Transcript of "In the Footsteps of Mary Magdalene: A Spirituality of Evelyn Underhill"

presented by
Colleen M. Griffith, Ph.D.

Dr. Thomas Groome:
My name is Thomas Groome. I have the privilege of serving as the Director of the Summer Institute which is sponsored now by Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry; and with our Office of Continuing Education, the Summer Institute co-hosts this wonderful gathering each year to celebrate this amazing woman and mother in faith, our beloved Mary Magdalene. And there…

I just want to say a few brief thank yous to people. I want to thank Father Bob VerEecke for presiding with us at the liturgy, Dr. Nancy Pineda-Madrid, our colleague, for the beautiful reflection she offered to set the tone for our liturgy together. Nancy stepped in literally at the last moment to do that today. So, you can imagine what she could have done if she had prepared. I want to thank Jackie Regan, our associate dean for student life, who in many ways organized the liturgy. For Anne Marie David, our songstress and wonderful musician at the liturgy. We actually, if you noticed, in the bulletin… in the liturgical aid we sang a number of Anne Marie's own songs and they were beautiful to our worship together. I want to thank Nicky Huggins for that beautiful liturgical dance. I don't know about you, but when she draped that white cloth across the Lectionary, I got caught in the throat. And Maura Colleary, our Associate Director of Administration, who has organized the lunch here.

And I'm sure there's many other people that I should be thanking, but let me just pick two more. About four years ago Rita Houlihan invited me to have lunch with her, and out of our conversation the idea of having a grand celebration of the feast of Mary Magdalene emerged. And I want to recognize Rita. She has been convinced for a long time that Mary Magdalene is what Johann Baptist Metz would call "a subversive memory" to our Church. Mary Magdala is a subversive memory in the sense that she gives hope, and at the celebration of this day will indeed call in question some of our present arrangements in our beloved Church and also will hold out hope for the future. So, in a sense it's been a great gift to us. And it's the generosity of Rita who makes our lunch available to us today and also the stipend for our guest speaker and the expenses of this day. So thank you, Rita, and would you please stand. As you… as you… as you leave today, there are a number of other resources on the table outside that would be particularly helpful in religious education contexts and so on. And all of the materials on Mary Magdalene are indeed made available to us by the generosity of Rita.

Secondly, I want to thank Dr. Colleen Griffith because and… my colleague, Melinda Brown Donovan, will introduce her formally in a moment to present the Magdala Lecture this year. But as the person responsible in a sense to seeing to that the program happens, you can imagine my panic here a few days ago when we heard the sad news from our colleague, Dr. Mary Ann Hinsdale, that her sister of just 50 years of age had very tragically and suddenly died of cardiac arrest, ironically in the midst of an athletic event in which she was competing, and so, a woman of good health and great fitness. And… but, went home to God just totally unexpectedly. So Mary Ann, obviously distraught with that sad event and having to care for her family as well and an aged mother of 89, we gave Mary Ann the out of course, and said well, we'll carry on. And it was then that we turned to Colleen. So, literally…

and Mary Ann will come back, by the way, two years from now. Next year's speaker is already engaged and we'll tell you it's Sandra Schneiders. We'll tell you about that later. But, so literally, rather than cancel the day we turned to our colleague and…good spouse, Colleen, Dr. Colleen Griffith. So, literally, at the last minute Colleen stepped into the breach, and as our beloved Teddy would say, "Go Mom, you'll do good." Here's Melinda to introduce Colleen.

Melinda Brown Donovan:
Thank you, Tom. It's such a great honor to introduce my good friend and colleague, Colleen Griffith. Dr. Colleen M. Griffith is associate professor of the practice of theology at Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry where she also serves as faculty director of spirituality studies. She holds a doctorate in theology from Harvard Divinity School where she worked under the directorship of the Historical Theologian, Margaret Miles.

Dr. Griffith's research and writing interests include historical and contemporary spirituality, Christian theologies of the Bible… of the body (excuse me), method in practical theology, and the relationship between doctrine and spiritual practice. She is a popular teacher at the STM with a full-time teaching load during the academic year. And yet, she is always willing to spend time outside of class advising and guiding students. In addition, she designed the summer Post-Master's Program in Spiritual Formation which she directs every summer at the STM.

Dr. Griffith's most recent publication is *Prophetic Witness: Catholic Women's Strategies for Reform,* published by Crossroad which received a first-place award by the Catholic Press Association in 2010. She served as the editor for the spring 2009 *C21 Resources* issue entitled "Catholic Spirituality in Practice," which had an unprecedented print request of over 200,000 copies. With such popularity, a new book entitled *Catholic Spiritual Practices: A Treasury Old and New* has been expanded to include this *C21 Resources* issue and more under Dr. Griffith's editorial guidance. It will be published in… by Paraclete Press in October of this year. Dr. Griffith is currently working on a manuscript entitled *Prophecy for Dry Bones: Toward a Contemporary Christian Theology of Human Bodyliness*, work she is looking forward to continuing when she is on sabbatical this fall.

Dr. Colleen Griffith is a woman of deep faith, a faith that energizes her creativity, her generosity, and her work. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Colleen Griffith to speak on *In the Footsteps of Mary Magdalene: The Spirituality of Evelyn Underhill*.

Dr. Colleen Griffith:
Thank you, all. I had a bit of sub-anxiety, but it's slowly dissipating. I'm seeing a lot of friendly faces out there.

Mary of Magdala, there you are. You adorn our museum and cathedral walls. Red dress, long bright orange hair, a colorful and dramatic figure portrayed visually as a lusty woman with wild eyes looking toward the heavens. You've carried our collective Christian cultural projections for a long time. We've referred to you as the fallen Eve, the redeemed whore, the repentant woman. Two thousand years later biblical scholarship underscores how falsely we, in fact, have portrayed you. We've incorrectly labeled you the woman with the alabaster jar who anointed Jesus in the house of Simon, the leper of Bethany. When did we decide that the penitent prostitute should be you when there were no scriptural references to you there? What purpose did it serve? How did we come to misrepresent you so?

Your story parallels that of most biblical women, a story of fragments and torn pieces. In your case, pieces that have been distorted and some completely covered from view. Mary of Magdala, did we think that by calling you a redeemed harlot and naming you Christianity's model of repentance that somehow that was a better way of dealing with your provocative apostolic leadership, your mystical presence on our biblical pages? Did this make you a more manageable figure for us, more controllable in terms of your influence? How long and in how many hands deemed Christian hands have you been asked to serve as an instrument of propaganda against your own sex? It seemed easier to fashion you as a penitent prostitute than to deal with the profound depth of your truth, your love, your leadership. Now today we mark a very different remembering of you in this gathering, and with it we stand open to the chance of moving in solidarity with the female holiness and leadership you model.

When I walk with the Johannine community's telling of today's appearance story, I meet you, Mary, at the tomb. You stand in the Judean dust and it feels like an abyss, mourning deeply your companion. You are alone. No one else is there. I'm not sure I'd be there—staying true with feelings of such loss and confusion and pain—when I'm already stretched to breaking point, is not my strong suit.

On a purely pragmatic note, weren't you putting yourself in a position of great jeopardy by going to anoint Jesus's body after his death? This doesn't even seem to faze you as you stand by that tomb. Imprudence? Your emotions running away with you? No. You're being truthful, utterly truthful in remaining in what is an unfamiliar darkness. You think it's the gardener wanting to know who you're looking for. You speak your word and your intent to him with a great directness; no denial, no swearing you hadn't known him. You ask to claim the body, exercising the societal right reserved for those next of kin. You're not next of kin. A bit bold? No. True. Who, in fact, has been more faithful standing at the foot of the cross and now here at dawn? Down low in the depths of yourself you unexpectedly hear your name called by the one you have loved so. "Mary," the most direct and intimate address of all. I've known that address from God alright, but it's frequently one that makes me want to retreat or to resist some. You don't flee, though. Rather, you turn face-to-face and receive the moment, experiencing the Risen Christ, and you respond "*Rabbouni,"* beloved teacher.

In this intimate exchange there are no interruptions, no modifiers, no intensifiers, no secondary details, just whole, holy, simple encounter, the kind that women mystics coming after you will write plenty about. You choose a personal and possessive grammatical form in your response to Jesus. "Rabbouni," my beloved teacher. Pretty familiar and informal. Presumptuous? No. Singularly true, as you have been shaped and fashioned by his words and deeds. Your first reaction is to embrace one another in this moment, and you do. Certainly not in keeping with the Jewish codes of proper behavior for a woman. Shameful? No. The truth of a faithful friendship. Finally, you hear in the very nearness of Christ's presence the urging not to cling to this moment alone but to move on to Galilee to the place of ministry for further relational encounters with the Risen One. And you go, without concern for how you might be perceived. Crazy? No. True. You announce to the others that you have been with the Risen Christ. Is it the unusualness of your words or the power of your person that convinces them? I suspect the latter. Still, the depth of your truth provoked and challenged. Perhaps this is why your iridescent witness got twisted by the pressures of patriarchal dominance.

Today in this gathering we celebrate not only Mary Magdalene, but all women who have witnessed to the irruption of the Spirit who've come after her right up to present day. Women who've been inspired by her to find the strength to remain when looking painfully into life's voids where it appears

that God cannot be found, and in the dark terrain witness to the Spirit in pre-dawn places. Steadied by the story of Mary Magdalene, we celebrate all historical and contemporary women who have heard their names called by God, and often in unfamiliar contexts and though tempted to run away, don't. And we especially celebrate the scores of women who have received and grappled with the invitation to move on to Galilee to places of ministry, and to do so without concern for their own success or failure. Yes, the blessing of Mary Magdalene's life and story continues. It continues in women and men alike who long to love in ways wide and deep, and who are practical witnesses to the irrupting Spirit of God, to the Resurrection Christ.

Who is one such woman witness in your life? Can you call this face into view? Let's take a few moments in silence with this question.

What has been this woman's blessing in your life? And how does she witness to the irrupting Spirit of God? Let's take just a couple of minutes to chat with one other person at our circle, to share that woman's face, name, and story.

Well, look, I'd like to share with you one such woman witness from my own life. She's an early 20th century woman who I've been reading for many years, who's become an abiding friend of sorts at this point, who very much walks in the footsteps of Mary Magdalene. And this historic woman is Evelyn Underhill.

Now let me set her a little bit in context for you. The year was 1911, one hundred and one years ago. And England stood in a real twilight zone. The balance of power was shifting in a Europe in which a unified Germany was on the rise. England sought to advance its educational systems and to buttress its defense capability. And shuffling its foreign policy, it made fresh overtures to France and to Russia, holding Germany now at arm's length. Meanwhile, the pre-war years under George V had proved very turbulent ones domestically. Tariff reform caused widespread consternation. And the proposal of a people's budget that would tax the rich to pay for needed reforms and rebuild the Royal Navy wreaked havoc in the upper chambers of the House of Lords. And one hundred years… one hundred and one years ago from our present year marked the greatest industrial unrest in England's history. There were massive strikes of dockworkers and railroad workers and miners, all of which brought the country to a halt. Over 25 percent of the population of England found themselves living in poverty. And those that did have jobs were working 55-hour weeks with no paid holidays.

Now from this historic island and its people's struggles in place and time arose a voice, the voice of another gifted communicator with a compelling spiritual vision. The intellectual prowess and clarity and persuasiveness of this voice were unmistakable, and yet the voice was an unexpected one. Evelyn Underhill, after all, was a woman—a woman born in 1875 who was expected in her socio-cultural ethos to do little more than marry young, stay at home, raise a family. Underhill had no ecclesiastical backing, and her gender rendered it impossible for her to receive a formal theological education. But it was her voice at the start of the 20th century that carried the whole soul of a people. She was so convinced that a new age had to dawn for religion and that the future of Christianity ultimately would be dependent on the retrieval of its rich mystical tradition, a tradition to which few people had access. Her classic text, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness,* was published in 1911 and it attracted a very broad audience. It received the attention of Baron Friedrich von Hügel, one of the major Catholic scholars living in England at the time. Von Hügel was a friend of Ernst Troeltsch and a correspondent of William James, took an avid

interest in Underhill, becoming her colleague, her mentor, her friend von Hügel. The book *Mysticism* was an intellectual tour de force. It was a brilliant and carefully rendered piece for which Underhill, with no formal theological education, had studied a thousand sources in order to explore faithfully the experiences of those whom she called humanity's pioneers, those who paved the mystic way. Now this work both established Underhill's reputation and gave exposure to a treasury of mystical literature in the Christian tradition that was largely unknown in the English-speaking world. And it marked the beginning of the revival of Christian mysticism with some strikingly fresh accents. The 500-page book that has seen 13 editions since was but the start of a prolific spiritual writing career for Underhill. She went on to produce over 300 pieces on the spiritual life—books, essays, introductions, reviews. She became the first woman invited to give theological lectures at Oxford, and she was named a fellow at King's College in London, the recipient of an honorary degree from the University of Aberdeen. She was also the first woman invited to give clergy retreats. And normally, that theological personage, that ministerial personage, are two different people. In Underhill they were one.

In the 15 years prior to her death in 1941, she devoted her time to spiritual direction, retreats for women, care for the poor. And upon her death the *Times Literary Supplement* hailed her as, quote, "unmatched by any professional teacher of her day in understanding the deep longing of the human soul." T. S. Eliot would speak of her as the one who had most understood, quote, "the grievous need of her contemporaries for a contemplative element in their lives."

One hundred and one years later, our year 2012, Underhill continues to inspire. Her biographer, Dana Greene, says that Underhill endures because she's one of us. Her personal struggles were very real ones. There was her shock and her profound sadness in the face of a war that rocked every thinking European to the core, a sadness that gave rise to a radical pacifism. There was the tornness [sic] she experienced as a result of her strong love for the sacramental and symbolic structures of Catholicism, and yet her inability to stand behind Pius X's condemnation of modernism. There was her growing realization that spiritual maturity was something that needed communal identity, and that it sometimes flourished within institutional structures and sometimes flourished in response to the limitations of those structures. And finally, there was her pain over the death of a close, close friend and confidante, Ethel Rose Barker, who had been her supportive friend for years. Her struggles so familiarly human offer fleshly dimensionality to her thought. Her response to these struggles was to follow her deep desire for union with Reality, capital R, a favorite referent of hers for God. Reality, capital R. A union that led not in a direction away from life's troubles but to increased creative engagement with them.

In late 1914, three years after the publication of her massive tome, there followed a much smaller book, one more hastily written but in all kinds of ways more accessible and more formative. The passionate message within its pages proved helpful to all of those struggling with the complexion thrown on human experience by the outbreak of World War I. In the text *Practical Mysticism* Underhill writes as an evangelist for Reality, capital R. She reminds her readership that in troubling times they are summoned to nothing less than a practical mysticism, something that should not be construed in a reified or rarified way as pertaining to the few and the proud and the brave. Underhill also denounces any distinctions drawn between spiritual life and practical life in this text, saying that this is misleading and false because, as she says, "the experience of being rooted in God leads necessarily to increased engagement in the world."

From 1914 forward, the vision of a practical mysticism for all became a driving melody line from which everything else that she wrote modulated. It was a term that caught people's imaginations and it ignited their desire, and I suspect that it still does today in our time. The particular genius of Underhill's contribution was, of course, her democratization of a *Practical Mysticism*. Underhill dedicated this book to an unseen future. She knew neither how the war would end nor whether the vision of *Practical Mysticism* would survive the carnage of the trenches, the killing of civilians, the bombing raids, the many sufferings of war. In the foreword to this book she addresses all of this, writing, and I quote:

> Many will feel that in such a time of conflict and horror when only the most ignorant, disloyal, or apathetic can hope for quietness of mind, a book which deals with that which is called the contemplative attitude to existence is wholly out of place. Indeed, deep conviction about the divine spirit in the human soul which is at the heart of a mystical concept of life is hard to reconcile with much of human history now being poured red hot from the cauldron of war. Yet the title I have deliberately chosen for this book, that of *Practical Mysticism*, means nothing if the attitude and then the discipline it recommends be adopted to fair weather alone, if the principles for which it stands break down when subjected to the pressure of events and cannot be reconciled.

End of quote. Proceeding fearlessly and speaking ever directly, utilizing her knowledge of the historic spiritual tradition, Underhill begins to describe practical mysticism. She presents it as something natural and dynamic, something that with training and attention can grow and mature out of the life process itself, causing persons to feel less and less distinction between prayer and action and more linkage between contemplative awareness and the furthering of God's creative Spirit in transformative action. In very endearing terms, she writes about practical mysticism as a steadying and enlarging sort of thing to which we are urged from within and drawn from without, specifically because of the giving of God's self, that direct activity of the one Love passing through and vivifying us, as she says, "like the sea waters supporting and passing through a shell fish." "Given-ness," which is another favored referent for God in her writing, capital G. Given-ness. "Your whole life hangs on a great given-ness," she writes.

Development in the practical mysticism espoused by Underhill enables people to see their worlds in truer proportions, to discern beyond what is apparent ruthlessness. It is practical mysticism that educates toward a charity that is free from sentimentalism and instills a resolute hope. In Underhill's words, practical mysticism makes possible, quote, "a life soaked through and through by a sense of God's reality and God's claim."

And what is the educative process that leads us to grow increasingly into a more realistic union, not only with the flux of life but with the source of life, the Whole, capital W, in which all lesser realities are subsumed? The process, according to Underhill, is one that corresponds with a latent mystical faculty in the human as created in all of us schmucks. Yeah. Growth in spiritual life, as Underhill reminds us, is not achieved by pushing and striving, though it does require attention and discipline, effort and desire.

The way that we develop as practical mystics, claims Underhill, is threefold. Firstly, through intentional self-disciplining and simplifying of our attention. Secondly, through intentional self-adjustments that serve to move us toward greater singleness of heart. And thirdly, through our

openness to some pattern forms of contemplation, by which we are accompanied by God. God supports us, checks us, feeds us in all of this. The education, as Underhill calls it, is never for the sake of ourselves alone. It leads to a bracing of our consciousness and an emancipation from the fetters of appearances. And most significantly, it turns us toward new levels of the world. So, let's consider each of these three strands of the educative process in turn.

Simplification of our attention. In Underhill's view, this suggests a quieting down, a centering, a movement to an inner stillness where our focus really becomes God who is Reality, capital R, and nothing less. Now mindful of how often we stumble on ourselves as the assumed alpha and omega of the universe, Underhill writes, and I quote, "Any spiritual view which focuses attention on ourselves and puts the human creature with its small ideas and adventures in the center foreground is dangerous until we recognize its absurdity," end of quote. She goes on to comment specifically on typical signs of self-preoccupation. "Fuss and feverishness," she writes, "anxiety and intensity, intolerance, instability, pessimism and wobble, every kind of hurry and worry—these are the signs of the self-made and self-acting soul," end of quote. It is simplification of our attention that can return our focus, putting things back in their true proportion. And it is the simplification of our attention that prepares us for prayer, making recollection possible. Underhill has some wonderful things to write and say about prayer. Two very good books of hers—one is *Life as Prayer*, a collection of many of her essays, and *Concerning the Inner Life*. In these she'll talk about prayer as being like a great garden which grows everything from alpines to potatoes. Prayer is something that even babies can do something about and no saint has exhausted the possibilities of yet. Prayer is this giant ocean in which elephants can swim and lambs can paddle. We all breathe a sigh of relief with all of that.

Now from the viewpoint of a 21st century North American living in a noise-filled age of distraction, Underhill's advice to simplify my attention assumes more meaning than she could ever have imagined. As I sit at my desk preparing lectures, my computer pings to let me know what new email has arrived. My cellphone rings and a few minutes later sings a familiar pop song alerting me to the arrival of voicemail. Meanwhile, the new art app on my iPad offers a tempting break from the task at hand. You recognize this. There are drawbacks and benefits here, of course. On the one hand, I'm able to receive communications from others handily and all of the time, and to respond quickly or not. I'm super-connected and super-in-control of my connectedness, or so I think and so we all think, though these connections are portable and faceless ones, and they're connections only to slices of persons and places. We dwell in a society characterized by what some contemporary commentators have termed networked individualism. Networked individualists are able to connect with all sorts of folks though they do it in an isolated way, having less and less face-to-face encounter with anyone. Has rugged individualism given way to a networked individualism? What do you think? As I attempt to stay with the train of thought that I'm in for the lecture I'm working on, too much competes for my attention. Why, it's getting more difficult for any of us to keep thinking a thought at all, given the blessed interruptions of our technological aids.

Point of fact, our 21st century daily use of technology, particularly our social media options, has made distraction ubiquitous. This is the thesis advanced by Maggie Jackson in a provocative new book titled *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*. Jackson notes, and I quote, "The seduction of alternative virtual universes, the addictive allure of multitasking people and things, are near religious allegiance to a constant state of motion. These are markers of a land of distraction in which our old conceptions of space and time and place have been shattered." Amid all of our material riches and abundant information systems, we in North America could be headed into a time of spiritual

decline, a turning point historically. What Maggie Johnson [Jackson] terms, and I quote, "a desert-like spell of collective forgetting," or what Harold Bloom aptly calls "a dark age of the screens," the world of multitasking, split-second decision making, netsurfing, and bullet-pointing pose real challenges to the kind of attentive gazing invited in Underhill's disciplining of our attention.

Do the habits of our technological hearts warrant closer review? We're browsing, surfing, dashing, hitching ourselves to machines that only further the disembodiment of social relations and only further separate us from the natural created order. Are we blind to the consequences of our practices? Our tools are in fact shaping us. The Internet has changed several generations' styles of attending to the materiality of life. And when was the last time anybody asked you if you desired this kind of profoundly formative influence? Surrounded by 500 different television channels, unlimited Nintendo PlayStations and wireless everything, grafted to our cellphones and iPods, how able are we really to move to a place of recollection to truly see, feel, taste, touch the Real, to hear our name called? The call to discipline our attention is one worth hearing in a techno-centric ethos where attention seems to be an ever-spiraling and untethered thing. I don't know if this is your experience as well, but in a little while we'll have a chance to chat about it.

The second component identified by Underhill in the education of a practical mystic is the making of some intentional self-adjustments, the simplification of our affections and will, and a detangling from clutter, psychological or otherwise, that prevents the singleness of heart that prepares us for deepened union with the Real. When Underhill writes about this training element in *Practical Mysticism*, she actually has the contents of human consciousness in mind with respect to self-adjustments. But in 21st century North American context, I believe that it becomes necessary to think through this element, not only in terms of the contents of our consciousness but in terms of our actual possessions as well, our many splendid things.

In our culture of consumption, possessions promise such a false but mighty sense of security. Excess quickly becomes normalized and sufficiency gets grossly distorted, and the line between wants and needs, basic comfort and excess, becomes more and more blurry. The economy of the U.S. in particular counts on our continued excessive consumption and the perpetuation of a commodity mentality. Media advertising strategizes to keep on successfully stimulating us as consumers. Little wonder that we've got more malls than high schools in the U.S., and that we've all become so accustomed to being surrounded by myriad amounts of goods. Seventy-five different options for sneakers? Three-hundred-and-one brands of cereal? It may appear that having things and having unlimited choices of things gives us a sense of control, but in reality it is our possessions too often that control us. Meanwhile, we have such little actual connection to our many transient things, and we continue to manage to turn a blind eye entirely to where our things come from and who it is that makes them.

The Latina theologian Michelle Gonzalez observes, quote, "The carefree matter in which American Christians purchase clothing and coffee, knowing well that these items are often produced by exploited workers, is baffling. The very existence of fair trade coffee and sweatshop-free clothing should force us to confront the fact that those items that do not bear these seals are often produced in dehumanizing conditions." Somewhere in our psyches as consumers we know that Gonzalez' critique is in fact a fair one, but when things take precedence over relationships, people and the services that they render gradually get commodified, too.

A detangling of our consciousness from whatever it is that inhabits… that inhibits singleness of heart, will have to include some reassessment of our relationship with our things, some exploration of why we value the things that we value, and how and when it is that our possessions possess us. Breaking from the allure of consumption won't be easy and it won't be a once-and-for-all thing, once done intentional adjustment. It likely will require the adoption and re-adoption of something akin to what the sociologist Juliet Schor calls "a new attitude of plentitude," a calling attention back to the inherent bounty of all that can't be consumed. This intentional self-adjustment includes making decisive strides toward being rich in things that in fact matter, relations with one another, relations with a planet in peril. By restoring our investments in one another and in our communities, by moving toward less ambiguous postures of sustainability, we'll find ourselves released at last from the shackles of "I have, I need, and I want"—a readjustment indeed.

Turning now to the third component in the education of a practical mystic, Underhill writes about an openness to particular forms of contemplation. Here she specifically addresses three complimentary ways of encounter with God: the discovery of God in the created order, the apprehension of infinite Reality in what is finite or that sense of the more in the Real, and finally a trustful dwelling in God which results in our letting go of tightly-reined selves so that God's activity can become manifest in our human activity. Underhill claims that it is in these ways of contemplation that we stand open to the living touch of God in the present moment, a touch that, of course, remains ever more than the specific moment itself. It is this more in the Real upon which all creatures depend for their existence. We hunger so for that glimpsing of eternity-with-us that beckons, invites, and prods.

The world for Underhill is the place where the infinite God manifests God's self in a multiplicity of forms. Engagement with God in the natural order of creation is a grace given without measure. And yet, the choice to engage creation, bringing a high degree of conscious awareness to it or not, remains ours. Of all of the forms of contemplation addressed by Underhill, the first, discovery of God in the created order, is the one that seemingly meets with the most resistance in our century. Now there's more than a bit of folly in this, because historically we've never stood more in need of a strongly ecological spiritual consciousness. With the earth continuing to warm up and greenhouse gas concentrations increasing, tropical forests being destroyed at the rate of 25 million acres each year, and some or other species of plant and animal life becoming extinct three times a day, we've all got to stop, and start doing our recollecting more conscious of place than we have ever before and more willing to commit to our common creaturehood. The ecological ignorance of our day—and some, like the eco-theologian Sallie McFague, would call this not just a matter of ignorance but arrogance as well—this ecological ignorance stands in sharp contrast with the first form of contemplation identified by Underhill. In our time, I suspect, this first contemplation will involve the rediscovery of God in creation and an unqualified return to the primary worldwide web without which we all perish.

As earth inhabitants at the turn of a new century, we humans have long been socialized to think firstly about all the ways that we are distinct and different from the rest of created life. As a result, we have minimal knowledge of other life forms with whom we share this earth and upon whom we so heavily depend. Drawing our attention to this very point in an engaging and effective manner, Steven Bouma-Prediger, author of the book *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, invites response to some simple basic questions. So, here we go:

- What is the soil like around your home?
- What are five agricultural plants in your region?

- What geological events have influenced the land where you live?
- Can you name five trees that live where you do?
- What are your resident and migratory birds?
- What flowers bloom where you live?
- What animals share your place?
- How many days until the moon is full?
- Were there stars out last night?
- From where does your water come?
- Where does your garbage go?

How'd you do? A simple test of our knowledge of place results in some pretty dismal grades for general awareness of the natural world. Our report card is incongruent with the stewardship of the earth theme that we Christians claim to value so much. For what does the language of stewardship amount to without some knowledge of the earth and its creatures and some acquisition of the skills needed to care for it? More thoroughgoing and thoughtful discussion of stewardship will point in the direction of concrete, specific, practical care for creation. When the chips are down, we are going to care for that which we love, and we will love that which we have truly come to know, come to understand. The practical mystic of the future, I'll bet, will be a lover of the natural world who knows and understands forms of life and life processes.

As to Underhill's other forms of contemplation, namely being able to see the more in the Real and being able to let go of the tight reins we place on ourselves so that God's ways can be manifest in our feet, hands, heart, tongue, these undoubtedly are the work of God's grace. But don't we have a part here, too? Are there dispositions and habits to be cultivated here? In her book, *The Spiritual Life*, Underhill, influenced by the 17th century Cardinal Bérulle, described three activities that figure prominently and consistently in the lives of practical mystics: adoration of God, adherence to God, and cooperation with God's creative Spirit in the world. Like Bérulle himself and like Underhill's own wise spiritual director von Hügel, she claims that the human experience of God evokes awe and that the natural corollary for awe is adoration.

Now there is, of course, a big difference between the experience of awe and what Karl Barth described once as "the dreadful prattle of theology." It is adoration of God that Underhill seeks, not firstly description or analysis, though these of course have their place. For her, adoration is an inner posture, an interior bearing, not some rigidly defined practice but a disposition of heart that lies at the core of prayer. Underhill would go so far as to state that adoration is the only real preparation for right action. I'm going to repeat that again. *Adoration is the only real preparation for right action*.

In our attempts to discern courses of action, therefore, what kinds of praxis we should be about, this principle stands as a pretty powerful one. One function of adoration is that it paves the way for deepened communion and more complete and confident adherence to God. The human reception of God's giving of God's self always seems to put us face-to-face with the ways and energies of the Triune God to which we are invited to adhere. That moment of adherence, then, points us outward toward the world and to the possibility of cooperation with God's creativity. Underhill is forceful in her insistence on this—worldly cooperation with God. She writes, and I quote,

> The riches of the spiritual landscape are not disclosed to us in order that we may 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 of the world or as the case may be, the field, the workshop, the study, the laboratory because we ourselves form part of the creative apparatus of God.

End of quote. Now you know people don't associate mysticism with the transformation of societies and institutional structures. People seem to presume that it has to do only with a person's inner life. The contemporary theologian, Philip Sheldrake, reminds us all that the classic mystical texts in Christianity, properly understood, do not support the viewpoint that mysticism is a, quote, "tropical luxuriance with no role in public political life." Reflecting on the Lord's Prayer with public life very much in view, Underhill comments, quote,

> Thy kingdom come. There is energy and drive and purpose in these words, an intensity of desire for the coming of perfection into life, not the limp resignation that lies devoutly in the road and waits for the steamroller, but a total concentration on the interests of God which must be expressed as action.

End of quote. This is a contemplatively edged action about what… which she speaks, but it's action all the same. Our development in practical mysticism in Underhillian terms involves an assuming of our own small parts in the vast operations of God's Spirit rather than trying to run some pokey little operation on our own somewhere. Engaging the world as practical mystics will decide many things for us. It will influence the choice of papers that we read, the movements we support, the leadership we vote for, and where we exert our time, treasure, and talent. And it will serve as a most truthful way of proceeding in times of struggle requiring endurance and long effort.

As I attempt to retrieve and provide access to central threads of Evelyn Underhill's *Practical Mysticism*, I am both conscious of and grateful for this enigmatic woman who walks in the footsteps of Mary Magdalene. Mary of Magdala, the 1st century Jewish woman, and the 20th century Underhill, were women whose lives witnessed to the irruption of the Spirit: who were faithful in time and place, who stood at abysses tithering [tottering] between life and death, who stayed, who remained. Both were mal-aligned: one by the pressures of early Christian patriarchal dominance, one by a Catholic tradition that has never recognized her sufficiently, after her decision in light of Pius X's oath against modernism, to affiliate as a member of the Anglican Church. But in the words and actions of these truthful women, contemporary women and men find companions and mentors whose memory can enliven us because they were notable women friends of God. And their spiritual insight and self-confidant leadership provide great inspiration for us.

These days it seems increasingly important for contemporary women to be able to connect their wobbly courage and spirit with what Elizabeth Johnson calls "a heritage of female holiness." In the two historic women we celebrate today, one finds this. So what will it mean to draw life from their lives? There is certainly much written content to work with regarding these historic figures—material to reflect upon, to pray with, to be taught by. And any practices of actively remembering the witness of historic women who walk in the footsteps of Mary Magdalene will release hope in us.

Granted, we'll need to press past only remembering them and their stories though, as it is actual active solidarity with them and what they stood for, vital union with their interests, that is really the invitation. It is our solidarity with the holy women in history that will point us all in the direction of ongoing conversion motivating the action of our best selves. In her book, *Friends of God and Prophets*, Elizabeth Johnson recalls Martin Marty being asked what he would like to see engraved on

his tombstone when he died. And Marty responded that, quote, "He'd like to see the word *vivit*, v-i-v-i-t, there since he hoped to live after death rather than to lie or rest." The Christian symbol, the Communion of Saints, carries this very same hope. How powerful it is to remember in hope that all of us sitting here today, along with the 1st century Mary of Magdala and the 20th century Evelyn Underhill and a great big cloud of witnesses in between—including women like Macrina and Scholastica and Clare of Assisi and Julian of Norwich and Catherine of Genoa and Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, Jane de Chantal, the list goes on—all of us are summoned to participate in the work of hallowing, of making holy the context in which we live by witnessing to the irruptions of the Spirit to resurrection life and doing so as practical mystics. Herein lies our highest calling, that of the practical mystic. In the words of Evelyn Underhill:

> See. Here is your vocation set out. It is your business to actualize it within the world of this time and space, perhaps by great endeavors, perhaps by small ones, in fields and market, tram and tube, office and meeting room, in the perpetual give and take of the common life. It is your business to actualize the more real life, that holy creative energy. You shall work for mercy, order, beauty, significance. You shall mend where you find things broken and make where you find the need.

Amen. Amen, we say. So be it.

Thank you.