

Sydney College of Divinity

**The Touch of the Spirit in Evelyn Underhill's Writings**

AN ASSIGNMENT SUBMITTED TO  
REV CAMERON FREESE  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE CLASS REQUIREMENTS OF  
SP540 THE ANGLICAN YEARS  
AS PART OF AN M. DIV. PROGRAMME

BROKEN BAY INSTITUTE  
(A Member Institute of the Sydney College of Divinity)

BY  
ALEXANDER MICHAEL PECK

BRISBANE, QUEENSLAND  
OCTOBER 1, 2010

## The Touch of the Spirit in Evelyn Underhill’s Writings

This short paper discusses whether Evelyn Underhill has a firm grasp of the various ways the Spirit touches the individual.

A framework that lends itself for such a discussion is a passage from St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians: “[T]he fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23, NIV).<sup>1</sup> The discussion proceeds along two lines. First, the nine virtues, made possible by a living relationship between the believer and God (cf. Gal 2:20; Jn 15:1-17),<sup>2</sup> are briefly defined. Second, the paper examines whether these nine virtues are discussed in the writings of Underhill.<sup>3</sup>

Love (*agape*) is divine love, for “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8, NIV). In human beings, this love is unmerited, transforming, and unchangeable.<sup>4</sup> Underhill writes that it is the love of God, and love of neighbor, that makes believers channels through which they accomplish God’s work on earth.<sup>5</sup> Concomitantly, she repeatedly urges one to grow in loving God for God-self and not merely for one’s own needs.<sup>6</sup> Finally, it is love, Underhill insists, that makes God’s people as tools or instruments in selflessly reaching out, caring, healing, and ministering.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1985), 2265; James Montgomery Boice, “Galatians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 10, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 498. Boice states that these nine virtues may be classified into three categories of three each – the first set has a primary direction that is *God-ward*; the second set concerns the believer’s relationship to *others*; the third set deals with the believer as they are to be in *themselves*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> This approach is based on the premise that if the Spirit is present in an individual, then their life would be touched according to the working of the Spirit.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* Boice gives the following Scripture references: unmerited (Rom 5:8), transforming (Rom 5:5), and unchangeable (Rom 8:35-39). It is also great (Eph 2:4).

<sup>5</sup> Mary Brian Durkin, “Teresian Wisdom in Evelyn Underhill”, *Spiritual Life* 41 (No. 1, Spring 1995): 29.

<sup>6</sup> Grace A. Brame, “Evelyn Underhill and the Mastery of Time”, *Spiritual Life* 42 (No. 4, Winter 1990): 350.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Brian Durkin, “Evelyn Underhill’s Guidelines for a Sane Spiritual Life”, *Spiritual Life* (Winter 1997). [http://www.evelynunderhill.org/her\\_work/articles/durk2.shtml](http://www.evelynunderhill.org/her_work/articles/durk2.shtml) (11 September 2010).

Joy (*chara*) corresponds to happiness, however, while happiness depends on circumstances, joy does not.<sup>8</sup> In Underhill’s view, it is humility that makes one joyful.<sup>9</sup> However, joy does not mean that life should be continually easy, merry, and heartlessly cheerful.<sup>10</sup> Rather, joy is grounded in both the way one thinks and feels about God.<sup>11</sup> It arises from an attitude like that of St. Francis who accepted the mystery of the Cross and drew near to God.<sup>12</sup>

Peace (*eirene*), while approximately equivalent to the Hebrew *shalom*, means more – especially as a result of God’s gift to humanity achieved through the cross of Christ.<sup>13</sup>

Underhill counsels to do one’s work in tranquility, implying peace.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, worry, anxiety, intolerance, conflict, and tumult have no place for those convinced that God is all, and that all takes place within God.<sup>15</sup> She stresses the value of being able to see or find God in everyday life,<sup>16</sup> and points to the peacefulness that awaits those who persevere in their struggle to find meaning in their religious quest.<sup>17</sup>

Patience (*makrothumia*) includes putting up with others, even when one is severely tried.<sup>18</sup>

In down-to-earth terms, Underhill defines the virtue of patience as follows:

Patience toward God is the quiet acceptance of life, bit by bit from his hand.

Patience toward others is bearing evenly all that is uneven in character, prejudice, and habits . . . It is meeting with equal countenance the nasty and sunny sides of the human person . . . It is equanimity toward the people who offend our taste . . . who

---

<sup>8</sup> Boice, “Galatians,” 498.

<sup>9</sup> Elisabeth Koenig, “Books of Interest on Underhill’s Life and Writings”, *Spiritual Life* 42 (No. 4, Winter 1990): 354.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Boice, “Galatians,” 498.

<sup>14</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (1936). <http://www.mrrena.com/misc/sl.shtml> (11 September 2010).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Durkin, “Evelyn Underhill’s Guidelines for a Sane Spiritual Life”.

<sup>17</sup> David Walker, *Evelyn Underhill* (Manly, NSW: Centre for Christian Spirituality, n.d.), 20.

<sup>18</sup> Boice, “Galatians,” 498.

ask for a cup of cold water at the wrong time, the stupid, the querulous, the obstinate. Each of us can fill up more blanks for ourselves!<sup>19</sup>

Kindness (*chrestotes*) is the divine kindness out of which God acts toward humans, shown in the Old Testament when it declares that “God is good”.<sup>20</sup> Kindness is a hallmark of Underhill’s instructions. For example, in relation to guidelines for prayer, she advocates for simplicity and flexibility,<sup>21</sup> rather than narrow or limiting ideas of prayer.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, in a spirit of kindness, she encourages changing and developing one's own personal style of prayer that suits,<sup>23</sup> instead of rigidly holding on to a set plan or model.<sup>24</sup>

Goodness (*agathosune*), though related to “kindness”, is more active and often directed toward that which does not merit the action.<sup>25</sup> Underhill exhorts radiating God’s love to the lovable *and* unlovable – an impossible task unless one’s life is, in her words, “soaked through and through by a sense of God’s reality and claim”.<sup>26</sup> Such love is deepened by adoration of the Creator and made visible by sanctified works.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, she herself visited in the slums two days a week.<sup>28</sup>

Faithfulness (*pistis*) is that quality which makes a person trustworthy and reliable.<sup>29</sup> To achieve this quality, Underhill teaches that one must willingly commit to make God the

---

<sup>19</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, ed. Grace Adolphsen Brame (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2000), 170.

<sup>20</sup> Boice, “Galatians,” 498.

<sup>21</sup> Durkin, “Evelyn Underhill's Guidelines for a Sane Spiritual Life”.

<sup>22</sup> Durkin, “Teresian Wisdom in Evelyn Underhill”, 22-23.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Durkin, “Evelyn Underhill's Guidelines for a Sane Spiritual Life”. Durkin, “Teresian Wisdom in Evelyn Underhill”, 22-23. Durkin adds that since a person converses differently with different friends, and because prayer is conversation with God, it also ought to be intimate and personal.

<sup>25</sup> Boice, “Galatians,” 498. Boice adds that goodness seems to be generosity that springs from kindness.

<sup>26</sup> Durkin, “Teresian Wisdom in Evelyn Underhill”, 29. Durkin quotes from Underhill’s *The Spiritual Life*.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Brame, “Evelyn Underhill and the Mastery of Time”, 343.

<sup>29</sup> Boice, “Galatians,” 498.

centre of all aspects of life.<sup>30</sup> Such a person does not look over their shoulders in remorse for the past or look up from their work, worrying about the future.<sup>31</sup> She shows how the saints met the vicissitude and suffering of their lives in a quiet steadiness of spirit.<sup>32</sup>

Gentleness (*prautes*) describes a person like Moses, who is praised for being the most gentle or meek among his contemporaries.<sup>33</sup> Drawing on St. John of the Cross, Underhill shows that every quality that the Spirit produces in human souls has three characteristics: tranquillity, *gentleness*, and strength.<sup>34</sup> She encourages that all of one’s actions need to be peaceful, *gentle* and strong.<sup>35</sup>

Self-control (*enkrateia*) is the virtue that gives victory over fleshly desires.<sup>36</sup> Underhill insists that to truly develop a spiritual life requires self-discipline and will power.<sup>37</sup> To further emphasize this point, she states that the key to a “situation lies in the will and not in the imagination.”<sup>38</sup> Also, she writes that “the direction and constancy of the will is what really matters, and intellect and feeling are only important insofar as they contribute to that.”<sup>39</sup>

From this brief analysis of the writings of Underhill and using the fruit of the Spirit as a framework, one may affirm that she grasps the ways in which the Spirit touches and influences an individual.

---

<sup>30</sup> Durkin, “Evelyn Underhill's Guidelines for a Sane Spiritual Life”.

<sup>31</sup> Brame, “Evelyn Underhill and the Mastery of Time”, 350.

<sup>32</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*.

<sup>33</sup> Boice, “Galatians,” 498.

<sup>34</sup> Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Boice, “Galatians,” 498.

<sup>37</sup> Durkin, “Evelyn Underhill's Guidelines for a Sane Spiritual Life”.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Durkin quotes from Underhill’s *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill* (1943), edited by Charles Williams.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

### Bibliography

Barker, Kenneth ed. *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1985.

Boice, James Montgomery. “Galatians”. In *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 10, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, 407-508. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991.

Brame, Grace A. “Evelyn Underhill and the Mastery of Time”. *Spiritual Life* 42 (No. 4, Winter 1990): 341-351.

Durkin, Mary Brian. “Evelyn Underhill's Guidelines for a Sane Spiritual Life”. *Spiritual Life* (Winter 1997): 236-243.  
[http://www.evelynunderhill.org/her\\_work/articles/durk2.shtml](http://www.evelynunderhill.org/her_work/articles/durk2.shtml) (11 September 2010).

\_\_\_\_\_. “Teresian Wisdom in Evelyn Underhill”. *Spiritual Life* 41 (No. 1, Spring 1995): 20-31.

Koenig, Elisabeth. “Books of Interest on Underhill’s Life and Writings”. *Spiritual Life* 42 (No. 4, Winter 1990): 352-354.

Underhill, Evelyn. *The Spiritual Life*. 1936. <http://www.mrrena.com/misc/sl.shtml> (11 September 2010).

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Ways of the Spirit*. Edited and with an introduction by Grace Adolphsen Brame. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2000.

Walker, David. *Evelyn Underhill*. Manly, NSW: Centre for Christian Spirituality, n.d.