith to communal worship. On the practical level, she came to see the importance of expressing faith in action, especially by serving the poor. She also grew in her appreciation of the mystery of Jesus rather than focus exclusively on the Fatherhood of God.

In 1990, Dana Greene wrote Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life (New York: Crossroad and University of Notre Dame Press). This excellent biography presents a balanced view of a personality not easy to know and a life with relatively little drama. What Greene captures in this work is the development and maturation of a spiritual life, of a pilgrim seeking to understand the mystery of God and of a pilgrim pursued by an unrelenting Creative and Redeeming Love.

Here are several lessons that I have carried away from this treasured volume.

Lessons:

Lesson One

Underhill's great legacy: recognition of the primacy of adoration over asceticism.

Prayer attends to God, and mortification concentrates on bending the individual will toward God, filling one with God and in the process making a saint. Yet for Underhill, emphasis on mortification is always subordinate to the responses of awe and adoration. This subordination is one of her most important legacies. (115)

On Ash Wednesday, the Gospel instructs us to pray, fast, and give alms. Prayer does attune us to the mystery we call God; almsgiving directs our energy and resources to helping those in need; fasting and mortification, disciplines that foster life, help to order our own houses so that we might be free to pray and be generous. But there is a hierarchy here. Prayer, that is, awe and adoration, are foundational in that this mutual communication with God gives us the proper perspective on mortification and the energy to serve others. Knock out this cornerstone of spirituality, and our houses will soon crumble.

Lesson Two

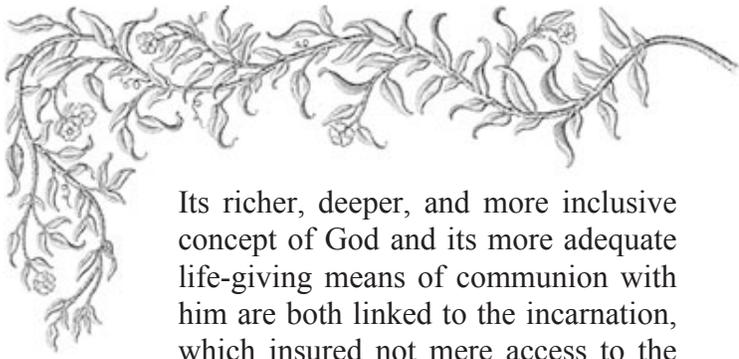
Christianity is an organic process that emphasizes self-surrender, love, and fruitfulness.

Equally important was her claim that Christianity was an organic process, distinct from the Neoplatonic philosophy which had greatly influenced it. Christianity, with its emphasis on self-surrender, heroic love, and divine fecundity represented true mysticism, she maintained, whereas Neoplatonism, holding out ecstatic union with the Absolute as its goal, had no place for participation in the infinite love which “overflowed” in gifts to others. (64)

Lesson Three

Christianity's goal: the perfection of charity.

In “Essays Catholic and Missionary” she claims that Christianity, relative to other theistic religions, is distinct in kind and superior in effect. *(continued on next page)*



Lesson Four

There are four ways of experiencing supernatural reality.

The book is a discussion of the four ways through which men and women experience supernatural reality: in history and the great acts of humanity; in human personality through incarnation, that is, in Jesus Christ; in sacrament and symbols that serve as bridges to the unseen; and finally in prayer, which transforms and sanctifies human life. (102)

God is revealed through history and Jesus, sacraments and prayer. Salvation history records the marvelous deeds of God, be they creation itself, the covenant, or the founding of community in Israel or the Church. Jesus, son of God and son of Mary, discloses the very essence of the Godhead, a God of love, compassion, and forgiveness. Through the sacraments, God keeps breaking into time at all the key moments of human life. And, as people lift up their minds and hearts to God, we experience the intimacy that the Deity offers us.

Lesson Five

Intercession means an offering of our will and love to God.

When Evelyn Underhill spoke of intercession she meant a general offering of one's will and love to God, through Christ, so that the one who offered might become a means through which God's mercy, healing, and power might reach someone and achieve, not a particular purpose, but God's purpose for them. (132)

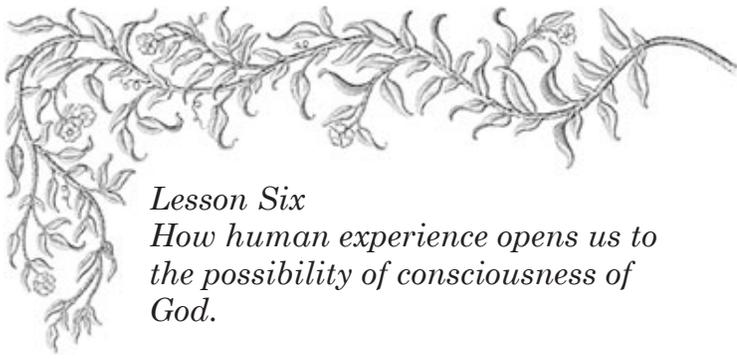
Intercessory prayer is a tricky business. In asking the Lord's help for someone who is ill, or divine assistance in bringing about world peace, or grace to forgive an injury, the one making the request will be expected to become an agent of God's power. That's how sacramentality works – grace meditated through human agency. Thus, a passive intercessor who has no intention of taking on appropriate responsibility for the transformation of the world is simply barking up the wrong tree. Intercession doesn't work that way. Rather, when we dedicate our will to God and promise God our love, great things will happen, new miracles every day.

Its richer, deeper, and more inclusive concept of God and its more adequate life-giving means of communion with him are both linked to the incarnation, which insured not mere access to the Numinous but the ability to bring the Numinous into relationship with human life. An incarnate God is both infinite and personal, transcendent and immanent, Wholly Other yet in history and in each soul. Unlike forms of theism, Christianity's goal is not the attainment of an individual mystical experience, but the perfection of charity lived out in life. At its heart is not ritual obligation or creedal statement, but a life transformed by love. (103)

Two things are worthy of note here: Underhill's concept of God and her clarity about the goal of Christianity. The Christian God is incarnate while retaining the qualities of transcendence and infinity. Reason stumbles here before the light of faith. Our finite brains cannot comprehend divine mystery. What reason and common sense can comprehend and affirm is Christianity's claim that although mystic experience, ritual, and creeds have their place, and an important one at that, still everything revolves around love and charity. Only when life is transformed by love will the Kingdom come with its by-products of peace and joy.



“An incarnate God is both infinite and personal, transcendent and immanent.”



Lesson Six
How human experience opens us to the possibility of consciousness of God.

Although she studied history and art and was influenced by developments in modern psychology, philosophy and science, her focus was on human experience and the possibility it offered for the development of a consciousness of the transcendent, the eternal, the absolute, the infinite. Underhill asked the question so often ignored: What is the deepest human longing? She found her answer first in the experience of the Western mystics who claimed that it was to behold love itself – that is, God – and second, in the experience of ordinary life that offers the opportunity to respond with awe and gratitude to that love. (6)

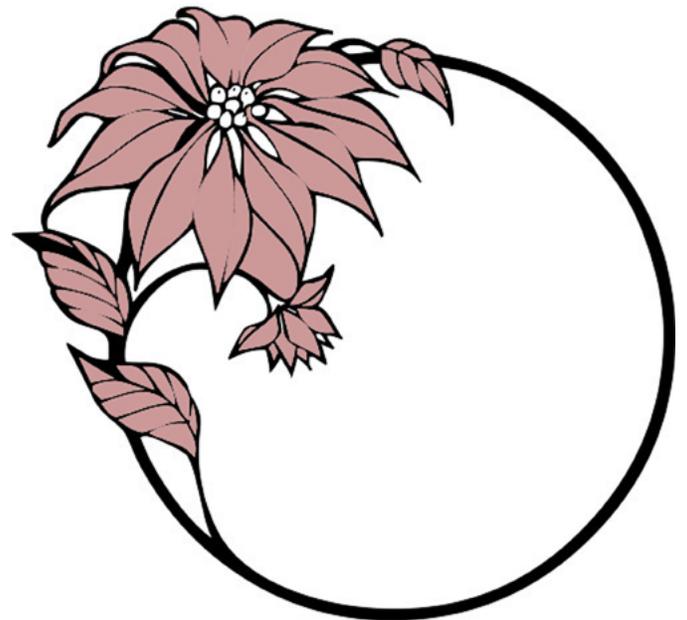
The field of human knowledge is vast: physical sciences, social sciences, humanities, philosophy, and theology. The human mind hungers for knowledge just as the heart hungers and longs for love. These infinite longings are always frustrated because of our intellectual and affective limitations. So, choices have to be made. The mystics opted for the mystery of love and strove to experience that love directly. Access to that love lay in many directions, the primary one being human experience wherein divine love felt, elicits gratitude, wonder, and awe. Consciousness is not limited to the realm of time and space; consciousness seeks the infinite and the eternal.

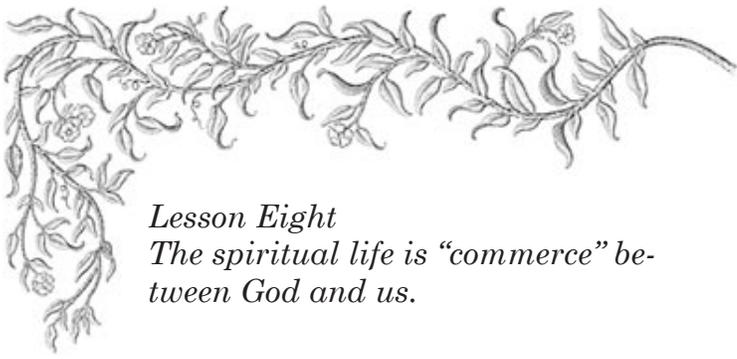
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Lesson Seven
Prayer is a way of being in constant union and dialogue with God.

Prayer, she says, does this work of transformation. It is not an action or a duty, or even an experience, but a vital relationship between the whole individual and the being of God. Initiated by God, it is nonetheless a mutual act, dependent both on grace and the will of the individual. More than a specific act, prayer is a state, a condition of soul at the heart of which is not intercession but adoration, the “awe-struck” love which brings with it a sense of humility and gratitude, a communion with God, and a self-offering. In short, prayer is the organic life, having adoration as its root, communion as its flower, and loving action as its fruit. (114)

Throughout the Christian tradition a constant theme is a holistic spirituality involving three elements: adoration (attention), communion (adherence), and loving action (abandonment). This way of life is grounded in prayer, that mutual dialogue wherein God and his creatures deepen their relationship. And the highest form of prayer is praise, a prayer grounded in adoration of divine love. The experience of prayer is transformative because it leads to gratitude, humility, and sacrifice. Prayer is the soul’s heartbeat.





Lesson Eight
The spiritual life is “commerce” between God and us.

Her most basic premise about the spiritual life, namely, that there is a personal holy presence and energy in which all things live and have their being; it prompts in those who recognize it not only acknowledgement but adoration. This holy presence has its most profound revelation in Jesus, is witnessed to by the lives of the saints, and is available to each person. Participation in the holy presence is the spiritual life. It is not separate from life itself but is a particular way of apprehending it. The spiritual life is the “commerce” between a person and the holy presence – God – an exchange which can suffuse and take over all of life, radically transforming it as it gains control. (113)

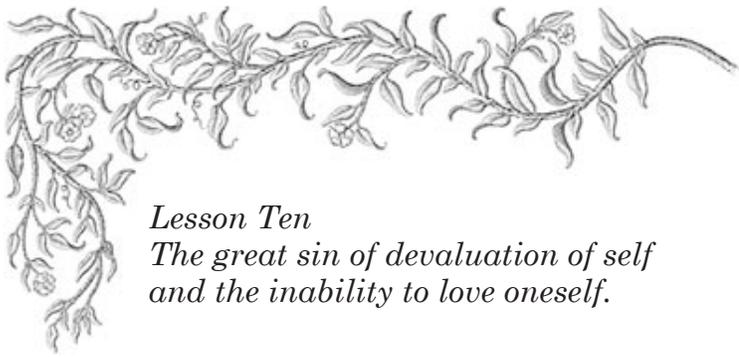
To speak of the spiritual life is to speak of holy, gracious presence. Birds in the air and fish in the sea are immersed in a milieu so pervasive as to be unnoticed. Human beings are in a divine milieu, a sacred presence. The challenge is to be aware of and respond to the holy mystery in which we live. The invitation is to participate in this life, a life called grace, and to allow this abiding presence to shape our days. Once we are truly aware of God’s presence and acknowledge it, adoration becomes a possibility, even a way of life.

Lesson Nine
Underhill’s methodology involves close observation, inclusivity, and a sense of oneness.

Here Underhill discloses her method and the source of her originality as a writer. Experience is the first guide in understanding one’s subject. The outer edges of experience are reached by what she called sympathetic imagination and imagined participation with the subject. From the time of her youth she wanted “to cultivate a habit of observation and interest in everything,” and to have a mind “wide to embrace all sorts of things” and a “sense of one-ness” with our kind. Identifying these values with “worthy womanhood,” she inculcated them so deeply that they became a way of understanding reality. Close observation, inclusivity, and a sense of oneness were the components of the methodology she applied both to life and to the study of the mystics. It was a learned methodology; one designated by social expectation of gender and the source of her perceptiveness both as a writer and a person. (48)

Finding one’s method is like finding one’s voice. It is a way of negotiating reality and making good use of one’s talents. Without a method we flounder and often get lost in the maze of things. Without one’s own voice there is no originality and sense of identity. Methodology draws us into the field of discipline and habit. To be practiced in noticing things, to appreciating them from the inside, and to nurture a sensibility of the oneness of being is a method both profound and effective. It is also a method that leads to wisdom and creative action.

“This holy presence has its most profound revelation in Jesus..”



Lesson Ten
The great sin of devaluation of self
and the inability to love oneself.

Underhill epitomizes what has been called the greatest female sin – the devaluation of self and the inability to love oneself. For most of her life, Underhill was unable to experience for herself what she saw so clearly in the lives of the mystics – unearned love that makes one lovable. It was her greatest failure. (150)

It could be argued that women have no corner on the sin mentioned above: “the devaluation of self and the inability of love oneself.” Is this not more universal than limited to gender? Are not all humans, male and female, vulnerable to low self-esteem, even self-disdain? For some graced reason, mystics knew themselves loved and responded to that blessedness by appropriating their intrinsic worth. This freed them to go forth and love others, helping them to discover their true value and worth. At times the mystics succeeded; at other times, the messages did not take root.

Spiritual Insights

Italy changed her life; it taught her that beauty was a way to the infinite life for which she longed. (12)

The avenues into God’s infinite life are many: truth, goodness, and beauty to name just a few. Often philosophers point the way into wisdom; saints are our guides into kindness; and, countries and their cultures can direct us into the radiant splendor we call beauty. Our holy longings are not without their resources.



Where the philosopher guesses and argues, the mystic lives and looks; and speaks, consequently, the disconcerting language of first-hand experience, not the neat dialectic of the schools. (50)

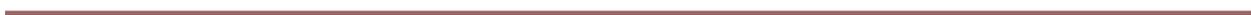
The discourse of first-hand experience is disconcerting because it is so intimate and private. It is the dialect of lovers and no one on the outside can comprehend its lexicon. Mystics will always seem strange, even to the contemplative, because of the uniqueness of their encounter with God. As for philosophers and logicians, anyone with a decent IQ has the key to their realm.

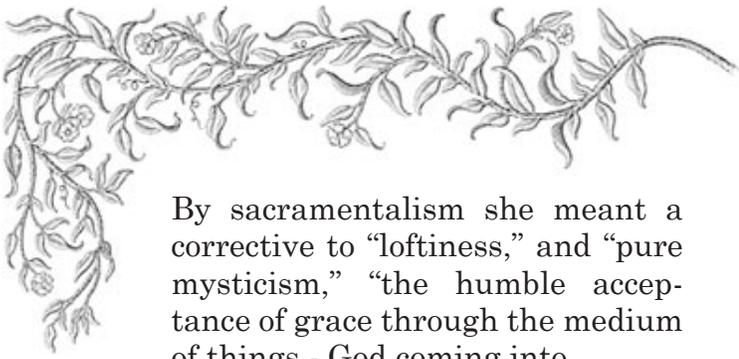


“The art of life,” she had written in 1911, “is learned only in the living – lookers-on know nothing of the game.” (77)

There is a certain knowledge obtainable by non-participants, but it is a second hand and often sterile knowledge. A case in point would be the scriptures: no one who does not live the word of God can really understand it. This was St. Augustine’s problem when he was wandering in the abstract philosophical world. Only when he began to live God’s will could Augustine understand its intrinsic meaning.

“Italy changed her life: it taught her that beauty was a way to the infinite life for which she longed.”





By sacramentalism she meant a corrective to “loftiness,” and “pure mysticism,” “the humble acceptance of grace through the medium of things - God coming into

our souls by means of humblest accidents – the intermingling of spirit and sense.” (89)

Sacramentality is not only a lofty word in the theological definition but one that tends to blur the beauty of the reality. For a sacrament offers the glorious mediation by which grace and nature begin their magic dance. A flower in the crannied wall, a burning bush, the lily in the field, a small host have the potential of drawing the human soul into God’s world. Grace can be a sneaky agent.



Like the artist, the mystic by giving full attention to one object learns its secrets. (125)

What we pay attention to is a primary indication of the meaning of our life. Artists are attentive to beauty, not just in general, but this beauty on the smile of a Mona Lisa. Mystics are attentive to love, not just an abstract love, but one incarnated in a divine manifestation. Artists and mystics are both seers and their gaze is so focused as to discover great secrets. Maybe not so much discover as to be open to a revelation of infinite worth.



“Lots of us manage to exist for years without ever sinning against society, but we sin against loveliness every hour of the day.” (16)

There are sins of omission and commission. Both diminish life. Our need for God’s grace is an hourly need since we are surrounded by loveliness (or as Gerard Manley Hopkins maintains: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God”). To by-pass beauty verges on sinfulness, not mere neglect. Blessed is that pilgrim who notices the loveliness of creation and responds in gratitude and joy.



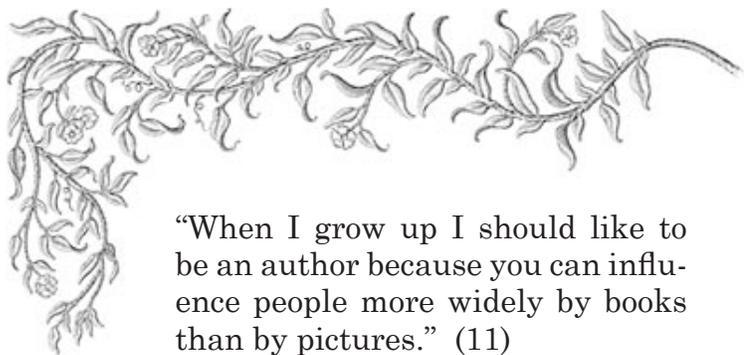
... adoration, adherence, and cooperation; together they make up the spiritual life. (125)

George Herbert, in his powerful poem, “Trinity Sunday,” prays to the triune God: “Enrich my heart, mouth, hands in me; / With faith, with hope, with charity; / That I may run, rise, rest in Thee.” Herbert knew the components of spirituality: the heart refers to adherence; the mouth to adoration and praise; the hands to co-operation and creative action. Any holistic spirituality has a cognitive, affective, and behavioral element.



What drove her was the belief that her times needed experiences of “God-intoxicated” spirits, with “the great qualities of wildness and romance.” (57)

Every meaningful life is a purpose-driven life. Some passion possesses the soul and takes it on a wild and romantic journey. For some, as for Evelyn Underhill, it is the conviction that people lack a personal experience of God. So she went in search of those pilgrims whose lives were “God-intoxicated.” She found them in the mystics and recorded for anyone who was interested what that divine intoxication looked like and how it transformed body and soul.



“When I grow up I should like to be an author because you can influence people more widely by books than by pictures.” (11)

Apparently, not everyone buys the claim that a picture is worth a thousand words. Such individuals also reject a further claim that our lives are lived on images. Yet, here is an author who drew pictures, pictures of mystics who went in search of God and were willing to pay the supreme price of self-surrender. Books do have tremendous influence and when they contain pictures that influence is magnified a thousand-fold.



[Underhill’s] search for the infinite life: it dominated all her life and work. In its service she became more than a beacon or bridge; she became an artist of the infinite life. (6)

Beacons illumine our journey and offer vision; bridges span our going from here to there. We are beholden to both. But then comes the artist who not only illumines our dark days and spans those abysses on our journey, but draws for us a portrait of Infinite Love, Light, and Life as experienced in the lives of the mystics. What gratitude we owe for such a service.



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