



“The Practical Humility of Evelyn Underhill”

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An extraordinary milestone was achieved this year in religious studies: it is the 100th anniversary of Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism*. It is extraordinary for any book to stay in print for so long, especially in the tricky and sometimes trendy category of spirituality. Underhill (1875-1941) was an upper middle class English seeker—not representative of any established religious tradition, (even though she was baptized and confirmed in the Church of England), and not an intellectual, a cleric, or an academic. Her famous 500 page book, *Mysticism. A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness*, remains a standard text of the mystic way. The book’s 100th anniversary, along with an Oxford University course in “Modern Mysticism,” impels me to look more deeply into the spirituality of Underhill.

Underhill felt that each person can access the divine communion. Her writings urge us on the mystic way, or for “practical man,” as she calls us, to a deeper and more confident life of prayer. In her life and works, Evelyn Underhill embraced humility and defined it as a prerequisite for the spiritual life. She wrote of many small ways to develop the humble world view, which the mystics had learned and cultivated naturally. Underhill set out to capture this spiritual virtue in three years of careful research for *Mysticism*, and later in her subsequent writings and in her own journey of faith. She retraces and emphasizes the virtue of humility as essential to the spiritual life for everyone. This essay will follow Underhill’s writing and her meandering faith journey to settle on what is essential: humility as the solid foundation upon which to build a life of faith.

Spiritual Humility

To begin, what is meant by spiritual humility? “Humility” has been defined differently in the secular and religious worlds. The English version of the word comes from the Latin *humilis*, or “lowly,” as in from the earth, or *humus*. In the secular world, humility involves taming the ego and regulating excesses, like materialism and hedonism, which lead humans away from our humble origins of the earth. Being humble, in the ways of the world, is not a quality to be admired if competition, profit, or security is the motive. In a religious sense, though, humility is born of the realization that we humans are creatures of God. We cannot be credited with our own existence: only God is the creator of human—and all—life, and therefore humans must approach God in thankfulness, praise, and perhaps (in some historical contexts) in deference. Humility is “...a deep awareness of our limitations and shortcomings in the presence of the divine perfection, and of our sinfulness in the presence of the all-holy God.”¹

¹ William Shannon. “Humility” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 517.

Through the ages of Christian history, humility has been essential to a life of faith. Christians, for example, teach that a person's ability to exemplify or witness the virtues taught by Jesus Christ requires some discipline, or submission of the will. This is discipleship—following the teachings of Jesus and living as an authentic believer. Humility quite often appears as a foundational step in discipleship as evidenced by many spiritual writings throughout Christian history. Theologian John Macquarrie contends that any deep reflection—in any intellectual discipline, but especially in theology and spirituality—one must be humble, "...submitting himself or herself to the truth; the same person is docile, open and ready to be taught."²

Theologians derived their interpretations of humility most palpably from the Christian scriptures, and as we have seen, especially from the model of Jesus' humility. After the scriptures, Augustine, Francis of Assisi, the monastics, and founders of religious communities most often emphasized humility in their writings. Humility was critical in the development of spiritual writings in the early church through the middle ages. Evelyn Underhill traced development of mystical awareness and noted the essential place of humility:

The Christian notion of humility as a finding of our true level, an exchanging of the unreal standards of egoism for the disconcerting realities of life seen from the angle of Eternity; the steadfast refusal to tolerate any claim to spirituality which is not solidly based on moral values, or which is divorced from the spirit of tenderness and love—all this has immensely enriched the mysticism of the West.³

"Finding our true level," by seeking humility is a central component in western spirituality, and a theme in both Underhill's writings and her personal search for God.

Mysticism

What then, of mysticism and humility? First, let us look at what is mysticism itself. St. John of the Cross called mysticism "the science of love" because the goal of mystical prayer is spiritual union with God. Catherine De Hueck Doherty described a mystic as simply "a man or woman in love with God, and the Church is hungry for such people." Often metaphors are used to describe this spiritual ascent: St. Benedict's ladder of humility is a classic ascent to God; other analogies are the developing maturity of a person from childhood to adulthood, and the more frequently used metaphor in spiritual writing is the growing intensity of a loving relationship which culminates in marriage. It is an ascent, a "way up through negations," which stands the soul outside itself--renders it, literally, "ecstatic"—and guides it to union with God. ... God's ecstasy, the deity's standing outside itself, is an excess of goodness that overflows in a loving and creative procession down to humanity. The human soul, on the other hand, is taken wholly outside of itself when it rightly understands and leaves behind all human language and conceptions about God and ascends to be wholly of God. The loving journey to God, or the "mystic way," has been described since ancient times as a three step process: purgation, (or the purgative way) illumination, (or the illuminative way) and union (or the unitive way.) Although Origen alluded to steps in the journey to God, it was most likely Pseudo-Dionysius who first outlined the "three ways" of purgation, illumination, and contemplation in his work *Mystica Theologia* around the year 500. Yet Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591), the Spanish mystic and

² John Macquarrie, "Prayer and Theological Reflection" in *The Study of Spirituality*. Cheslyn Jones and Geoffrey Wainwright, Editors. (NY: Oxford University Press, 1986), 585.

³ Evelyn Underhill. *The Essentials of Mysticism and other Essays*. (London: J.M. Dent and Company, 1920), 12-13.

author of *The Dark Night of the Soul*, and *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, is the more widely read author of this three step mystical method.

Always rooted in the Christian call to perfection, the mystical experience begins with the purgation or purging away of sin and worldliness. It is a beginning of the journey toward spiritual maturity, characterized by a growing awareness of God's presence. Evelyn Underhill described purgation in *Mysticism*:

Primarily, then, the self must be purged of all that stands between it and goodness: putting on the character of reality instead of the character of illusion or "sin." ... So, with Dante, the first terrace of the Mount of Purgatory is devoted to the cleansing of pride and the production of humility: the inevitable—one might almost say mechanical—result of a vision, however fleeting, of Reality, and an undistorted sight of the earthbound self.⁴

Purgation is characterized firstly by a sincere willingness on the part of the disciple to open himself or herself to God in honest self-awareness. The person is committed enough to a deeper relationship with God to turn away from (or purge) the temptations and attachments of life so that meditative prayer can be more focused and fruitful. Such a "realignment of values" is a constant struggle at first to "overcome the attitudes and pattern of behavior that tend to draw the individual away"⁵ from God. One may struggle with pride, bad habits, arrogance, selfishness, or whatever is sinful or superficial. Whatever distracts or leads back to worldliness and away from God is stripped away in purgation. Purgation often includes mortification, or a dying to self, worldly powers, or possessions. It is demanding and difficult: metaphors used such as stripping away, purging with fire, purifying the body of disease, or Saint John's "Dark Night" all suggest the intensity of the process. By its nature, humility is an essential attitude which allows purgation. The result is a passing over to a new illuminated life in God's grace. The seeker looks at life in a new way, and perhaps for the first time comprehends the truth of God's presence personally in his or her life.

The second stage in the ascent to God is often called contemplation. The Holy Spirit enables a new attitude and perspective on life and a keen awareness of the liabilities of the old ways of sin. Saint John of the Cross uses the analogy of a clean window: by purifying or cleaning the soul (window) one can now see the beauty of God clearly.

The final stage of the soul's ascent to God is called the unitive way. This is the maturing of the soul and the culmination of the journey whereby the soul is transformed by the divine. In the unitive way, the soul is one with God, truly in communion with the divine. Like a spiritual marriage, the person is a "living flame of love," to use Saint John's metaphor. The union draws the soul into the heart of God, and a life of loving communion has begun. The old self is forgotten in the knowledge of divine love, which "frees the person to be present to others as a sacrament of God's merciful love and forgiveness."⁶ Communion with the divine has allowed the soul to ascend to the highest peak of divine love, true unity with the triune God. The path from purgation and illumination has brought the soul the ultimate spiritual reward—unity with God. The three stages of mysticism have been outlined here in broadest of terms, and it is but

⁴ Evelyn Underhill. *Mysticism. A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*. (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1912. 4th Edition), 241.

⁵ Thomas D. McGonigle, OP. "Purgative Way" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 801.

⁶ Thomas D. McGonigle, OP. "Unitive Way" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 988.

one expression of spirituality. We will now turn to Underhill's *Mysticism* for her particular understanding of the role of humility in the mystic.

Mysticism, 1911

Evelyn Underhill's massive work on mysticism was not the first treatment of the subject, but a comprehensive and accessible work which found an eager readership in England in 1911. Born into an agnostic family, members but not believers in the Anglican Church, Evelyn was attracted by religion as a young woman. A trip to Italy in her mid twenties awakened her spiritual senses. Neither her parents nor her fiancé encouraged any effort in faith or prayer—indeed Herbert Stuart Moore, Evelyn's future husband, pleaded with her to abandon her notion of becoming a Catholic. She agreed to give it a year of contemplation before their marriage in 1907. The Modernist controversy in the Catholic Church⁷ persuaded Evelyn not to convert, and she felt disconnected to traditional Church life during the years of the First World War. Underhill wrote three novels in the years 1904-1908, and began writing *Mysticism* in 1907.

The publication of *Mysticism* in 1911 caused a bit of a sensation: many of the writings of the great mystics were out of print or not available in English. The topic of mysticism was held suspect by mainstream believers, almost at the level of the bizarre. *Mysticism* “clears away the underbrush of magical or paranormal occurrences. The Christian mystic focuses entirely on the one God.”⁸ Underhill not only helped to revive the mystics, but she made them understandable and accessible to the average reader. “The mystics are the pioneers of the spiritual world, and we have no right to deny validity to their claims merely because we lack the courage necessary to those who would prosecute such explorations for themselves,”⁹ she writes.

There are two main divisions in *Mysticism*: Part I is “The Mystic Fact,” which addresses the characteristics of mysticism and dispels the ways it is misrepresented; Part II is “The Mystic Way” which lays out the process of journey to God. Underhill outlined five steps on the mystic path—the traditional three steps of purgation, contemplation and union with a pre-step of awakening or conversion and a dark night or surrender. Briefly:

1. **Awakening or conversion:** the disturbance of the settled self. Underhill quotes George Fox and Saint Augustine and Francis. “I was swept up to thee.”
2. **Self knowledge or purgation.** Getting rid of the experience that is not part of God's Reality. Getting “out of the cave of illusion” by purging or mortifying sins and harmful attitudes. She refers to Richard St. Victor and others to teach a “self simplification.”
3. **Illumination.** “A mighty swing back into the sunshine.” Not yet supreme communion but a joyous apprehension of the Absolute.
4. **Surrender or Dark Night.** “The eternal battleground” includes dreams, morbid hallucinations, seeing the Absolute. This is a great swing back into darkness and may include blankness, stagnation. It is a “deep human process” where the soul has some sense of abandonment, emptiness.

⁷ The Modernist movement was based on Pope Pius X's 1907 document *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* condemning modern errors and causing the excommunication of priests believed to uphold such propositions. In 1910 an anti-Modernist oath was required of all Catholic bishops, priests and academic teachers of religion.

⁸ Emilie Griffin, Ed. *Evelyn Underhill. Essential Writings.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003) 13.

⁹ Evelyn Underhill. *Mysticism. A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness.* (Stilwell, KS: Digireads.com Publishing, 2005), 10.

5. **Union.** The unitive life completes the circle of being. Often lived in the world as “springs of action” resulting from enhanced love of God and service to neighbor. Here we live the fruits of mysticism.

The golden gem of the book for its wide readership is this: “True mysticism is active and practical, not passive and theoretical. It is an organic life process, a something which the whole self does; not something as to which intellect holds an opinion.”¹⁰

And how did Evelyn Underhill comprehend and live out humility? In *Mysticism*, we have an idea of how she first grasped this spiritual virtue. In Chapter 2, “Mysticism and Vitalism,” Underhill discusses being a spiritual person in total “aliveness”—vitality—which revels in all that the world, especially the natural world, has to offer. Mysticism is like vitalism because it is about a process of becoming rather than merely being. A person needs humility to embrace the reality of whole world: it is not limited to the self, the intellect, the material or the sensual experiences of a person’s singular world but includes the cosmos. Such a life of vitality is provided for us, created by what Underhill refers to in this phase of her life as the Absolute, as Reality. “Give yourself, then, to this divine and infinite life, this mysterious cosmic activity in which you are immersed, of which you are born... You can move to higher levels, to greater reality, truer self fulfillment...”¹¹ The spiritual person is like a lover, Underhill writes in Chapter 4, “The Characteristics of Mysticism.” “The mystic outlook, indeed, is the lover’s outlook. It has the same element of wildness, the same quality of selfless and quixotic devotion, the same combination of rapture and humility.”¹²

Mysticism includes many such examples of the power of the realistic, humble view of the self. After all, humility is seeing the truth—coming to grips with the absolute reality of the self with all its strengths and weaknesses. “If thou wilt arrive at a perfect knowledge and enjoyment of Me, the Eternal Truth,” she quotes from the writings of Saint Catherine of Siena, “thou shouldst never go outside the knowledge of thyself; and by humbling thyself in the valley of humility, thou wilt know Me and thyself, from which knowledge thou wilt draw all that is necessary.”¹³ Keep grounded, Underhill urges. Often in the spiritual life such truth or self knowledge is painful, and work needs to be done to diminish vices and pride. In *Mysticism* there are many allusions to Dante. Climbing the Mount of Purgatory is described by Underhill as “devoted to the cleansing of pride and the production of humility: the inevitable—one might almost say mechanical—result of a vision... of Reality, and an undistorted sight of the earthbound self.” Detach oneself from material things, turn from impurity, embrace simplicity: these are the actions that will center the soul in the Presence of the divine. Often using the term mortification, Underhill is writing of a “death of selfhood” which in turn allows for the person to give of himself or herself in a “divine furnace of purifying love... a complete self surrender, a voluntary turning from all impurity, a humility of the most far reaching kind: and this means the deliberate embrace of active suffering, a self-discipline in dreadful tasks.”¹⁴ Yet, Underhill quotes Suso, “Suffering is the ancient law of love. There is no quest without pain, there is no lover who is not also a martyr.”¹⁵ Humility’s axiom, she writes, is “Naught is too low for love.”¹⁶

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹² *Ibid.*, 65.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 152

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 152

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 153

Mysticism brought instant success to Evelyn Underhill. Its publication provided an opportunity for Evelyn to collaborate with Baron Frederich von Hügel, one of the famous spiritual writers of the age. Von Hügel was Roman Catholic, fully immersed in the knowledge of the mystics, and became Evelyn's spiritual director until his death in 1925. In 1913 she wrote *The Mystic Way*, a shorter and simpler version of the 1911 work. "It was written with the unorthodox seeker in mind,"¹⁷ writes her friend Margaret Cropper. When the war broke out in 1914, *Practical Mysticism* was in the press. Evelyn granted interviews, wrote poetry, and cultivated many friends. She worked in the Admiralty—Naval Intelligence—translating guide books. Life, at least on the outside, was good: her marriage was happy, and she was devoted to her parents. Margaret Cropper notes Evelyn's "courageous gaiety."¹⁸ Yet Underhill was searching for her place in the world of organized religion—at this point in her life she still did not belong to a church. She had great periods of doubt. "During the war, I went to pieces."¹⁹ There was still the spiritual longing—held over from the time just before her marriage—to worship in the traditional Church, and to receive Holy Communion. In 1919 or 1920, she rejoined the Anglican Church, and by 1922, with the help of her spiritual director, Underhill was content. Von Hügel wrote to her in 1921: "But it is excellent news that, preparing one of these addresses for Manchester College, Oxford, you found you had really come out strongly and self-committingly for Traditional, Institutional, Religion."²⁰ He encouraged Evelyn in her work in spiritual direction; this was to make up a large portion of her time for the next two decades.

Practical Mysticism (1917)

Practical Mysticism was intended for a general audience: "she was addressing herself especially to those who had no allegiance to any church, to the religious man in the street."²¹ The subtitle of the early editions was *A Little Book for Normal People*. The first three chapters explain mysticism and argue that it is part of the reality of our world. Chapters 4 ("Meditation and Recollection") and 5 ("Self-Adjustment") describe the necessary training of the attention of a person who wants a deeper spiritual life. Chapters 7-9 are each on the three forms of contemplation, and Chapter 10 is "The Mystical Life," which underscores the value in which mysticism has been actualized in the world.²² "I write only for the larger class, which, repelled by the formidable appearance of more elaborate works on the subject, would yet like to know what is meant by mysticism, and what it has to offer the average man: how it helps to solve his problems, how it harmonizes with the duties and ideals of his active life."²³ Underhill is still theistic in this slim volume, and not particularly Christian in her theology: she defines mysticism here as "the art of union with Reality."²⁴ Yet there is much to offer "practical man" as she calls her readers, and this is her second major work that highlights the virtue of humility. Chapter 3's "Preparation of the mystic" details the need for conversion—a power stronger than ourselves which turns us in the right direction. Our senses are purified and humbled from the tyranny of ego. Underhill summarizes Richard of St. Victor, "the essence of all purification is self-

¹⁷ Margaret Cropper, *Life of Evelyn Underhill*. (NY: Harper, 1958), 52.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

²² Evelyn Underhill. *Practical Mysticism*. (Breinigsville, PA: Connecting to God, 2010), 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

simplification; the doing away of the unnecessary and unreal, tangles and complications.”²⁵
Fighting for our attention, she writes, are

Ambitions and affections, tastes and prejudices...the poor, worried consciousness flies to and fro amongst them; it has become a restless and complicated thing. Yet the situation is not as hopeless for you as it seems. All this is only happening upon the periphery of the mind, where it touches and reacts to the world of appearance. At the centre there is a stillness which even you are not able to break... There, your essential self exists.²⁶

From this true center of personality, Underhill says the scattered parts of the self arrange themselves in order. Now whole, one can “by a deliberate withdrawal of attention from the bewildering multiplicity of things, a deliberate humble surrender...make oneself ready for messages from another plane.”²⁷ This gathering up of the true self is a kind of surrender required of an approach God: doing so patiently day after day will enable one to discover the soul for the first time.

Chapter 5 of *Practical Mysticism*, “Self-Adjustment,” enables the seeker to go further. In humility, he or she has diminished the competing thoughts and demands of the day to place one’s full attention before God. It is not easy; Underhill says the self is the most difficult obstacle to prayer even though at the same time we “hunger for communion.”²⁸ Habit has us in chains, and we sense the disharmony between the simple self yearning for the divine and the “lower life,” frittering our energies away on external things. “The mystical character is far more important: and its chief ingredients are courage, singleness of heart, and self control.”²⁹ “Deep humility,” she concludes, “is the first condition of success.”³⁰ In the final chapter of *Practical Mysticism*, Underhill promises that with practice, you yourself will become more real, a new person.

The spiritual direction of Von Hügel brought a calm confidence to Evelyn Underhill in the 1920’s, and she continued writing and offering retreats. Many of her retreat talks were printed. Underhill developed spiritually and became increasingly comfortable in the Anglican Church, receiving Holy Communion several times a week. In 1921 she sent “My Rule” to von Hügel with seven determined steps toward growth in spirituality:

1. “invisible religion;”
2. active work;
3. spiritual direction—taking on a limited number of cases;
4. detachment—managing the number of people in her life;
5. prayer—fixing a time for daily devotion;
6. mental dispositions—trying to develop a catholic mind, less critical of Christocentrism;
7. Humility—“try to set about full, definite development of principle of God found in history, here and now...and make this part of the rock of personal faith;
8. Balance spirituality with human contacts
9. Spiritual Dispositions—eliminating hostile currents of feeling.³¹

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

³¹ *The Life of Evelyn Underhill*, 85-86.

Evelyn Underhill practiced what she preached: humility was the foundation of her faith. In her *Notebooks*, she records a gradual movement away from the language of spiritual steps and progress to “terms of responsive actions that occur simultaneously: awe and adoration, adherence to and cooperation with God.” She records Von Hügel’s “Six Moral Marks of a Religious Man” in the *Notebooks*, and the first mark is humility—“our smallness in the universe is God’s hand.”³² In February of 1924, Underhill had a profound experience of the “quiet joy” of God: “One is so tiny and so much nothing—that the question of one’s own awful imperfectness doesn’t come in,” she writes in the *Notebook*.

Several small books of lectures and retreat talks were published in the 1920’s: *Concerning the Inner life* was published in 1926 from a lecture series given to the Liverpool Clergy. *The House of the Soul* (1929) is instruction likening the two parts of the soul to a house: the bottom floor is grounded in the world while the upper story can access the Divine. In 1932, *The Golden Sequence: A Four-Fold Study of the Spiritual Life* was printed. Evelyn’s friend Margaret Cropper believes this was the most personal of all her books. Underhill’s definitive study on religious worship came out in 1936: *Worship*. It shows the author’s movement toward traditional Christian worship, the value of the cross of Jesus in enduring suffering, and the importance of liturgical life. “Worship is therefore in the deepest sense creative and redemptive. Keeping us in constant remembrance of the Unchanging and the Holy, it cleanses us of subjectivism, releases us from ‘use and want’ and makes us realists.”³³ *The Spiritual Life*, a slim volume adapted from four broadcast talks, came out in 1937. “Our spiritual life,” she writes, “is His affair; because, whatever we may think to the contrary, it is really produced by His steady attraction, and our humble and self-forgetful response to it.”³⁴ With characteristic clarity, Underhill reminds us of our purpose and our quiet joy as we seek the Divine.

In all, Evelyn Underhill authored and edited 39 books. She wrote over 350 articles and reviews. It can be said that she made mysticism accessible to all. Yet with her prolific writings and her own earnest journey of faith, we can also say that she is an excellent teacher of spiritual humility as an essential pre-requisite in the way to God. T.S. Eliot wrote after Underhill’s death in 1941:

She concerned herself as much with the practice as with the theory of the devotional life—her studies of the great mystics had the inspiration not primarily of the scholar or of the champion of forgotten genius, but of a consciousness of the great grievous need of the contemplative element in the modern world... With shrewdness and simplicity she helped to support the spiritual life of many more than she could in her humility have been aware of aiding.³⁵

The practice of spiritual humility became rooted in Underhill’s own life and remains a key theme of her teaching: humility, finding our true level, allows us to turn off the ego and turn gently toward God.

³⁵. Carol Poston, Ed. *The Making of a Mystic. New and Selected Letters of Evelyn Underhill*. (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), x.

³² Evelyn Underhill and Dana Greene. *Fragments from an Inner Life. The Notebooks of Evelyn Underhill*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publications, 1993), 33.

³³ *Evelyn Underhill Essential Writings*, 108

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

