



By Margaret Evans, Editor

Let me tell y'all about a book I just read. (I know, I've been doing a lot of that lately. I'm kind of on a roll.) It's called *Practical Mysticism: A Little Book for Normal People*, by Evelyn Underhill. It was published in 1914, so you won't find it on the

New York Times

bestseller list. You may, however, download it on your Kindle for \$.99, an investment I highly recommend.

You readers know I have long been interested in the life of the spirit, and this short book, recommended by a fellow traveler, charmed me from the get-go with its title. I found it cheeky and clever and surprisingly modern for a title that's 100 years old. I liked the idea of "practical" mysticism, was drawn to the notion that a "normal" person like myself might achieve such a thing. (Okay, my husband just told me that "normal" is a stretch. But you know what I mean.) I liked that Evelyn Underhill was not a popular New Age guru but a long-dead Englishwoman who rose to prominence as an Anglo-Catholic writer; it appealed to my own little set of cultural preferences and prejudices. Mostly, however, I liked the idea of a sturdy, meat-and-potatoes approach to "mysticism," a word that had always felt a bit exotic and intimidating to me – like something I could look at, but could never touch. (Me? A mystic? I'm just a nice Methodist girl from Alabama!) Maybe this would be mysticism in sensible shoes and a comfy sweater – something even I could grab hold of?

Well, as it turns out, Underhill believed the mystic's life was the most practical life a person could lead – and, by "practical," she meant encountering the world as it *really* is instead of through a veil of illusion. Mysticism, by her definition, is not an escape from reality, but a face-to-face reckoning with it. (What could be more practical?) The mystical realm is not some airy-fairy dreamscape that only beckons to poets and prophets and cloistered monks; anybody can be a mystic. Apparently, yours truly is already in the club. You might be, too.

Into the Mystic

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Underhill acknowledges that it's easier for some of us than for others. For poets and artists, mysticism – which starts with seeing things as they really are, beneath the images and constructs and systems our minds invent – comes somewhat naturally. (As Lady Gaga might put it, they're born that way.) For religious converts, the unveiling often comes all at once – a change of heart and mind and "sight" so sudden and powerful, it can last a lifetime. For everybody else, however, the mystical vision must be cultivated and nurtured, with differing degrees of difficulty depending on who – and how – you are. The bottom line is that it *can* be done.

As a writer with a certain poetic bent who has also known the shock and awe of unexpected – and frankly, uninvited – religious conversion, I've always had something of the mystic's vision, I guess. I "go there" easily and often – through art, music, literature, liturgy, nature, and any number of doorways. But I don't tend to think in terms of "mystic," for I am also deeply attached (or shallowly, rather) to my "normal" self – the harried and hassled working mom who always has a dirty house, never has anything to wear, doesn't know what to make for dinner... the opinion writer who can't stay off Facebook, gets sucked into pointless, unresolvable arguments, wishes cable news would disappear but can't stop watching it...

So, yeah. I know from normal. I live there.

In this little book for normal people, Evelyn Underhill has spoken to me personally and profoundly – from 100 years ago – and I feel like I've known her for at least a thousand. (Don't you love when that happens?) I'm not sure she's taught me anything new, *per se*. It's more than that. Through the mists of time, she has *recognized* me and called me by name, and in doing so, she has helped me recognize and name myself.

Hi, I'm Margaret. I'm a normal person and a mystic.

It's not an impossible combo, she tells me, nor a freakish one. In fact, it's the fullest way to live. In some odd transaction of spirit, this stranger-friend writing from a century ago has given me permission to be who I've always been . . . but more so. And I don't have to stop being a columnist. I don't have to stop engaging in current affairs. I don't have to join a convent or move to an artist's garret or hike the Camino de Santiago.

There *are* things I must do, however, because my normal life can be so much richer with my mystic in charge. Unlike many folks, I'm lucky in that I know my mystic well – we're besties, as my daughter might say – but I need to let her take over from Ms. Normal. If I can learn to lead with my mystic, Ms. Normal will have a much better time.

I won't get into the details about how that happens. Underhill gives instructions, but they're somewhat nebulous and can't be delivered in bullet points. Besides, there are many paths one can take, and there's nothing more boring than reading about somebody else's spiritual "exercises." If you're interested, get the book. It's 99 cents!

Yes – no matter where you fall on the sensitivity spectrum, you, too, can learn to develop practical mysticism for a very small fee. And what will you get for your money? It depends on your dedication. Complete union with Ultimate Reality/Divine Love/The One (yes, we're talking about God, here) is the goal of the serious mystic. And as you might imagine, it takes serious

commitment. But developing your mystical vision at any level is a worthy endeavor, as even a minor league mystic like myself can attest. It will help you see through surfaces to the truth of things, and as Underhill puts it . . .

□□ " . . . those glad and vivid 'things' will speak to you. They will offer you news at least as definite and credible as that which the paper-boy is hawking in the street: direct messages from that Beauty which the artist reports at best at second hand. Because of your new sensitiveness, anthems will be heard of you from every gutter; poems of intolerable loveliness will bud for you on every weed. Best and greatest, your fellowmen will shine for you with new significance and light. Humility and awe will be evoked in you by the beautiful and patient figures of the poor, their long dumb heroisms, their willing acceptance of the burden of life. All the various members of the human group, the little children and the aged, those who stand for energy, those dedicated to skill, to thought, to plainest service, or to prayer, will have for you fresh vivid significance, be felt as part of your own wider being. All adventurous endeavors, all splendor of pain and all beauty of play – more, that grey unceasing effort of existence which makes up the groundwork of the social web, and the ineffective hopes, enthusiasms, and loves which transfuse it – all these will be seen and felt by you at last as full of glory, full of meaning; for you will see them with innocent, attentive, disinterested eyes, feel them as infinitely significant and adorable parts of the Transcendent Whole in which you are immersed."

Too grandiose? Woo-woo? Over the top? I promise you she's not exaggerating. This is what it's like; this is how it feels. I've been there; I've seen. I plan to go and see more often. You can, too. Maybe you already do. It's our birthright as human beings. Let's claim it! Let's all be practical mystics together. It's only normal.