

A Journey from Mysticism into Activism and Back Again: Reflections on Underhill

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In the final reflection paper for the course *Mysticism and Activism* I will take a more personal turn and build on Underhill's chapters 7-9. She describes the three chapters in this way: "So, we will consider it as the successive achievement of those three levels or manifestations of Reality, which we have agreed to call the Natural World of Becoming, the Metaphysical World of Being, and—last and highest—that Divine Reality within which these opposites are found as one" (p. 45). When I read these chapters I found myself constantly tacking back and forth between my experiences in the natural world, Underhill's description, my professional experiences as an educator/activist for social justice, and my growing understanding of mysticism.

In this final paper I will take each of the three levels of mysticism that Underhill describes and see to what extent my lived experiences map onto those three levels. I will pull two or three essential quotes from each chapter, reflect on my personal experiences that seem to fit those quotes, and then try to craft a rough-poem blending Underhill's description and my lived experiences. My intent behind the poem is to bring forward critical concepts and as such I'm less concerned with rhyme and polish.

The overall goal:

Underhill argues that the three levels are distinguishable yet interconnected in a slow and progressive way. The journey of self toward the Real is iterative, tacking back and forth between knowing, being, and living. As she notes: "*This illumination shall be gradual. The attainment of it depends not so much upon a philosophy accepted, or a new gift of vision suddenly received, as upon an uninterrupted changing and widening of character; a progressive growth towards the Real, an ever more profound harmonization of the self's life with the greater and inclusive rhythms of existence.*" (Underhill, p. 44)

Becoming Non-self Self

Born March, 21st 1959
God's creatures begins the journey.
60 years,
Back to knowing the Real.

At birth being one with the Real,
Learning the not Real;
Ending again with intimate union to the Real.

So much to learn and unlearn along the way.
Family norms and social pressures; playing the game.
Teachers who reinforce conformity of curriculum, behavior, and learning.

Always in the background the still silent voice;
A True North, A Polar Star, A Beacon of light,
When lost in the confines of society and external expectations.
A way forward and back on track to the Real.

Listen to the unheard heard.
Follow the silence.
The great One-One of all.

Level One: *“The Natural World of Becoming”*

This is the level of God’s emergent and immanent presence in the world through all things natural including self. In short, Level one claims that we are all one. There is no real and enduring difference between me and the other. Distinctions, like self, are a distraction and the creation of a social prison that Soelle writes about.

I believe that I experienced elements of Level One from childhood through my BA degree in Environmental Education. I often experienced nature as a direct and unmediated understanding characterized by bliss and unmediated joy. I remember, especially as a child, standing or laying down for long periods of time just being one with nature; self-dissolved into the water, air, bugs, birds, and mud. The interconnected and generative ways that nature work kept me fascinated and curious to know more. Life, even in its sometimes brutal and apparently uncaring form was sweet and mysterious.

“Pour yourself out towards it, do not draw its image towards you. Deliberate—more, impassioned—attentiveness, an attentiveness which soon transcends all consciousness of yourself, as separate from and attending to the thing seen; this is the condition of success. As to the object of contemplation, it matters little. From Alp to insect, anything will do, provided that your attitude be right: for all things in this world towards which you are stretching out are linked together, and one truly apprehended will be the gateway to the rest” (Underhill, p. 47).

“So here at last, in this intimate communion, this "simple seeing," this total surrender of you to the impress of things, you are using to the full the sacred powers of sense: and so using them, because you are concentrating upon them, accepting their reports in simplicity” (Underhill, p. 49).

Nature Boy

Earliest memories,
All of nature.

A sense of oneness and mystery.
Pine trees, wet ground, blackberries, and frogs.
A woodlot full of living things to chase,
real and imagined.

Mud holes brimming with life.
Laying on my belly, blissfully watching and wondering.
Crawfish, snakes, high flying swallows, and night skies
Standing still on a woodland trail,
Watching life fly, crawl, and swim.
Mesmerized by wonder.

Dragonflies hold the key to the universal binding of All-Love.
Purveyors of Wisdom,
Language I'm part of but can't speak.
Learning to remember what others have taught me not to remember.

The river, the mountain, the dragonfly.
The one eating.
The one being eaten.
Awe, wonder, and mystery
We are all one.

Level Two: "*Metaphysical World of Being*"

Once one becomes aware of and more conversant with the experiences of Level One there emerges an impulse and drive to look beyond the interconnectedness of all being, all of God's Divine creation. A deep curiosity and pull toward relationship with the something greater than self that which energizes all the individual connected pieces. It matters little if those pieces are considered beautiful, tragic, or brutal. In short, what is the transcendent essence of the all enduring Love that unifies all and holds all in a gentle embrace? What are the descriptors of the ineffable beyond the effable?

I can trace the beginning of Level Two experiences from early adulthood through my 50s. Through this time period I was increasingly aware that the sense of oneness with creation, from a thunderhead to a glistening drop of dew, was pointing toward a bigger and more inclusive sense of universal consciousness. The experiences of wonder, awe, and joy leaned heavily toward some sort of unknown-known. My religious traditions named this One as God, which I accepted but not as a standalone or unitary definition; more polytheistic than monotheistic. The world of people, places, and things was too rich, organic, and integrated to be one thing alone. I slowly learned through unintentional practice to be and to see beyond the obvious to the deep connections of all things. This led to my commitment to transcendent and transformative forms of teaching. To do this I practiced being attentive to the Divine in the Divine creation and became more accustomed to and trusting of the Truth that was beyond the known knowing.

“But now you reach out towards the ultimate sentence and melody, which exist independently of your own constructive efforts; and realise that the words and notes which so often puzzled you by displaying an intensity that exceeded the demands of your little world, only have beauty and meaning just because and in so far as you discern them to be the partial expressions of a greater whole which is still beyond your reach” (Underhill, p. 52).

“Yet in spite of the darkness that enfolds you, the Cloud of Unknowing into which you have plunged, you are sure that it is well to be here. A peculiar certitude which you cannot analyse, a strange satisfaction and peace, is distilled into you. You begin to understand what the Psalmist meant, when he said, “Be still, and know.” You are lost in a wilderness, a solitude, a dim strange state of which you can say nothing, since it offers no material to your image-making mind” (Underhill, p. 58).

Behind the Curtain

The world is rich with tricksters, jesters, and clowns.
The raven, coyote, and dragonfly.
God’s sleight of hand artists,
They are not what they appear to be.
More like curtain pullers than lever pullers.
Less smoke creators and makers of illusion.
More like truth tellers,
Sharing to anyone who can decipher,
their undecipherable wisdom

Their mission; invite attentiveness.
Go beyond the effable.
Seek and lean toward the ineffable,
The unknown known of the transcendent Creator.
Learn to walk sideways, see in the dark, hear the silence into speech.

Ever illusive, ever changing, yet constant.
The tricksters, mercurial oracles of the Divine Love.
Are reminders of the trustworthy presence of God.
Fleeting and transformative mischief makers
Carrying banners:
Peace, Certainty, Knowing.

Level three: *“Divine Reality”*

After a time of wandering around in the transcendent spaces of Divine Love, learning to trust the tricky nature of the Divine jesters the unfamiliar and disorienting nature of Level Two becomes increasingly trustworthy and reassuring, but still full of mystery and hard to grasp. It is a strange

paradox of comforting-discomfort. One experiences a form of knowing and expressions of wisdom that have no logical explanation. The ability to see and say things that should not be known or understood becomes more frequent with the increased ability to trust Truth beyond Truth.

I was in my late 40s and early 50s before I learned to embrace and feel comfortable with the uncomfortable gifts present in close intimacy with Divine Love. I can best describe it as a painful knowing of beauty that can't be described but can be lived in punctuated moments. Painful because it can't be controlled, has to be present in conversations and interactions with others, and comes from me/not me. It is like I'm becoming a conduit of universal consciousness that has to be given away and not doled out in small pieces. I experience, at times, this sense of spiritual intimacy and connection during conversations with students. Sometimes the conversations are joyful and exploratory; sometimes they are hard and focused on truth telling. I sense the world shifting and deep knowing beyond knowing comes into my being, beyond consciousness. I open my mouth and I let the Words beyond the words speak, an unconscious uttering of knowing. Love binds all, the wounded and the wondering alike. Students often ask how did I know what to say or how did you find a way to put words to an experience or thought. I'm increasingly comfortable answering that I don't really know, but I have learned to trust the Wisdom beyond the wisdom; a Divine gift.

“The place that you have come to seems strange and bewildering, for it lies far beyond the horizons of human thought. There are no familiar landmarks, nothing on which you can lay hold. You “wander to and fro,” as the mystics say, “in this fathomless ground”; surrounded by silence and darkness, struggling to breathe this rarefied air.” (Underhill, p. 62)

“An attitude of perfect generosity, complete submission, willing acquiescence in anything that may happen—even in failure and death—is here your only hope: for union with Reality can only be a union of love, a glad and humble self-mergence in the universal life. You must, so far as you are able, give yourself up to, “die into,” melt into the Whole; abandon all efforts to lay hold of It. More, you must be willing that it should lay hold of you.” (Underhill, p. 63).

“Here,” says St. Thomas Aquinas, “the soul in a wonderful and unspeakable manner both seizes and is seized upon, devours and is herself devoured, embraces and is violently embraced: and by the knot of love she unites herself with God, and is with Him as the Alone with the Alone.” (Underhill, p. 67)

Trustworthy Acceptance

How do I know what I know?

How can confusion, obscure spaces, and the unknown
become trustworthy wisdom?

What becomes of I when I is not knowing?

Wisdom from beyond self.

A purveyor of words, symbols, and images.

A life of writing, thinking, and advising learners.
Stumbling upon Wisdom of Words beyond words.
How do I know what I Know?

Attentive listening to the other.
Hearing their joys and troubles into deep speech.
Trusting the Silent Voice within,
Me but not me.
Mystical activism in service of others.
Love binds all,
Wounded, wandering, and wondering.

Final thoughts: *Braided Love*

Although not identified by Underhill as a Level, it does occur to me that after 10 weeks of study that mysticism and activism are a dynamic and fluid pair. They prefer to dance together rather than attend separate parties. As such the three levels of mysticism identified by Underhill are actually three interrelated moments of human flourishing of Divine knowing. The division into Levels is really ultimately arbitrary and more of a convenience driven by the limitations of the written word, than a truism.

I can sense this interconnectivity at times. I will often reach into my knowledge of the natural world for images and metaphors that bridge from the particular moment of interrelatedness to the more universal Wisdom of Divine Love. And then back around and out again. My mysticism has yielded a sense of activism that manifests as attentive listening that creates space for my students to flourish toward their natural state of being. And when their flourishing is truncated by institutional systems, I will trust the Divine Love to provide the words and the passion for action.

“Though these three worlds of experience are so plaited together, that intimations from the deeper layers of being constantly reach you through the natural scene, it is in this order of realization that you may best think of them, and of your own gradual upgrowth to the full stature of humanity.” (Underhill, p. 45).

Wings of Divine Presence

Three ducks winging over the ravine,
All mallards by name and duckness by creation.
Fluid formation of unanticipated positioning.
Switching leads.

All in front, all following, all purposeful and unified in their flight

Predictable-unpredictability slicing through the air;
Unpredictable in pursuit of each other;
Predictable in form and function.

Three levels of consciousness;
Three levels of mystical embodiment.
Winging and chasing their way through the ravines,
And blue skies of my life.
Becoming, Being, and Loving
One leading, the others following.

Not I, but we.
Human flourishing and transcendence.
One with Divine Love.