

EVELYN UNDERHILL

- **1. Awakening** - Subject starts to become aware of the presence of something supernatural. Their heart is filled with joy and they have never felt this kind of joy before, yet they cannot see this supernatural being, and they hunger for more.
- **2. Purgation** - Where subject strips away their ego, their self, their whole existence. They give up everything in this life and in the next. They start to become aware of their faults & imperfections, and try to compensate for those with self-discipline.
- **3. Illumination** - This is often the final stage for some mystics. The subject sees the visual representation of eternity as heaven & earth, reality & mysticism meet. For our purposes this is most likely the ecstatic moment, so therefore one that should be given more emphasis by me in my research & final deliverable.
- **4. The Dark Night of the Soul** - Extraordinary mystics go beyond the third step onto this one. These mystics have experienced mysticism so fervently, that when they "come back down to earth" they start to have what we can refer to as "withdrawal symptoms" of God's presence. They feel deprived, vulnerable, helpless & confused. It is the ultimate un-selfing, and the ultimate submission to God's Will.
- **5. Union with The Other** - Having gone through the other steps, the subject now finds themselves in the Eternal, they are at union with God forever, and act as a liaison between the things on Earth and the things in Eternity.

Stages of Mysticism: a synopsis of Evelyn Underhill's Practical Mysticism (Part Two)

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This post continues the discussion from [Part One](#).

Chapter Four: Meditation and Recollection

Continuing along the mystical path laid out by Underhill, this chapter dives deeply into the practice of training our attention, or Recollection.

Underhill defines Recollection as “the subjection of the attention to the control of the will.” It begins with the “deliberate and regular practice of meditation.” There is nothing special, according to her, about disciplining our consciousness: “The real mystical life,” she says, “which is the truly practical life, begins at the beginning; not with supernatural acts and ecstatic apprehensions, but with the normal faculties of the normal man.” It is something that everyone must do if they “would get control of their own mental processes.” She then lays out the process of training our attention.

In describing meditation she says, “Take, then, an idea, an object, from amongst the common stock, and hold it before your mind.” And as with all guidance to beginning meditators, she

warns that this is not nearly as easy as it sounds: “But, the choice made, it must be held and defended during the time of meditation against all invasions from without, however insidious their encroachments, however ‘spiritual’ their disguise. It must be brooded upon, gazed at, seized again and again, as distractions seem to snatch it from your grasp.”

Eventually, through this act of focusing, we begin to merge with our object of meditation, to “sink as it were into the deeps of it, rest in it, ‘unite’ with it.”

“Moreover,” she goes on, “as your meditation becomes deeper it will defend you from the perpetual assaults of the outer world. . . . And gradually, you will come to be aware of an entity, a *You*, who can thus hold at arm’s length, be aware of, look at, an idea—a universe—other than itself.” And finally, in Recollection, you “turn this purified and universalised gaze back upon yourself.”

So here’s the process:

Step one: First we are to devote our attention to, meditate on, an object to such an extent that we are no longer aware of where our consciousness ends and the object begins.

Step two: We abide, protected from the world, in this meditative state.

Step three: Eventually, we discover an awareness outside of our ordinary consciousness, a witness that stands outside of our personal whims.

Step four: We turn this new found awareness back upon the personality and are able to witness our self.

For Underhill, this is just the beginning, the initial training of consciousness at the outset of the mystical path:

“So doing patiently, day after day, constantly recapturing the vagrant attention, ever renewing the struggle for simplicity of sight, you will at last discover that there is something within you—something behind the fractious, conflicting life of desire—which you can recollect, gather up, make effective for new life. You will, in fact, know your own soul for the first time: and learn that there is a sense in which this real *You* is distinct from, an alien within, the world in which you find yourself, as an actor has another life when he is not on the stage. When you do not merely believe this but know it; when you have achieved this power of withdrawing yourself, of making this first crude distinction between appearance and reality, the initial stage of the contemplative life has been won.”

However, this trick of consciousness is nothing in itself. It takes the addition of Purgation and a loving disposition to continue down the path.

Chapter 5: Self-Adjustment

Just training our attention is not enough because the act of seeing ourselves through this disinterested or detached awareness reveals an inevitable conflict between our new

understanding and our “old habits, old notions, old prejudices.”

Once we get our first glimpse of Reality, “Never again,” Underhill tells us, “need those moralists point out to you the inherent silliness of your earnest pursuit of impermanent things: your solemn concentration upon the game of getting on.”

But just seeing this truth is not enough. She assures us that we will backslide without self-discipline. Having recognized the fallacy of our old perceptions of what is real and important, we have to make systemic changes. This “drastic remodeling of character” is called Purgation, and it is “the second stage in the training of the human consciousness for participation in Reality.”

Purgation itself has two components: detachment and mortification. According to Underhill, detachment means stepping away from three very ingrained behaviors. It is “the refusal to anchor yourself in material things, to regard existence from the personal standpoint, or confuse custom with necessity.” And mortification is “the resolving of the turbulent whirlpools and currents of your own conflicting passions, interests, desire; the killing out of all those tendencies which the peaceful vision of Recollection would condemn, and which create the fundamental opposition between your interior and exterior life.”

As we see here, for Underhill, morality is more than just choosing to follow a set of rules. It is a question of our fundamental disposition. She points to one character trait as the most in need of adjustment: “You are enslaved by the verb ‘to have.’”

“The very mainspring of your activity is a demand, either for a continued possession of that which you have, or for something which as yet you have not: wealth, honour, success, social position, love, friendship, comfort, amusement. You feel that you have a right to some of these things: to a certain recognition of your powers, a certain immunity from failure or humiliation.”

But holding these beliefs keeps us from experiencing Reality: “So long as these dispositions govern character we can never see or feel things as they are.”

The answer, the path forward, is one of expanding our capacity for detachment, which Underhill does not see as cold or hard hearted, but as characterized by a compassionate recognition of the intrinsic value of all things.

“So it is disinterestedness, the saint’s and poet’s love of things for their own sakes, the vision of the charitable heart, which is the secret of union with Reality and the condition of all real knowledge. This brings with it the precious quality of suppleness, the power of responding with ease and simplicity to the great rhythms of life; and this will only come when . . . the verb ‘to have’ . . . is ejected from the centre of your consciousness.”

The effort continues, as we see in the title of the next chapter, through love and will.

Chapter 6: Love and Will

The next effort that must be made, after working to train our attention and remodel our interior landscape, is “to *push* with all your power: not to absorb ideas, but to pour forth will and love.”

It is “by an eager outstretching toward Reality” that we “move towards Reality” and “enter into its rhythm.” Underhill says we must “look with the eyes of love,” which she admits sounds a little corny, but it couldn’t be more important.

“To ‘look with the eyes of love’ seems a vague and sentimental recommendation: yet the whole art of spiritual communion is summed in it, and exact and important results flow from this exercise. The attitude which it involves is an attitude of complete humility and of receptiveness; without criticism, without clever analysis of the thing seen. When you look thus, you surrender your I-hood; see things . . . for their sake, not for your own. The fundamental unity that is in you reaches out to the unity that is in them.”

It is this effort of love and will that allows us to progress into what Underhill calls the Forms of Contemplation.

“Therefore this transitional stage in the development of the contemplative powers . . . is concerned with the toughening and further training of that will which self-simplification has detached from its old concentration upon the unreal wants and interests of the self. Merged with your intuitive love, this is to become the true agent of your encounter with Reality”

At this point we have seen that we begin by training our attention to see things as they are rather than filtering them through our enculturated language and self-serving categories. Next we find that the new knowledge brought from this awareness gives the lie to our old way of being in the world and, if we are to progress, we must stem this cognitive dissonance by adjusting our thoughts and actions to meet up with the wisdom we’ve gained. And finally, here we’ve seen that the path is still not passive. We must press on, through love and will, reaching out toward Reality.

In the next post, we will explore the results of all of this effort, which is the journey through what Underhill calls the Three Forms of Contemplation. They amount to ever-expanding circles of loving union with the World of Becoming or Nature, the World of Being or Spirit, and finally with the Absolute, whatever insufficient label we choose to give It!

C S L

I HAVE REFERRED TO CONTEMPLATION MANY TIMES SO FAR. WHAT IS THE PLACE OF CONTEMPLATION IN THE AUTHENTIC SPIRITUAL LIFE? CHRISTOPHER ARMSTRONG WRITES, “IT IS LIKELY THAT THE REPUTATION OF EVELYN UNDERHILL WILL STAND HIGH WHENEVER THE CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE IS TAKEN SERIOUSLY AS A BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION.”⁷⁰ IN HER EARLY UNDERSTANDING OF CONTEMPLATION, UNDERHILL DRAWS HEAVILY UPON TERESA OF AVILA FOR HER WORK ON MYSTICISM.

CONTEMPLATION IS A KIND OF PRAYER THAT REQUIRES THE PREPARATION OF RECOLLECTION. THERE ARE THREE FORMS OF CONTEMPLATION AFTER ONE ACHIEVES RECOLLECTION: ILLUMINATION, QUIET (“THE ATTAINMENT OF THAT INTUITIVE AWARENESS, THAT MEEK AND SIMPLE SELF-MERGENCE”⁷¹), AND ECSTASY (AN “UTTER SELF-SURRENDER”). THE FIRST TWO FORMS ARE ACTIVE, INVOLVING EFFORT OF THE WILL; BUT THE THIRD FORM IS PASSIVE OR INFUSED AND HAPPENS WITHOUT EFFORT. IN ILLUMINATION, SHE WRITES IN *T M W*, QUOTING RUYSBROECK, “‘GRACE,’ THE TRANSCENDENT LIFE-FORCE, SURGES UP EVER STRONGER FROM THE DEEPS—‘WELLS UP WITHIN, LIKE A FOUNTAIN OF THE SPIRIT,’—FORMING NEW HABITS OF ATTENTION AND RESPONSE IN RESPECT OF THE SUPERNAL WORLD. THE FACULTY OF CONTEMPLATION MAY NOW DEVELOP, NEW POWERS ARE BORN, THE PASSION OF LOVE IS DISCIPLINED AND ENHANCED.”⁷² THUS FOR UNDERHILL, CONTEMPLATION IS A PRAYER IN WHICH A PERSON MAY RECEIVE THE “LIFE-FORCE” OF THE SPIRIT AND DEVELOP AN INTERACTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE SPIRITUAL REALM. CONTEMPLATION IS THE EXERCISE OF A CERTAIN FACULTY DIFFERENT FROM THE INTELLECTUAL AND EMOTIONAL ONES. ASSOCIATED WITH THIS FACULTY ARE SPIRITUAL POWERS AND INCREASED FOR GOD. AND SENSIBLE DELIGHTS OR CONSOLATIONS ARE A SIGNIFICANT PART OF CONTEMPLATION.

HOWEVER, LATER IN FEBRUARY 1923, UNDERHILL QUESTIONS IN HER NOTEBOOK THE VALUE OF GOOD FEELINGS AND OVERWHELMING EMOTIONS IN PRAYER. HAVING BENEFITED FROM THE HELP OF VON HUGEL, SHE OBSERVES THAT HER PRAYER HAS CHANGED TO BE MORE “QUIET, CALM, [AND] EXPANSIVE.” THEN TO ILLUSTRATE THIS SHE WRITES, “I HOW IT ACTUALLY IS THAT WE ARE IN CHRIST AND HE IN US—THE INTERPENETRATION OF SPIRIT—AND ALL OF US MERGED TOGETHER IN HIM ACTUALLY.”⁷³ THIS INTUITION IS NOT INDIVIDUALISTIC, SINCE UNDERHILL INCLUDES HER SENSE OF THE REALITY OF THE MYSTICAL BODY OF CHRIST. AND SHE NO LONGER WANTS THE “PSYCHO-PHYSICAL ADVENTURES” WHICH ARE MORE OF A DISTRACTION THAN A HELP TO TRANSFORM THE WILL IN LOVE. UNDERHILL WRITES IN HER NOTEBOOK, “MORE AND MORE I SHOULD LIKE TO GET AWAY FROM SENSIBLE CONSOLATIONS OR AT LEAST THEIR DOMINANCE. THEY ARE ENTRANCING AND OVERWHELMING; BUT THEY DON’T REALLY LEAD ANYWHERE. IT’S THE DEEP, QUIET, MYSTERIOUS LOVE ONE WANTS TO KEEP, AND GRADUALLY TRANSFER FOCUS TO THE WILL.”⁷⁴ CONTEMPLATION IS A MEANS OF GRACE TO INCREASE ONE’S CAPACITY FOR SELF-SACRIFICE: IT IS “THE FILLING UP OF THE RESERVOIR” FOR BEING MADE PART OF CHRIST’S “RESCUING AND EVER-SACRIFICED BODY.”⁷⁵ IN *T G S* SHE OBSERVES THAT GRACE IS NOT A “LIFE-FORCE” BUT “THE ACTUAL SELF-GIVING OF THE IMMANENT DIVINE LIFE, THE PERSONAL, MANWARD-TENDING, LOVE AND WILL OF GOD.”⁷⁶ AND THEREFORE THE POINT OF CONTEMPLATION FOR THE SPIRITUAL LIFE, RATHER THAN AN EXERCISE OF DEVELOPING THE SPIRITUAL FACULTY, IS TO RESPOND TO THE GRACE OF DIVINE SELF-GIVING WITH ONE’S OWN SELF-GIVING IN ORDER TO “BECOME

MORE DEEPLY LIVING AND CREATIVE, AND BE WOVEN INTO THAT SPIRITUAL BODY, THE INVISIBLE CHURCH, THROUGH WHICH THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT IS DONE.”⁷⁷

SOME TIME LATER, IN *W*, UNDERHILL UNDERSTANDS CONTEMPLATION (OR RATHER PERSONAL PRAYER AND WORSHIP) MORE DEEPLY AS THE “SECRET PERSONAL LIFE OF ADORATION,” WHICH IS “THE ONLY CONDITION UNDER WHICH [THE CHRISTIAN] CAN HOPE TO BECOME A CHANNEL OF THE DIVINE CHARITY, AND CO-OPERATE IN THE SANCTIFICATION OF LIFE.”⁷⁸ SHE IS ACTUALLY REFERRING TO CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER IN HER DESCRIPTION OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE OF ADORATION AS “THE SELF-OBLIVIOUS GAZE, THE PATIENT AND DISCIPLINED ATTENTION TO GOD, WHICH DEEPENS UNDERSTANDING, NOURISHES HUMILITY AND LOVE; AND, BY GENTLE PROCESSES OF GROWTH, GRADUALLY BRINGS THE CREATURE INTO THAT PERFECT DEDICATION TO HIS PURPOSES.”⁷⁹ THUS THE PLACE OF CONTEMPLATION FOR UNDERHILL IN THIS LATER PERIOD IS TO FACILITATE THE DEDICATION OF ONE’S WILL TO THE WILL AND PURPOSES OF GOD. IN *T S* *L* CONTEMPLATION IS HELPFUL FOR COOPERATING WITH THE SPIRIT SUCH THAT EACH MEMBER OF THE CHURCH MAY WORK FOR THE SALVATION OF THE WORLD. “WE ARE TRANSMITTERS AS WELL AS RECEIVERS. OUR CONTEMPLATION AND OUR ACTION, OUR HUMBLE SELF-OPENING TO GOD, KEEPING OURSELVES SENSITIVE TO HIS MUSIC AND LIGHT, AND OUR GENEROUS SELF-OPENING TO OUR FELLOW CREATURES, KEEPING OURSELVES SENSITIVE TO THEIR NEEDS, OUGHT TO FORM ONE LIFE; MEDITATING BETWEEN GOD AND HIS WORLD, AND BRINGING THE SAVING POWER OF THE ETERNAL INTO TIME.”⁸⁰

IN REVIEW, EVELYN UNDERHILL’S UNDERSTANDING OF THE ROLE OF CONTEMPLATION IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE STARTED OUT AS A WAY TO DEVELOP ONE’S SPIRITUAL FACULTY IN POWER AND LOVE. THEN, MOVING AWAY FROM CONSOLATIONS IN PRAYER, UNDERHILL VALUES CONTEMPLATION AS A MEANS FOR INCREASING ONE’S CAPACITY FOR SELF-SACRIFICE AND FOR RESPONDING TO GRACE WITH ONE’S OWN SELF-GIFT. LASTLY, CONTEMPLATION IS SEEN AS A PART OF WORSHIP, FOR THE PURPOSE OF DEDICATING ONESELF TO GOD’S PURPOSES. CONTEMPLATION IS COMPLETED BY ACTION; WHAT ONE RECEIVES IN OPENNESS WITH GOD, ONE MEDIATES IN OPENNESS TO OTHERS.