

Evelyn Underhill and the Creative Spirit

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for clergy working on a DMin, Seabury Institute

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Ps 96 Sing a new song

Wisdom 7:24-8:1 Wisdom makes us friends of God & prophets

John 4: 19-24 woman at the well

The Gospel reading for today is the concluding snippet of Jesus' long conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob. That conversation offers two rich and ancient images for inspiration and, by extension, for the life of faith. The first image is that of a well, especially a sacred and very deep well such as this one. A woman standing by such a well is an archetypal reference to Sophia, god of wisdom, and to the Muses, gods specific to each of the arts. The deep well has always been a classic image for legitimate creative inspiration and for the genuine experience of God.

Implicit in the image of the well is the contrast between well water and surface water or ground water. As everyone used to know--before the days of faucets and sewers, that is--ground water is apt to be dangerously polluted. Water drawn from deep within the earth will be pure, and so the "well" image insists that creativity is not simply "run-off" collected from the world around us. Creativity comes from deep inside. The guardian spirit of the well--always a woman--testifies that one gains access to these depths through love and not by power.

Jesus approaches the Well of Jacob without a bucket, of course. He is a man and the bucket or the container is a feminine image of fertility and creative capacity. In the conversation that follows, Jesus contrasts this pure, deep well-water with another kind of water, usually translated "living water." The Greek might be more accurately translated "spurting water." It is at once a masculine image and a reference to spring water--water that bubbles to the surface spontaneously because the underground

aquifer is both very full and very near to the surface. Spring water is well water that comes to surface all on its own.

Needless to say, springs are rare stuff in arid climates. In the dry season, they are apt to disappear. That's why they are the second great Western image for creative inspiration: it happens unexpectedly and unreliably. Springs are fickle. They are unpredictable. That's part of why the guardian figure is always female: "woman" is the archetype of all that is changing and unpredictable. What Jesus offers the woman, essentially, is a spring that will never run dry--a spring that will be a source of life "eternally." This passage is one of many in which the Gospel writer claims that Jesus himself is Sophia, incarnate now as a man not a woman. The whole scene between Jesus and the woman at the well ends with an unmistakable reference back to the Wisdom passage we heard this morning.

These are particularly apt readings for the commemoration of Evelyn Underhill, who was a spectacularly unexpected, improbable character. She had no scholarly training either in history or in philosophy or in theology. As far as I can tell, she never even received a BA. She was not supported by the church or by the university. She was the only daughter of a rich lawyer, frivolously educated and then married off--at the very late age of 32--to another London lawyer. She had to maintain the active social life of a proper Victorian lady of the upper class. In her case, that meant spending a lot of time boating with her husband and her father. All her biographies point out that both men were great yachtsmen. What a life for a scholar, hours and hours sitting in the back of a boat someone else is piloting.

Nonetheless, in 1911 she published *the* scholarly study of mysticism. It has never gone out of print: it's marvelously astute and gloriously readable. She establishes beyond all question that mysticism is a variety of creative experience, similar in form to creative experience and creative activity in any of the arts. God clearly said to her, in the words of today's psalm, "sing a new song." And she did so. She did so despite all the evidence that she of all people seemed ill-equipped for this task, professionally unprepared, and far too busy with other things.

People like her set a very dangerous example to the rest of us. People like her deconstruct all the excuses all of us use all of the time when there is some piece of writing we are putting off.

Who, me? That's impossible. I can't do that!

or

Not now, I've got too much going on. I really can't. And the phone is ringing--look, I'll get back to you.

or, more dangerously yet

I'm NOT going to make a fool of myself.

There's not a writer in the world who is free of these demon voices. Not a one. When they show up in your head, beware. These are the pollution of ground water. Surface water. Such voices are the run-off from every toxic person and every toxic situation you have ever encountered. Don't drink that stuff.

When these demons show up in my study, my favorite temptation is to stop writing and go back to reading. The library is full of books I ought to read. Buckets and buckets of . . . books. In these days of computerized search and the internet, electronic research can turn into the Sorcerer's Apprentice. Do you remember that Disney cartoon? Mickey Mouse casts a spell on a broom, sending it off to draw water from a well. Let's call the broom "Google." Google can't be stopped, and soon he threatens to drown poor Mickey Mouse with torrents of . . . reading. Reading and more reading.

Reading can of course be as legitimate research. Reading books is how one joins a culturally-general conversation. I'm sure Underhill spent incredible hours alone, just reading, because she had been denied an education equal to her talents. And I know that all of you will spend a lot of time reading as you start work on your dissertation proposals in the next three weeks.

But reading can also be a way of avoiding the danger that *I'm going to make a fool of myself*. When God calls our names, rather than responding "here I am," we can yelp, "who, *me?*" and run hide in the library. Evelyn Underhill came out of the library. She was a woman when women were supposed to be brainless. She was neither a scholar nor a

theologian in the eyes of the world, and yet she proved she was stunning good at both scholarship and theology. It took a lot of courage to sing that new a song.

Evelyn Underhill found the abiding spring that Jesus describes. She found the Presence of God welling up within her, and she trusted her experience of God. As a result, she understood the very human experience of the mystics she studied. Above all, I suggest, she kept her own balance between the competing pressures of that deep well of reading and the bubbling spring of her own experience of God. Like her, we have to remember that all of it--the deep well of the library and the spring of our experience--are the mighty waters of the Spirit flowing through us just as they flowed through the people we are reading. She trusted all this and kept working against astounding odds and despite considerable social pressure

So must all of us. We are here at Seabury for a reason, and we have to watch for that reason to begin bubbling up. It will. I promise you that with all of my heart. This God is very strange but in the end utterly reliable and deviously resourceful. As Underhill documents, and as I can attest from a lot of my own reading, writers and other artists talk about settling down to work exactly as church people talk about settling down to pray. Relax. Clear your mind. Center your attention but without forcing anything. Trust. Water doesn't flow through us if we clenched as tight as solid granite.

But if you trust with enough courage, if you trust with enough faith, words will come into that open silence in your head. Ideas will bubble up around you until they are soaking your socks. And if you do this regularly enough, then screwball ideas and random insights will also show up when you are driving, or when you are standing in line at the grocery store, or when you are taking a shower. Pay attention. Pay very close attention. What you have in such moments is "a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty."

It's your new song. Sing it loudly. Sing it clearly. There's an Irish blessing for these moments, a blessing that I love: "Dance as if no one is watching; sing as if no one is listening. Love as if love will never end." As Christians, after all, we do trust and believe that God's love *will* never end.

So have a little faith . . . that God has faith . . . in *you*. I look forward to hearing your new songs.