

An Invitation: To Know the Transcendent through the Immanent

By Martha Gross

In her writings, Evelyn Underhill challenges the reader to go deeper -- beyond words, beyond labels, and even beyond dogma-- to encounter Living Reality, The Absolute Fact, God. She identifies the human tendency to miss the symbolic or sacramental dimension of things, and to cling to labels as if they are reality itself. She likewise faults Christians for not looking deeply enough and hence not finding the self-disclosure of the Living God in Creed, liturgy, scripture and religious imagery. Throughout her writings Underhill invites us to open ourselves to the sacramentality of life. It is there we can find the Transcendent God – a God who is present, active and communicating in both the secular and religious moments of our lives.

How, one might reasonably ask, can people open themselves to perceiving the Living God in ordinary, secular experiences? Underhill maintains that everyone is capable of this deeper perception or contemplation. The key, she writes, is to know a thing through uniting oneself with it, and thereby losing oneself and one's egocentric self-awareness in the process, much as a lover does with the beloved. If one can avoid the urge to objectify an experience and simply experience it fully, one can enjoy a heart knowledge that defies description. This is perception at the level of pure sensation. Like a great poet or artist, the contemplative heart no longer sees a beautiful thing labeled "flower" but basks in the simple sensation of being in wordless communion with it. Contemplation or intuitive perception is the doorway to encountering God, Who communicates Himself in the particulars of nature. As Underhill wrote in *Practical Mysticism*: "...behind the special and imperfect stammerings which we call color, sound, fragrance and the rest, we sometimes discern a whole fact – at once divinely simple and infinitely various – from which these partial messages proceed, and which seeks as it were to utter itself in them."

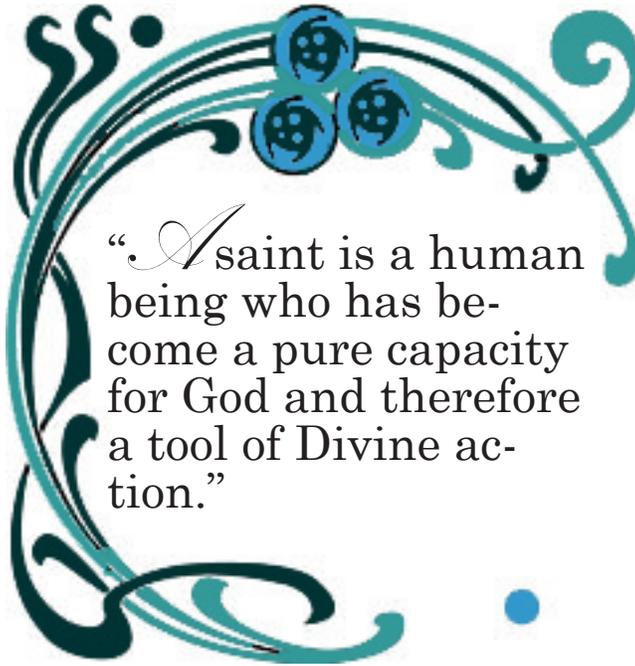


Underhill claims that the mystics or saints cultivate a contemplative mindset with passion and purity of heart. Consequently their unitive experiences transform their consciousness. For most ordinary, what she calls "normal" people, this transformation of consciousness does not take place. For Underhill the mystic's intuitive knowing is as one looking through a windshield to what lies beyond. If the glass is smudged with self-absorption and egocentricity, one has trouble seeing. The cleaner the windshield, the more clearly one can see through it. We must learn to see things, not as they are to us or for us, but as they are in themselves. Self-absorption keeps our focus on the windshield; purifying ourselves of self-interest focuses our attention outward and invites us to unite with Reality beyond ourselves.

Just as we miss Reality in the natural world when we treat it as an object we can use for our own ends, we miss the opportunity to know God when we use religion as a means to meet our own trifling wants and agendas. Underhill likens religion to a pantry with inexhaustible spiritual nourishment, yet many continue to starve because they do not know either what they have or how they can access it. The key, once again, is shifting the focus away from self to God, so one might see through the religious cipher to the God Who Is, and Who actively reveals Himself and gives Himself to the soul. Christianity is not a moral system or even a lovely arrangement of lofty ideas and ideals, but a process of losing of self in order to find oneself in God.

In both the secular and religious worlds we find Underhill coaching us to open ourselves to the God Who Is and, according to the Nicene Creed, Creator of both the "seen and unseen." To do so we must train ourselves in contemplation, purify ourselves of self-interest, and look beyond even dogma and liturgy in order to know and unite ourselves with the God Who Is, Reality Itself.

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“A saint is a human being who has become a pure capacity for God and therefore a tool of Divine action.”

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Evelyn Underhill's Quest for the Holy:
A Lifetime Journey of Personal Transformation

