

Rays From The Rose Cross Magazine

Book Reviews

Characterizing the Spiritual Life

Surely a classic, though, curiously, unfamiliar to many people who aspire to live a spiritual life, *The Spiritual Life* (Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania) is a small book which originally appeared as a series of four broadcast talks delivered by Evelyn Underhill prior to World War II. Underhill has an extraordinarily broad and deep appreciation of the histories, literatures, and theologies of many religious movements. She wrote several masterful studies, including *Worship and Mysticism*, which are exhaustive in scope and judiciously balanced in objectivity.

In this compact work, the English author's object "was to present some of the great truths concerning man's spiritual life in simple language; treating it, not as an intense form of other-worldliness remote from the

common ways and incompatible with the common life, but rather as the heart of all real religion and therefore of vital concern to ordinary men and women." In this reviewer's estimation, Underhill has admirably and eloquently achieved her objective.

Although admitting that the "spiritual life" is a dangerously ambiguous term, Underhill makes short work of disposing of that ambiguity. It is not "the life of my own inside," nor necessarily something very holy, difficult and peculiar-"a sort of honors course in personal religion." The essence of the spiritual life, seen through the "wide-angle lens of disinterested worship," is being in Being. The author observes, "We mostly spend our lives conjugating three verbs: to want, to have, and to do-craving, clutching and fussing," thus keeping us in a state of perpetual unrest and dissatisfaction. But released from our self-referential context, our personal ups and downs, our desires, grasping, and agitation are seen as small transitory facts within a vast, abiding spiritual world lit by a steady spiritual light.

The spiritual life becomes a conscious fact for us when we realize that the tendency of all life is to seek God, Who made it for Himself; that ultimate security is secured only by gaining a hold on the eternal; and that

there is in each of us that which is also unchanging and which finds its true home and goal in God.

The spiritual life is not something specialized and intense, "a fenced-off devotional patch rather difficult to cultivate and needing to be sheltered from the cold winds of the outer world...On the contrary, it is the very source of that quality and purpose that makes my practical life worth while." The spiritual life does not consist in mere individual betterment, or in assiduous attention to one's own soul, but in "a free and unconditional response to that [Holy] Spirit's pressure and call, whatever the cost may be." And that call transcends the question "What is best for my soul?" and even the question "What is most useful to humanity?" It addresses the ultimate question, "What function must this life fulfill in the great and secret economy of God?" God comes first, we are His creatures, His instruments. He is the controlling factor of every situation, religious or secular. It is only for His glory and creative purpose that we exist.

A spiritual life, then, is one in which all we do comes from the center where we are anchored in God and self-given to the great movement of His will. "Our spiritual life is His affair...It consists in being drawn, at

His pace and in His way, to the place where He wants us to be, not the place we fancied for ourselves."

The spiritual life is based on communion with God. It becomes a conscious fact when we acknowledge our spirit as an unfinished product upon which the creative action of God is constantly working. We awake to and in spirit, gradually or abruptly, and may hear spoken or speak the equivalent of "God only." We have glimpses of one living Perfection and, desiring it, see also the costly response it demands. From our finite center we long for infinity, but could and would not did not that incomprehensible Beneficence stoop toward mankind and incite and support and strengthen its seeking.

The two means by which conscious communion is pursued are mortification, killing the roots of self-love, and prayer, turning toward the living Reality and establishing a continual conversation with It. Prayer "is really one's whole life toward God: our longing for Him, our 'incurable God-sickness,'" as Barth calls it. Nor shall we know peace until our communion with Him is at the center of our experiential life.

Underhill distills man's right relation to God into three words: adoration, adherence, and co-operation. We cling to the Invisible in the visible and regard the Unseen as the most real of all realities. Adoration is the

"atmosphere within which alone the spiritual life can be lived." Hallowed be Thy Name; not "described, or analyzed be Thy Name. Before that Name let the most soaring intellects cover their eyes with their wings, and adore." In adoration we widen our horizons and drown our limited interests in the total interest of Reality, redeeming our souls from religious pettiness and giving them richness, depth, and breadth. Every aspect of our practical life can become part of this adoring response, from peeling potatoes to waiting for a bus.

The deepening communion with God calls for complete and confident adherence. An attitude of humble and grateful acceptance, a self-opening, an expectant waiting is the second essential point in the development of the spiritual life. If we approach Divinity out of a sense of spiritual poverty, we will be spiritually enriched. But no communion is possible for the one ostentatiously dressed in self-esteem, for "the dew of Grace" can not pass through the veneer of him whose righteousness is self-given. The Spirit of spirits draws us with irresistible power to and by His Love and we adhere to Him as iron is drawn to a magnet.

When we co-operate with God, we "pull our own weight." The theological axiom "Man's will and God's grace rise and fall together," is translated into practical

terms by our learning to will God's will. He made us in order to use us, for His purpose, not ours. We are not only His handiwork; we are at times His tools. Our goal is that all merely self-willed choices and obstinacy be drained out of us and that our work become more and more God's work in us. Then, as agents of the creative Spirit, we transform our homely activities and harmonize our everyday actions with our spiritual outlook and impersonal utility.

Our glimpses or intuitions of Perfection painfully contrast with our sense of imperfection and unworthiness. Yet, by God's grace, we want to cooperate. We volunteer. We become compliant. "Here am I." Which means going anyhow, anywhere, at any time. We are enkindled by a will ours, yet not ours. We become transmitters as well as receivers. Real cooperation always entails sacrifices, and therefore suffering.

Complete self-giving to Spirit produces three distinguishing characteristics in human souls: tranquillity, gentleness, and strength-which implies an immense depth and an invulnerable steadiness as the soul's abiding temper. While fuss and feverishness and every kind of hurry and worry "are signs of the self-made and self-acting soul, the spiritual parvenu;

tranquillity, gentleness, and strength manifest the threefold imprint of the spirit on souls surrendered to God's great action." Such souls equably endure the rising and falling of religious temperatures and the myriad upheavals of inner and outer circumstance.

Underhill concludes her wise and beautifully expressed exposition by answering a few questions which detractors and sceptics often raise as obstacles to embracing the spiritual life. She dispatches these objections with quick, clear-minded intelligence. We may say to God, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts find no rest save in Thee." And we concur with St. Augustine that "God is the only Reality, and we are only real insofar as we are in His order, and He in us." Nevertheless, what is asked of us, writes Underhill, is not necessarily a great deal of time devoted to what we regard as spiritual things, but the constant offering of our wills to God by trying to give spiritual quality to every detail of our everyday lives. "It is the constant correlation between inward and outward that really matters." "Many people seem to think that the spiritual life requires a definite and exacting plan of study. It does not. But it does require a definite plan of life; and courage in sticking to the plan, not merely for days or weeks, but for years."

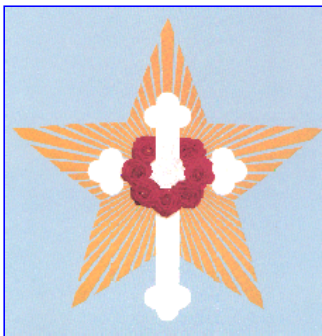
The Spiritual Life is one of those rare books which may be taken up again and again, each time providing fresh insight and inspiration for whomever is earnestly seeking to live the spiritual life.

—C. W.

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