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Evelyn Underhill
A Course in Miracles
& Stages in the Development of Trust

by Jon Mundy, Ph.D.

I cannot let this year pass without noting a milestone and an interesting similarity between *A Course in Miracles* and a Teacher of God from the early 20th century. My primary text during the years that I taught university courses on *Mysticism* was a delightful book simply titled *Mysticism* by Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941, England). I would love to have known Evelyn. She was clearly a mystic and I'll bet a bit like Helen Schucman. A woman of great intellect, she was also a visionary and a metaphysical poet. She was also fascinated with her study of a host of different mystics whom she saw as spiritual pioneers.

Evelyn's book *Mysticism* was published in 1911 – one hundred years ago. Any book which is still being sold one hundred years after it was published is a classic. Though immensely popular, her book was regarded, during her lifetime, unsuitable as a textbook because of its strong romantic quality. What was unacceptable then is now much admired. Evelyn was the first woman to lecture and lead spiritual retreats for the Church of England and the first woman theologian to lecture in English universities. She reached spiritual depths unknown by many of her contemporaries. She counted as her best friends the India poet, Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize for literature (1913) and the French Philosopher Henri Bergson, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1927. Interestingly, Evelyn, Tagore, and Bergson each died in early 1941. All total, Evelyn published 39 books and more than 350 articles. Upon her death, *The Times of London* reported that in the field of theology, she was “unmatched by any professional teacher of her day.” (See www.evelynunderhill.org)

After many years of reading a vast collection of mystical documents from both the Eastern and Western traditions, Evelyn identified 5 stages in spiritual development. The Course likewise describes 6 stages in the development of trust. The first two stages described in the Course and Evelyn's description of what happens in spiritual development are strikingly similar. Evelyn's second stage *purgation* is very like the 2nd and 3rd stage of the Course, *sorting out* and *relinquishing*. Again, the last two stages described by Evelyn and the Course are strikingly similar especially the next to last stage which is somewhat surprisingly an unsettling period defined by Evelyn as – *the dark night of the soul*.

God Is Life

One of my favorite definitions of God from the Course is that *God is Life* (T-14.IX.4:5). *Communication with God*, the Course says, *is Life* (T-14.IV.10:6). *Life* is not something which begins with the birth of a body. *Life* is not something which ends with the death of a body. *Life*

like *Mind*, and *Spirit*, and *Light*, and *Love* is energy without form. *Mind*, the Course says, is the activating agent of spirit, supplying its creative energy.

To know *God* we must move beyond form.
Love is an experience which transcends form.
Life is an experience which transcends form.
Mind is an experience which transcends form.
Spirit is an experience which transcends form.

Life is an eternal attribute of everything that God created (T-4.IV.11:7). *Life* is eternal. *Life* has no beginning and it has no end. It is not a continuum. It is what always has been and cannot not be. The Course, like the Bible and a thousand other scriptures, also defines God as *Love*. By simple deduction, if God is *Love* and God is *Life* then *Life* is *Love* and *Love* is *Life* and the more in *Love* we are, the more *Alive* we are. The more *Alive* we are the more we know about *Love*, the more we know about *God*.

The Pathway Back to God

The Course seeks to lead us out of “the dreaming of the world” and back into *Awakened Life*. It is a matter of *re-mem-bering* or *re-cognizing* what we already know.

*Enter in at the straight gate for wide is the gate and broad is the way
that leads to destruction and many there are that go there in.
Straight is the gate and narrow is the way that leads unto **Life**
and few there are that find it.*
Jesus in Matthew 7:13-14

*Yet there is a plan behind appearances that does not change.
The script is written.
When experience will come to end your doubting has been set.
For we but see the journey from the point at which it ended,
looking back on it, imagining we make it once again;
reviewing mentally what has gone by.*

W-158.2.2-5

GPS -- Gods Plan for Salvation

My wife, Dolores gave me a GPS as a Christmas present several years ago and it's been one of the most helpful tools I've ever owned. It's amazing how it works. You take “a little black box” and you punch into it your intended destination. There is a button on the box for “Home.” If I want to go Home, I just hit the button which says “Home.” Instantaneously, this little black box makes contact with 3 different satellites each traveling around the earth at 12,000 miles per hour. One gets our latitude, one gets our longitude, one gets our position in time, and through a process of trilateration, it puts all the information together and sends the directions to us at the speed of light telling us where to go, foot-by-foot, step-by-step along the way to go home. Principle Number 4 from the 50 Miracles principles says; *All miracles mean Life. God is the Giver of Life.*

You will be told very specifically all you need to know. As with any good GPS system, we are consistently and persistently being told exactly the right decision to be made in this instant and every instant. All I have to do is to be “willing” to ask for direction.

We all know the jokes about men not being willing to stop and ask for directions. Arrogance is a primary characteristic of the ego. The ego likes being right and will never admit to being lost. To admit to being lost implies helplessness. Alcoholics Anonymous will not help folks until they are willing to admit that they need help. Once we ask for help, help is available but I have to ask. Lesson 49 from the workbook says, “God’s Voice speaks to me all through the day.” Indeed God’s voice speaks to us all through the day, like any good GPS system. We are constantly being told exactly what we need to do to find our way Home.

It is possible to reach a state in which you bring your mind under my guidance without conscious effort, but this implies a willingness that you have not developed as yet.

The Holy Spirit cannot ask more than you are willing to do.

T-2.VI.1:1-2

We are not asked to work out the plan of our own salvation. That would be arrogant. Our job is to “trust” God’s Plan. God’s plan for our awakening is as perfect as ours is fallible (T-14.V.2:5).

The Easy Pass

A Course in Miracles also works like an *Easy Pass*. It will whisk you right around any potential slowdown. You don’t need to stop and pay a toll man. Someone who looks like a doctor, a lawyer, or therapist need not take your funds. Myron Blackman prays every night to win the lottery... as time goes on, his prayers become more urgent. Finally, he cries out, “God, I pray for this night after night, why haven’t you answered my prayer?” Suddenly a deep voice from above says: “You need to meet me halfway on this... Buy a ticket!” When our daughter, Sarah, was younger, she used to say she wanted to become a famous singer. I suggest that a good first step would be to learn to sing. In the same way, the Course works but it only works if we work it.

God does not need to know the details of our soap opera dreams – simply because they are dreams. He knows his children are sleeping and He has devised a plan, a GPS system by which we might find our way home. Time is kind and if we use it on behalf of reality, it will keep gentle pace with our transition (T-16.VI.8:2). A clear highway home is laid out for us if we choose to follow it. While the way is straight and the gate is narrow that leads into *Life*, we wander about pursuing our latest fantasy, seeking to fulfill the ego’s ongoing demands.

As recalcitrant prodigal sons and daughters, we want to do it our own way, in our own time. In the story of the prodigal son, when the son asks for his inheritance, the father does not deny it to him. *And the father divide unto him his living* (Luke 15:12). Most folks know the story; the son spends his money on riotous living and he falls into want. We each go through a variety of trials, each trial offering us the opportunity of moving deeper into trust – until total trust is forever given to God.

Eventually the prodigal son has a crash and burn experience. He repents and then he has a revelation – “I could go Home!” The acceptance of *The Curriculum of the Atonement* and the “undoing” of the ego eventually bring us Home. Our task is easy. We are to assume full responsibility for everything that comes our way. As I accept responsibility for my own script and grow in trust, fear subsides and *Life* becomes increasingly purposive and meaningful. Purpose is “everything” in the Course. Once I quit trying to do it my way, once I begin to follow GPS, I can move with purpose. Joy, the Course tells us is unified purpose (T-8.VII.15.1).

The Undoing or the Unveiling of the Ego

Before looking at the steps and stages described by Underhill and the Course, and the striking similarities between them, we should note that the stages are not clearly defined by Underhill or the Course as there are obvious overlaps and gray areas. We come around in time, like in a spiral passing over a similar, yet higher point in spiritual development. So these steps may be repeated over again at different ages, in different ways clear up to the final stage where there is no longer any need for change.

1. Awareness – Undoing

Removing the Blocks to an Awareness of Love’s Presence

According to Evelyn, the first stage is the beginning of *an awakening to an awareness of the divine*. “Something” questions the nature of reality as defined by consensus reality. A change in direction, an alchemical (churning, turning, cooking kind of thing) begins working within. There is an *inward* rather than an *outward* turning. Change often comes with a growing “disillusionment” or “discontent” with the world or ourselves. “Crash and burn” experiences often precipitate a major change. Or, change may come as *a subtle calling* to a profession or way of living.

Whatever the stimulus, the first step comes in the realization that as Bill Thetford said to Helen Schucman, “There must be a better way.” No longer in denial, useless and inhibiting behavioral ruts can now be identified and laid aside. According to many mythic traditions, we find freedom from the devil by calling the devil by name. In the same way we find freedom from the ego by seeing it for what it is (nothing) and thus, not giving it any power over us. There is no devil. There is no ego. I only come to *know* this, however, by returning my mind to the Mind of God – by bringing it back in line with GPS. Only for a moment did we try to give “reality” to an illusion.

You don’t see many folks under thirty or even forty studying the Course. They are often busy finding mates, establishing careers, having children, buying homes, and paying bills. When marriages and businesses fail, when children are more a pain than a pleasure – there may come a “mid-life crisis.” It may seem that things are being taken away – in truth, their lack of value is being recognized.

2. Purification – Purgation – Sorting Out

Miracles, are everyone’s right but purification is necessary first.

ACIM, (T-1.1:7)

Every now and then, GPS engages in a new triangulation in order to check its accuracy. Ships crossing the ocean and planes flying through the air, consistently readjust their setting more clearly on to their intended destination. Every now and then it is necessary to “re-calculate.” Evelyn calls this stage “purification.” St. Theresa of Avila calls this stage “purgation” and the Course calls it “A period of sorting out.” There inevitably comes a cleansing, a letting go of fears, unessential anxieties, and false concepts. Changes may occur in relationships, with parents, children, careers, health issues, money issues, and more and it’s all okay. It’s the way the script is written. It’s the way, I wrote it, and I can appreciate it.

Negative habits that hurt my body and my mind may now be laid aside. After a few weeks of being sober, folks who join Alcoholics Anonymous often report a new clarity or awareness they did not even know they lacked. According to Evelyn, no student can omit the stage of purgation. As a snake sheds its skin, there must be a putting off of the old and a making way for the new.

Catharsis

Purgation may include a catharsis, a confession, and a “getting it off one’s chest.” Those who join AA are asked to admit to God, themselves, and at least one other person that they have been mistaken in their perception and their behavior. This helps but will not necessarily prevent a falling back into the same patterns. Increasing *willingness* “one day at a time” is required to get it right.

Folks sometimes call and ask me to listen to them tell me how upset they are with some brother or sister. This often involves a regurgitating of some story they have already rehearsed about some special relationship they feel trapped in and around which they have serious questions and a good bit of judgment. There is not much to do but listen. Eventually, they will stop the regurgitation and when they do, I often say, “I think you’re going to have to let this go.” A marriage therapist friend once said that she sometimes wishes she could say things like, “Stop It!” “Get off it!” “Grow up!” “Be Responsible!” or “Stop Whining!” Of course that’s not what she says. Teachers of God never frighten or threaten their students. It is necessary to gently lead such friends down a more peaceful and loving path. Still, “Getting off it,” that is, stopping the insanity is precisely what is called for.

*If you don't wash out the stone and sand, how can
you pick out the gold? Seek the path of
Heaven with firm determination.
And you will see the original thing!*
Liu I-Ming (737- ?, Chinese Taoist)

3. A Period of Relinquishment – According to Underhill this stage involves the further development of self-discipline as we progressively let go of the valueless. Old egoistic and ineffectual ways of living are more clearly perceived and released. Things of the world: status, ego enhancements, opinions, “the poor me syndrome,” the “I already know it all syndrome” are set aside in favor of what is valuable – the purer experience of *Light – Love – Life*. Yet Evelyn observes, few escape this distress entirely.

*It is by going down into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life.
Where you stumble, there lies your treasure.*
Joe Campbell, Mythologist (1904-1988)

It may seem we are being asked to sacrifice our own best interests on behalf of truth. The truth is known as we let the garbage go. Strangely, where we expected to find a loss; instead, we find light-heartedness. The bankruptcy is over, the divorce a done deal, the house sold, and a job lost. Now some perspective and respite can come our way.

4. **A Period of Settling Down – Illumination**

A Time of Resting in Reasonable Peace

Underhill calls this stage “Illumination.” Seen by some as the final stage, it is a quiet time, a period of reprieve. We can relax awhile. All we have to do is to forgive all things that no one ever did and overlook what is not there. Following GPS means correcting my course and bringing it in line with the straight-way and the narrow path that leads us Home. Yet, we have not yet come as far as we think. The spiral comes around again. Now truly, *I give up what I do not want, and keep what I do.* We go from here not alone but aware of like-minded companions and our trust in the Inner Teacher, the Holy Spirit grows deeper and clearer.

5. **A Dark Night of the Soul – A Period of Unsettling**

Evelyn talks about this stage as many mystics do as the dark night of the soul. Jesus devoted his whole life to the pursuit of God and then before the end, there comes the heavy darkness. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Of course, God cannot forsake us. Still, our distress may be quite deep. According to Evelyn, this period is marked by feelings of helplessness, stagnation of will, and a sense of withdrawal of God’s presence.

Thinking we have it made, there comes a bigger test of faith with a final exam, perhaps the very real prospect of one’s own death. Trusting ever more deeply, we see that what we let go is nothing after all – clear up to letting go of the body. Finally, we see its non existence as well. There may be a loss of a home, maybe a health issue, maybe another divorce, maybe the death of a loved one. The story of Buddha mediating for 7 years, Jesus in the wilderness, and Mohammad sitting alone in a cave – all tell of the struggles which proceeded awakening. Great mystics like St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa of Avila and a myriad more, find trust deepening though long periods of illness and psychological distress. Now finally we realize – **all judgment must be laid aside.** The last characteristic a Teacher of God develops is total trust and complete open-mindedness. It is a period culminating in a final surrender to divine will.

Coming round again, and rising ever higher on a spiral of consciousness, stages 1-5 may be repeated many times in different ways and at different ages. Progress is, however, ever inward, upward, and thus, ever more clearly focused on Home. With each round, there comes a deeper level of purification followed by yet greater awareness.

6. The Course calls this final stage, **A Period of Achievement.**

Evelyn Underhill calls it – **Union with God.**

Complete forgiveness is the final goal of the curriculum. Once returned fully to God, the mind no longer wanders. There is no more decision-making to be done. There are no more

unnecessary detours. Now we follow only GPS. We are directed toward creation within the Kingdom. Illusions end and peace of mind is complete. Nothing could be more desirable. Enlightenment awaits everyone. Awakening, we find we never left Home. We were only sleeping. We were only “dreaming the world.” In the end, is the complete restoration of Heaven. For a moment, we took a look in a mirror darkly and we thought we saw our reflection there. Now, however, only the light of God shines through. Tranquility is achieved.

The more clearly GPS is focused on, the more clearly the “straight way and the narrow gate” is seen – the more *destiny* seems to step in and guide the process. A “reversal in thinking” occurs as the mind turns ever more clearly to the path of God. It’s not about form. It’s not about fame. God’s way is the peaceful gentle and clear highway.

What would it be like to have no worries, no anxiety, no problems – no major concerns? What would it be like to hold no grievance, no hurt feelings, no unforgiveness or condemnations? What would it be like to be forever calm, patient, and serene? What would it be like to be free of judgment? What would it be like to experience the love of God flowing from the heart to everyone, everyday? What if there was no fear of death – no sense of limitation? What if you knew you were not a body? What would it be like to know eternity? What would it be like to know God?

The spiritual journey does not consist of arriving at a new destination where we gain something we did not already have. Enlightenment, the Course says, is but a re-cognition, not a change at all. It consists in the dissipation of ignorance concerning ourselves and the re-membrance of eternity.

Peace,

Jon