

## **A Final Test of Holiness** **by Merrill Ware Carrington**

*The following was delivered at the 2013  
Evelyn Underhill Day by Merrill Ware Carrington.*

Over the years, the annual Days of Quiet honoring Evelyn Underhill have offered the opportunity to explore many facets of her identity -- her work as a philosopher and biographer, novelist and poet, essayist and book critic. We have explored the evolution of her calling as a conductor of retreats and teacher of prayer. We have looked at her interfaith conversations and her courageous stand as a pacifist during the Second World War. We have learned about her marriage, her rather arid-seeming relationships with her parents, her travels, her sailing trips, her bookbinding, her gardening, her cats!

But the dimension of Underhill's life and work about which I've felt a particular ongoing curiosity is her role as what we would today describe as a spiritual director. (She was herself more inclined to speak of her "cases" or her "care of souls.") For those of us who think of Underhill as an inner companion and guide, it's tempting to try to imagine what it would have been like to know her as an outer companion in the life of the Spirit.

Beginning with the question "Why?", one might well ask, "What were the motivations, conscious and unconscious, that lay beneath Underhill's gradual embrace of her vocation as what Charles Williams called a 'mother of souls'?"

In exploring this question, a useful starting point might be a statement Underhill made at a 1933 retreat entitled *The School of Charity*. It

*The final test of holiness is not seeming very different from other people, but being used to make other people very different; becoming the parent of new life.*

is, for me, among the most compelling statements she ever wrote: This assertion speaks to us of a particular path, exemplified by Underhill in the last decade or two of her life, in which the goal of success or outward accomplishment takes a back seat to the intrinsic satisfactions of a vocation that fosters new life in others. One's own achievements, and the fame that might accompany them, become less compelling than participating in other people's full flourishing.

One is reminded here of 20th c. psychologist Erik Erikson and the stage of adult development characterized by what he called "generativity". At this point, at full maturity, the challenges and joys of being a mentor and guide for the next generation become a central concern. Though not all those who sought guidance from Underhill's were members of the next generation, the maturity of her wisdom was such that she was appreciated as a wise elder even by her contemporaries. In this sense she functioned as a parent to many.

What Underhill is saying in the quotation above has particular poignancy in light of the fact that she did not herself experience parenthood in a literal sense. (She had neither biological nor adopted children. It's unlikely she would have written 39 books and several hundred other published works had she had a houseful of children, even with the nanny and governess that would have been typical of someone in her social class in Edwardian England.)

The reality is that Underhill seems to have had very little contact with children at all. And, late in life, when she was asked by a parish vicar to teach a group of 11 – 14 year olds about prayer, she admitted that she was "terrified" by the prospect.

There is no way around the fact that this was an area of significant un-lived life. We all have such lacunae, gaps in our experience, roads not taken. If we don't have children, we miss out on one set of rewards and challenges. If we do have children, we may be, or at least we feel, blocked from another set of possibilities, for instance, the solitary life of prayer – or the opportunity to be a writer as prolific as Underhill!)

Children were not a part of Underhill's life, but it is also the case that she brought a dedication and tenderness of concern to the care of the souls in her charge that was undeniably maternal. And this, no doubt, was at least a part of why the ministry of spiritual direction held so much meaning for her.

She had few direct opportunities to learn what children can teach us about life with God and she knew little about caring for children, day to day, but in the matter of parenting new life in others, in a symbolic sense, she seems to have had perfect pitch.

Underhill's work as a mother of souls was very much a "final test of holiness." In one sense, on a theoretical level, she knew everything there was to know about holiness. But it was in her relationships with her directees that her ideas about the nature of holiness were held up to scrutiny and passed through the mesh of daily circumstance. This was where her ideas about the life of faith, the co-inhering persons of the Trinity, and the meaning of the Incarnation, for example, demanded translation into the concrete details of individual lives. Here, holiness ceased being a lyrical abstraction and became a moment-by-moment challenge -- for her directees and also for herself.

So **who** were the individuals whose lives offered Underhill the final test of holiness?

It seems that all of the souls under her care on an individual basis were women, and most were

unusually well educated, especially for the early 20th century. Some were inquirers who sought her out by mail after reading one of her books. Some were retreatants who became directees, others were friends who sought her out with questions of a focused spiritual nature.

Another dimension of the question of Who? is that, over time, Underhill seems to have understood her directees as her family. Because of the nature of her marriage, it seems almost inevitable that she would seek intimacy elsewhere. She and Hubert seem to have had a companionable, congenial life together, but they were in no sense soul mates. And while the mother and father of this only child educated at home until the age of 13 were probably no more reserved or remote than many British parents of their day, it seems unlikely that they would have offered her an easy, reliable or life-giving sense of family. Underhill appears to have related to her directees as if they were sisters or cousins or nieces, as well as friends, and she seems to have cherished them for the connection they made her feel with the larger human family.

### **When and Where?**

The first person, in a chronological sense, who might be understood as a directee, Margaret Robinson, came to Underhill by mail when Underhill was not even thirty. Though already possessing enormous knowledge about the great mystics, Underhill was understandably a bit tentative in offering advice, given her relative lack of experience with Christian contemplative practice – and with life itself. This particular relationship continued for many years in the form of written correspondence, but it was not until mid-life and the emergence of her vocation as a conductor of retreats (and after having begun formal spiritual direction with Baron von Hugel) that her identity as a Mother of Souls truly blossomed. She began to see her

“cases” in person, as well as write to them, both within the retreat context (in “interviews” scheduled between the three addresses she gave each day) and also, though only very occasionally, at her home.

**How** did Underhill pursue what some have termed the art of spiritual direction?

It’s clear through her letters that as a spiritual director Underhill possessed much warmth and humor. She displayed compassion and unforced concern, “shrewdness and simplicity” (T. S. Eliot), “pithiness and practicality” (Mary Brian Durkin). At the same time, she did not hesitate to be prescriptive and she could be firm to the point of sternness. On at least one occasion she made a directee feel bit scolded. But in general, according to Charles Williams, she “eased her students as much as she urged them.”

Underhill could be a bit gossipy and, because many of her directees knew each other, she seems a bit less careful than she might have been about mentioning one of them to another. From today’s perspective, one could easily have concerns about the issue of confidentiality and the blurring of relational boundaries.

Reading between the lines of Underhill’s responses to her directees, however, one senses that they trusted her enormously and felt comfortable confiding their doubts and insecurities. And, as much as she offered substantial food for thought and very specific guidance, it appears that it was her personality, her being itself that mediated something tremendously encouraging, and, to use an overused word, inspiring. Unquestionably, she was an embodiment of the assertion that Christianity is more easily “caught than taught.”

In trying to imagine what it might have been like to sit in her presence, one is assisted by a couple of very telling descriptions.

Here is one friend, writing of her first meeting with Underhill:

*As I entered, she got up and turned round, looking so fragile as though ‘a puff of wind might blow her away’ might be literally true in her case, but light simply streamed from her face illuminated with a radiant smile... (Williams, p. 37)*

And from her admirer, Charles Williams:

*If the present writer has seemed, here and there, to say a little less than he might about her writing, it is because that, on the whole, it was the least (though no doubt a valuable) part of her intense vocation. Her vocation was rather to be – a guide? No; say rather, in the end, a light. The light might, and certainly did, illuminate and guide, but first it merely shone. This light she was.... (p. 44)*

### **With What Content?**

For all the vast knowledge at her disposal, a great many of Underhill’s letters to her directees involve attention to small scale worries and immediate challenges as opposed to references to the overarching themes of Christian tradition -- family conflicts, illness, demands and decisions related to work or employment, dissatisfactions with parish life. Occasionally Underhill’s correspondents had explicitly theological concerns or requests for guidance in the practice of prayer.

She not infrequently recommends a bit of Augustine or Ignatius, Walter Hilton or Julian of Norwich, and, of course, her beloved von Hugel and his teacher, Abbe Huvelin.

What one notices most often is that a great many of Underhill’s correspondents, far more than might be common today, are seeking

holiness in the sense of *virtue* and are much pre-occupied, as Underhill was herself, with rooting out sins and imperfections, large and small. She clearly aims to calm the worried and to promote a sense of balance, but as we know from Dana Greene's collection of fragments from Underhill's journals, she was internally pre-occupied for many years with her own shortcomings. It would have been hard not to focus on this concern in others as well, but perhaps this was largely a reflection of a different era, an entirely different cultural context.

The bottom line is that in ways both pedestrian and grand, Evelyn Underhill offered her directees a quality that we today might call "mirroring", a process whereby one's interiority, one's core identity as a child of God is made more alive, more possible, as a result of being fully "seen" by another.

In feeling one's way into a sense of Underhill as a director, a last set of questions might be termed **Then vs. Now?** How did her approach differ from our own contemporary understanding of spiritual direction -- and what similarities existed, not only in comparison to the ministry of direction in our own day, but to the age-old Christian phenomenon going back to the Desert Fathers and Mothers. One can so easily imagine Underhill speaking the words attributed to one of those early wise ones: "Go into your cell and your cell will teach you everything"!)

Sadly, we have only the letters and a few descriptions from the souls in Underhill's care, but from what we have to go on, one has the sense that she understood her role as primarily one of conveying insight and information. Contemporary spiritual directors are encouraged to focus more on asking probing questions and on simple listening -- two people waiting on God, together, sometimes in silence. There

is much emphasis on what's referred to as the "locus of discernment", on allowing the process of discernment to be located in a fundamental sense within the directee.

As one seasoned monk-director has put it, "No adult should say should 'should' to another."

From the evidence available one gets the impression that Underhill not infrequently takes hold of the locus of discernment and assumes that she knows what's what and what should be. When she offers advice, she sometimes declares that a given decision is ultimately up to the directee, but one is left feeling that she doesn't entirely trust that her directees will, in time, find their own way. This is an easy trap to fall into as a director and in practice, the Holy Spirit has a unerring capacity to overturn the assumptions of an all-knowing Mother of Souls!

Some writers about spiritual direction, especially those influenced by Carl Jung and other 20th century depth psychologists, speak about the importance of the director, him or herself, being open to being changed, even transformed as a result of each and every encounter. The space between the director and directee is understood as an "interactive field" in which both individuals are affected by what is said. It's hard to know whether a dynamic of this kind was at work when Underhill met with her directees, but is probably less likely to occur when a direction relationship is carried on largely by mail.

On paper, Underhill seems to see herself, at least on the surface, as the one with "the goods", with the wisdom to convey, which is not unnatural or surprising, given the depth of her knowledge. And meanwhile, whether from temperamental reserve or cultural upbringing, she was disinclined to share her own concerns, anxieties, or life-frustrations. But it's clear that

over time, the souls under her care were of immense importance to her and may well have constituted the relationships of greatest mutuality in her life. She became increasingly comfortable in her role as a director and clearly felt immense loyalty and affection toward her “cases”. She may not have understood this as a transformation within an “interactive field”, but there’s no question that the souls whose new life she fostered were central to her own unfolding and, especially, to her sense of being less and less alone in the world.

This was delivered at the 2013 Evelyn Underhill Quiet Day.

For further reading:

**Greene, Dana.** *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998.

**Poston, Carol, ed.** *The Making of a Mystic: New and Selected Letters of Evelyn Underhill*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

**Williams, Charles, ed.** *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991.