The year was 1914. England stood in a twilight zone. The balance of power in Europe had shifted and a unified Germany was strengthening. In the period leading up to World War I, England advanced its educational systems and buttressed its defense capability. Making overtures to France and Russia, it held Germany at a long distance.

Domestically, the pre-war years under George V proved turbulent. Tariff reform caused widespread consternation, and unrest abounded amongst labor and suffrage movements. Pre-War England experienced some of the greatest industrial strife in its history. Massive strikes of dockworkers, railroad workers, and miners threatened to bring the country to a halt. Meanwhile, twenty-five percent of the population found themselves living in poverty.¹

From this historic island, and its people's existential struggles in place and time, there arose the voice of a gifted communicator with a compelling spiritual vision. The intellectual clarity and persuasiveness of the speaker were unmistakable, though the voice was an unanticipated one. Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941), after all, was a woman, someone who in her socio-cultural context, was expected to do little more than marry young and raise a family. Underhill had no ecclesiastical backing; she had no benefactors, and her gender rendered it impossible for her to receive a formal theological education. But it was her voice, at the start of the twentieth century that lifted the spirit of a people. Convinced that religion had to speak to people and their struggles, Underhill insisted that the future of Christianity would depend on the retrieval of its rich mystical tradition, a tradition to which few persons had access, and one that had enormous formative potential.

By 1914, Underhill’s classic text, *Mysticism: The Preeminent Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (1911) had attracted a broad audience. It received the attention of the noteworthy Baron Friedrich von Hugel, friend of Ernst Troeltsch and a correspondent of William James, with whom Underhill often is compared in twentieth century religious thought.² *Mysticism* was a tour-de-force, a brilliant and carefully rendered piece for


which Underhill had studied a thousand sources in order to explore the mystic way. The five hundred page volume 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. The book marked the start of a prolific spiritual writing career for Underhill, and it signaled the revival of mysticism with some fresh accents.  

Underhill went on to produce some three hundred pieces on the spiritual life: books, essays, introductions, and reviews. She became the first woman invited to give theological lectures at Oxford and the first asked to lead clergy retreats in the Anglican Church.  

At home in both academic and ministerial settings, her deft coupling of theology and spirituality was exemplary. Upon her death, the Times Literary Supplement described her as “unmatched by any professional teacher of her day in understanding the deep longing of the human soul.”  

T. S. Eliot recognized her as the one who had most understood “the grievous need of her contemporaries for a contemplative element in their lives.”  

A full century later she continues to inspire. Theologian Kathleen Henderson Staudt notes: “she brings together a mind that is fascinated by theological and philosophical exploration with a heart that recognizes and is devoted to the practice of prayer and a strong sense of vocation as a teacher of spiritual practice.”

A Practical Mysticism for All

In late 1914, three years following the publication of Underhill’s massive tome, there followed a smaller book, Practical Mysticism, that proved to be more accessible for ordinary people, and timely. Practical Mysticism carried within its pages a passionate message, one that proved helpful to those struggling with the unprecedented outbreak of World War. Lucy Menzies, a contemporary of Underhill’s and a spiritual teacher and author in her own right, recalls the personal impact of this text: “By the mercy of God, Practical Mysticism came into my hands at a time of great need. It was given to me at the first Christmas of the Great War in 1914. I had been prepared for its message by many years of searching without finding, and it spoke straight to the heart of my condition.”

Practical Mysticism offered persons a realistic and invigorating way of proceeding spiritually in the face of a war that caused every conscience-driven European to shudder.

Underhill dedicated this book “to an unseen future.” She knew neither how the War would unfold nor whether the vision of a practical mysticism would survive all of the senseless sufferings of war. In the forward to her book, she addresses this:

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 the human history now being poured red hot from the Cauldron of war...

(2012), 107.

3 Most notable amongst these is Underhill’s democratization of it.
5 Underhill was named a Fellow at King’s College in London and was awarded an honorary degree from the University of Aberdeen. In addition to her teaching and writing, she offered spiritual direction, led retreats for women and for ministers, and engaged in a substantive practice of outreach to the poor.
6 See “E. Stuart Moore—Obituary,” The Times (London), June 19, 1941.
Yet, the title [I have] deliberately chosen for this book—that of *Practical Mysticism*—means nothing if the attitude and 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...

Adopting a pacifist stance herself and proceeding courageously, utilizing her knowledge of the historical Christian spiritual tradition, Underhill describes the nature and function of practical mysticism. She speaks of it being something natural and dynamic that with training and attention can grow and mature out of the life process itself, causing persons to feel less distinction between prayer and deeds, and more linkage between contemplative awareness and the furthering of God's creative spirit in transformative action.

Writing as “an evangelist for Reality,” she urges a “union with the Real” with “the Real” being a referent for God, as the foundation of a practical mysticism. She tells people that they are summoned to nothing less than “union with the Real” in challenging times, and reminds them that practical mysticism is not a rarified thing that pertains only to some. She denounces any and all distinctions made between spiritual life and practical life, finding these unhelpful. For her, increased consciousness of one’s rooting in God as the Real leads necessarily to deeper engagement in the world.

In endearing terms, Underhill writes about the spiritual life of ordinary practical mystics as “a steadying and enlarging sort of thing.” She describes it as one that involves a being urged from within and drawn from without, specifically because of the giving of God’s self, experienced as “the direct activity of the one Love, passing through and vivifying one, like the sea waters supporting and passing through a shellfish.” Givenness becomes a further favored referent for God in Underhill’s work: “Your whole life hangs on a great Givenness,” she will exclaim. Interjecting some humor, she writes that exercising one’s mystical faculty will take attentiveness and discipline: “if not the renunciation of the cloister, then at least the virtues of the golf course.” Development in a practical mysticism then enables a person to see his or her world more honestly, discerning beyond apparent ruthlessness, while moving toward a love free from sentimentality, a love that instills a genuine hope. Such is the everyday mysticism that makes possible “a life soaked through and through by a sense of God’s reality and God’s claim.”

From 1914 forward, Underhill’s vision of a practical mysticism for all stood as the driving melody line from which all else that she wrote modulated. It was a term that caught people’s imaginations, igniting desire, and inspiring courage. It still does. In the early decades of the twenty-first century, it is helpful to explore its beckon anew and to consider the specific process that leads to development in it.

**Dynamics of Practical Mysticism in Twenty First Century Perspective**

Engaging the work of Underhill in our time prompts a basic question: What can be learned from her about that process that leads persons to grow into more realistic union not only with the flux of life but with the Source of life, the Whole in which all lesser realities are subsumed? This process, according to Underhill, corresponds with a latent mystical faculty in the human as created. And growth in union with the Real is something natural, something not achieved by pushing and striving, though it does require attention and discipline, desire and effort. The

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12 Greene, ed., *Fragments of an Inner Life*, 54.
way that persons develop as practical mystics is threefold for Underhill: 1) through a disciplining and simplifying of our attention, 2) through intentional self-adjustments that serve to move us to greater singleness of heart, and 3) through openness to some patterned forms of contemplation through which we are “accompanyed supported, checked and fed.”18 The “education” that ensues from these practices is rich, leading to a bracing of our consciousness, an “emancipation from the fetters of appearance,”19 and a turning toward new dimensions of the world.

Considering each strand of this educative process in turn, simplification of attention, as described by Underhill, suggests a quieting down and a centering, the movement toward an inner stillness where one’s focus becomes God, who is Reality and nothing less. Mindful of how often we stumble on ourselves as the assumed epitome of reality, Underhill cautions: “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 till we recognize its absurdity.”20 She comments specifically on indicators of self-preoccupation: “Fuss and feverishness, 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.”21 It is simplification of attention that returns focus, putting things back in their true proportion; and it is simplification of attention that prepares persons for prayer, making recollection possible.

From a twenty-first century standpoint, living and working in a noisy environment of digital technological distraction, Underhill’s prodding to simplify our attention assumes more meaning than she ever imagined.22 As we situate ourselves at our daily workstations, our computers “ping” to let us know that email has arrived. Cell phones ring, while iPods play familiar pop songs. Beeps alert us to the presence of new voice mail, and a variety of apps on iPads offer breaks from the task at hand and escape from life concerns.

There are drawbacks to our high technology. On the one hand, it appears that we’re able to receive communication from others handily and all of the time, and to respond quickly or not. On the other hand, we too readily assume that we are super connected and in control of our connectedness, when in reality these connections are disembodied, providing mere slices of persons and places. We move increasingly in technological environments that foster a “networked individualism”23 in which persons connect with all sorts of folks in isolated ways, having far less live embodied exchange with anyone. Has rugged individualism morphed to a more acceptable networked individualism?

In technocentric environments, so much competes for our attention. Attempts to be more reflective are thwarted often by the blessed interruptions of our technological aids. Daily use of social media options has made distraction almost ubiquitous. This is the thesis advanced by Maggie Jackson in her book Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age. Jackson observes: “The seduction of alternative virtual universes, the addictive allure of multitasking people and things, our near religious allegiance to a constant state of motion: these are markers of a land of distraction, in which our old conceptions of space, time, and place have been shattered.”24 Amidst first world material riches and abundant information systems, we who glorify technology may well be headed towards a negative period of decline, a turning point historically.

18 Underhill, Spiritual Life, 36.
19 Underhill, Practical Mysticism, 7.
20 Underhill, Spiritual Life, 12.
21 Underhill, Spiritual Life, 93-94.
23 This is a term coined by Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman. See Networked: The New Social Operating System (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2012).
Dashing to browse, surf and tweet, persons experience obstacles to their good intentions to move toward what Underhill calls a “disciplining of our attention.” Indeed the “habits of our technological hearts” warrant more critical review. Are our devices shaping us? Surrounded by unlimited social media options, and grafted to our technological “necessities,” are we able to move to those places of recollection where we truly see, feel, taste, touch the Real? Underhill’s urging to discipline our attention carries fresh import in a technocentric ethos where attention is an increasingly untethered thing.

A second component identified by Underhill as integral in the education of a practical mystic is the making of intentional self-adjustments, the simplification of our affections and will and a detangling from clutter, psychological or otherwise, that could prevent the singleness of heart that prepares persons more fully for union with the Real. Writing about this formative dimension, Underhill has the contents of human consciousness in mind. In twenty-first century consumerist contexts, however, it becomes fruitful to critically reflect on this element not only in terms of the contents of our consciousness but also in terms of our actual possessions, our many splendid things.

In cultures of consumption, possessions promise false but mighty senses of security. Excess quickly becomes normalized, and “sufficiency” is grossly distorted. The line between wants and needs, comfort and excess becomes very blurry. The economies of consumerist cultures count on continuous excessive consumption and the successful perpetuation of commodity mentality. Media advertising strategizes to keep on stimulating consumers. Inhabitants of consumerist cultures become accustomed to being surrounded by myriad amounts of goods—90 different options for sneakers? 201 brands of cereal? 75 different watch styles? It may appear that having an unlimited choice of things provides a sense of control, but in reality, possessions more often than not control people. A great irony here is that we have little actual connection to our many transient things. And we’ve managed to turn a blind eye to where our many things come from and who makes them. When things start to take precedence over persons, people and the services they render quickly become commoditized as well.

The detangling of consciousness from what inhibits singleness of heart ought to include a reassessment of our relationship with our things, some exploration of why the things we value are valued, and discernment regarding the degree to which possessions are possessing us. Breaking from the allure of consumption is neither an easy nor a once-and-for-all intentional adjustment. It requires the adoption and readoption of something akin to what the sociologist Juliet Schor calls “an attitude of plenitude,” a calling one’s focus back to the inherent bounty of all that can’t be consumed. Making adjustments in this way means taking decisive strides toward opting to be rich in things that in fact matter: relations with one another and with a planet in peril. By restoring our investments in one another and our communities, and by moving toward less ambiguous postures of sustainability, we find ourselves released from the shackles of “I have, I need, and I want.”

Turning to the third component in the education of a practical mystic, Underhill identifies particular forms of contemplation. Here she specifically addresses three complementary ways of encounter with God: the discovery of God in creation, the apprehension of infinite Reality in what is finite or the sense of the More in the real, and, finally, trustful dwelling in God, which results in our letting go of tightly reined selves so that God’s activity becomes more manifest in our human activity. Underhill senses that the practice of these ways of contemplation opens persons to the living touch of God in the present moment, something that remains ever more than the specific

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26 For an excellent analysis of this, see the classic text by John F. Kavanaugh, Following Christ in a Consumerist Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).
moment itself. It is that greater Real in the existential moment upon which all creatures depend for their existence. Human beings hunger for glimpses of it, sightings of the hidden “eternity with us” that accompanies and draws.

The created world, for Underhill, is a revelatory place where an infinite God manifests Godself in a multiplicity of forms. Engagement with God in the natural order of creation, the first of Underhill’s three ways of contemplation, is both a possibility and a choice. Persons can opt to bring a high degree of conscious awareness to their engagement of the created order or not.28

Of all of the forms of contemplation addressed by Underhill, the first, discovery of God in the created order, carries some real urgency in our time. Historically, humankind has never stood more in need of a strongly ecological, spiritual consciousness. The earth continues to warm up as greenhouse gas concentrations rise, tropical forests are being destroyed at the rate of 25 million acres each year, and multiple species of plant and animal life are becoming extinct annually. More than ever, our forms of recollection must reflect greater consciousness of place. Ignorance regarding the created order becomes a matter of arrogance at some point, something that contemporary ecotheologians emphasize.29 Lack of mindfulness of the created order stands in sharp contrast with the first form of contemplation identified by Underhill.

In the twenty-first century, the first contemplation points in the direction of rediscovery of God in creation, and genuine care for the primary World Wide Web, without which we all perish. As inhabitants of the earth, we have been heavily socialized to think about all of the ways that humans are distinct from the rest of created life. Such thinking has resulted in our having such minimal knowledge of other life forms with whom we share the earth and upon whom we heavily depend.

People espouse “stewardship of the earth” as a value but typically don’t have much knowledge of the natural world and its ecosystems. What does “stewardship” mean without some understanding of the created order itself and without acquisition of the kinds of skills required to care practically for it? Contemporary discussions of stewardship will be more effective when they point in the direction of concrete specific, practical care for creation. We will care for that which we love, and we will love that which we have truly come to know and understand, all of which is made more possible through contemplation and action. The practical mystic of the future will be a lover of the natural world, who knows and understands forms of life and life processes.

The Dispositions of Heart of the Practical Mystic

In seeking union with the Real through simplification of one’s attention, intentional self-adjustments for the sake of greater singleness of heart, and openness to patterned forms of contemplation, there are interior dispositions and habits to be cultivated. In her book *The Spiritual Life* (1937), Underhill, influenced heavily by the seventeenth century Cardinal Pierre de Berulle,30 describes dispositions and habits of the heart that figure prominently in the lives of practical mystics: adoration of God, adherence to God, and cooperation with God’s Creative Spirit in the world.

Like Berulle himself, and like her wise spiritual director Friedrich von Hugel, Underhill claims that the experience of God evokes awe in the human, and that the most natural stance of all in the face of awe is *adoration*. Adoration

28 Underhill illustrates this point by telling an old story of “Eyes” and “No Eyes,” who travel along the very same path, but approach it so differently. “Eyes” chooses to be open to the revelations of creation as he goes, while “No Eyes” doesn’t have time for or interest in this. Underhill is skillful in contrasting their experiences. *See Practical Mysticism*, 6-7.
30 Pierre de Berulle (1575-1629) was a mystic, cardinal, and statesman. He is credited with being the founder of the French School of Spirituality. Underhill amplifies his categories here. *See Spiritual Life*, 58-59.
of God is something different from theological description or analysis.\footnote{Underhill humorously notes that it is something very different from what Karl Barth calls “the dreadful prattle of theology.” Underhill, \textit{Spiritual Life}, 62.} It is an inner posture, an interior bearing. It is not a rigidly defined practice but a disposition of heart that lies at the core of prayer. And Underhill goes so far as to identify adoration as the basis for and preparation for right action.

Adoration tills the ground for deepened communion, for fuller \textit{adherence to God}. The human reception of God’s giving of God’s self puts us face to face with ways and energies of the Triune God to which we are all invited to adhere. Adherence moves outward then toward the world and to the possibility of cooperation with God’s creative spirit within it.

Underhill consistently emphasizes this—worldly cooperation with God. She writes: “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.”\footnote{Underhill, \textit{Spiritual Life}, 74.} People tend to associate mysticism with the transformation of individuals, rather than that of societies and institutional structures, but for Underhill, the latter association is imperative. And practical mysticism cannot be divorced from public engagement. Reflecting on the Lord’s Prayer with public life in view, she asserts: “Thy Kingdom COME! There is energy, drive, 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 steam roller, but a total concentration on the interests of God, which must be expressed as action.”\footnote{Underhill, \textit{Spiritual Life}, 77.}

Ultimately development in practical mysticism, in Underhillian perspective, involves assuming our small part in the vast operations of God’s Spirit rather than trying to see what we can create by ourselves. Engaging the world as practical mystics will influence our choice of spiritual practices, the causes we support, the leadership we favor, the choice of those alongside whom we stand in solidarity, and the decision about where we exert our time, treasure, and talent. And, as it did a century ago, the choice of a practical mysticism will serve as a truthful way of proceeding in times of struggle requiring endurance and long effort.

In 2014, one hundred years following the publication of \textit{Practical Mysticism}, we are not that people standing on the brink of the pending atrocities of World War I. We are instead the ones who find ourselves rummaging around in a lot of rubble, standing in the aftermath of a number of disasters: 9/11, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Katrina and Sandy, earthquakes in Haiti, tsunamis, nuclear meltdowns, clergy sex abuse scandals, terrorist threats, violation of the human rights of our opponents and dissidents through torture in defense of national and international security, chemical weapon slaughters in Syria, and the list motors on. There are Good Friday experiences in our landscape and Easter Sunday risings too, but we, early on in our century, are most conscious of living in an uncomfortable Holy Saturday sort of place. In this “neither here nor there” position, in the between of death and life, we run into piles of debris, the reminder of so much that is no longer. We do our best to assess what has and hasn’t moved out of death, in order to understand what of life there is to which we can testify.\footnote{I am indebted here to the exceptional work of practical theologian Shelly Rambo, who speaks of the experience of Holy Saturday in moving ways that bring its terror and its possibilities to the forefront. For extended discussion of this, see Shelly Rambo, \textit{Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining} (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).}

The theological giant Karl Rahner, reflecting on the experience of Holy Saturday, speaks about “its due place in our life of faith.”\footnote{Karl Rahner, ”Hidden Victory,” \textit{Theological Investigations}, vol. 7 (New York: Seabury Press, 1957), 151.} Describing it as “the situation of one who stands between a present that is already vanishing, and a
future which is so far present only in hope,”36 Rahner writes about death and life interpenetrating one another in the experience of Saturday. He gives witness to the Christ reality already at the heart and center of the Saturday experience. Rahner writes: “He is there as the innermost essence of all thing...even when every kind of order seems to be breaking up. He is with us as the light of day and the air are with us, which we do not notice.”37 What then becomes the stance of the practical mystic in this “Holy Saturday” reality?

Saturday mystics are middle day attesters to the Spirit of God that remains.38 The Spirit stays even in what are ruins, inviting persistence. The aftermaths of tragedies and injustices escape human comprehension and control and yet, in the disciplining of attention, the making of some necessary self-adjustments, particularly adjustments regarding a sense of outcomes, and genuine openness to the Real beyond the immediately troubling, persons can and do cooperate with God’s creative Spirit, giving life full form to what it is that remains in Holy Saturday debris. With good-humored resilience in the face of rubble, practical mystics persevere with a joy and zest for life even when light is dim. Perhaps this itself is an act of adoration.

Commitment to a practical mysticism takes fresh shape in a time when the need for contemplatively-edged action is great. In haunting words that span the decades, echoing anew, Underhill continues to guide: “It is your business to actualize within the world of time and space, perhaps by great endeavors, perhaps by small ones in field and market, tram and tube, office and meeting room, in the perpetual give and take of the common life—that 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.” Such is the art of union with the Real. Such is the vocation of the practical mystic.

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38 See Rambo, Spirit and Trauma.