

A PRACTICAL MYSTICISM FOR EVERYDAY

One historical figure that I have been reading and learning much from these days is Evelyn Underhill. Underhill (1875-1941) was an early twentieth century writer, lecturer, retreat leader and spiritual guide. She was the first woman invited to give theological lectures at Oxford and the first to lead clergy retreats in the Anglican church. She is known for her wisdom regarding the spiritual life and for demythologizing the notion of mysticism, making it more accessible and practical.

Underhill writes with appealing humor about the most serious of things. In her book *The Spiritual Life*, she states that exercising our mystical faculty will take attentiveness and effort, “if not the renunciation of the cloister, then at least the virtues of the golf course.” Underhill longed to transfuse her ministerial life “with the spirit of contemplation.” Doing so, in her view, required the cultivation of a “practical mysticism.”

Ever less interested in definitions of mysticism than in its practice, Underhill believed that we all have the potential to become practical mystics. By cooperating with God’s initiative within, we are rendered more capable of beholding God, while working in the vineyard. Practical mysticism, in Underhill’s presentation of it, involves “union with the flux of life and union with the Whole in which all lesser realities are resumed.” It means living flung open to the Spirit of God, and working for mercy, order, beauty, and truth, mending what is broken and creating where there is need.

Becoming a practical mystic, claims Underhill, entails simplification of our frequently cluttered characters, emancipation from the unreal, and the training of our inner attention, something which practices of prayer effect. Underhill senses that movement toward a practical mysticism corresponds with our fondest and deepest desires. She refuses to think of mysticism as the esoteric realm of the few, the proud and the brave.

There is nothing otherworldly or pietistic about Underhill’s mysticism. It is the art of union with the Real, something sought so in the work of ministry. As one’s union with God grows, so does one’s identification with humanity and the earth. Underhill writes: “The riches and beauty of the spiritual landscape are not disclosed to us in order that we might sit in the sun parlor, be grateful for the excellent hospitality, and contemplate the glorious view... Our place is not the auditorium, but the stage, the field, workshop, study, laboratory to be agents of the Creative Spirit in the world.”

The sway of Underhill’s vision has much to suggest to ministerial lives in the twenty-first century. Through Underhill, we catch sight of a spirituality of ordinary life achieved not through heroics and intense ascetical practices but through increased capacity for union with God, with “the Real.” The call to a practical mysticism beckons, offering the possibility of a rich and wholesome spiritual grounding for ministry.