

# *Mysticism: Fostering Spiritual Holism in Education*

**Paul Michalec**

E-mail: [paul.michalec@du.edu](mailto:paul.michalec@du.edu)

Received December 2023

Accepted for publication August 2024

Published November 2024

## **Abstract**

Mysticism is often perceived as access, by a few special individuals, to a Divine presence. Furthermore, the mystical is experienced only after years of practice, discipline, and hermit-like behavior. This article argues, as others have, that mysticism can be democratized and is available to all educators. Through personal narrative the author chronicles his experiences as a holistic educator with the three levels of mysticism described by Ruth Underhill. Throughout the article the author articulates practices consistent with a pedagogy of healing, wholeness, and humanization of self, others, and the world.

**Keywords:** *mysticism, holism, personal narrative, spirituality, higher education, social justice*

---

The field of holistic education is experiencing a resurgence as it becomes increasingly associated with educational practices such as social-emotional learning (Schonert-Reichl, 2017), educating the whole child (Miller, 2019), meditation (Erbe & Lohrmann, 2015), mindfulness, (Hammond, 2014), Indigenous practices (Arrows, 2016), wellness (O'Brien, 2016), and yoga (Saxena et al., 2020) to name a few. These practices are holistic in that they broaden the sense of self as learner beyond the singular Western focus on mind and rationality to include the fullness of human learning.

There is much to celebrate in this expansion as it offers new avenues for holistic education to enter the contemporary conversations around school and curricular reform. At the same time there are two aspects of holistically informed pedagogy that are

less prevalent in education conversations, spirituality (Hersey, 2022; Lingley, 2016; Huebner, 1999) and the inner journey of the educator (hooks, 2003; Rendón; 2012; Palmer, 1993; Michalec & Brower, 2012; Michalec, 2002, 2022). This paper seeks to address this limitation by describing the spiritual and pedagogical journey of a higher education faculty member as they apply the spiritual concept of mysticism to the holistic framing of effective teaching and learning. The mystical and mysticism are key components of spiritual traditions that seek to expand notions of human knowing and being in relationship to a higher power. This paper couples the mystical, as a particular spiritual practice, to an expansive notion of holistic education in higher education. Mysticism, as described in this article, is a series of inner-stages that foster a transformative

relationship between educator and that which is greater than self and self-knowing, in service of creating transformative educational spaces for learners.

My interest in connecting mysticism to holistic pedagogy began in 2014 when I enrolled in a Master of Theological Studies at Iliff School of Theology. As a holistic-prophetic educator I have long been interested in the spiritual roots of my teaching as it informs my commitment to social justice and transformational teaching and learning (Michalec, 2002, 2022; Michalec & Newburgh, 2018). My purpose in attaining a Theology degree was fueled by what felt like limited language in the field of education to adequately articulate the spiritual qualities of heart-forward teaching. I was familiar with the scholarship of educators and philosophers who drew from various spiritual traditions to describe teaching including, Dwayne Huebner, bell hooks, Laura Rendón, David Purple, Parker Palmer, and Jiddu Krishnamurti to name a few. Still, I felt the need to expand the language of description at the interface between effective teaching, social justice, and spirituality for myself and the students I teach. It is the spiritual and holistic aspects of education that are most in need of further exploration and examination in higher education classrooms.

A pivotal course in my theology degree was *Mysticism and Activism*. A primary goal of the course was to “democratize mysticism” (Soelle, 2001) and show that the mystical was accessible to everyone, not just the pious or gifted individuals. An anchor text for the course was Evelyn Underhill’s *Practical Mysticism* first published in 1914. By training and practice, Underhill is a Christian, poet, novelist, and pacifist. She was highly influential in the field of practical mysticism for the common person. Although writing from her faith tradition, her understandings

and views on the mystical are universal and consistent with many faith and spiritual traditions.

This article is a personal journey into Underhill’s description of the three stages of the mystical experience as they relate to my teaching, social justice, and holistic education. The personal and embodied are elevated as well as the universal connection to that which is bigger than self, the unified wholeness of all, what Underhill calls “Reality.” I will first provide definitions and establish the language of mysticism as it leans toward inclusion of the spiritual as a holistic impulse for educators. I will then articulate Underhill’s (1914/2020) three levels of mysticism in her book *Practical Mysticism*. Each level will be defined and illustrated with a story of coming to understand that stage in my professional development as a holistic-prophetic educator. I will also offer a poetic reflection on each level. Mysticism is divine nonlinear speech, and poetry is the human form of non-linear speech (Greene, 1988; Eisner, 1996). The essay will conclude with a discussion of how mysticism can inform the formation of holistically minded educators.

### **Definitions and Context**

Religion and spirituality are related but distinct human responses to the mystery, the ineffable, and the sense of awe and wonder that people experience in the world. Religion is a formal practice in a community, complete with rituals, practices, and traditions. Spirituality is a personal relationship with that which is bigger than self and self-knowing. The deep heart of education is described and experienced as spiritual (Palmer, 1993; Rendón, 2012; Lingley, 2016). Huebner (1999) in his analysis of spirituality in education argues, “To speak of the ‘spirit’ and the ‘spiritual’ is not to speak of something ‘other’ than humankind, merely ‘more’ than humankind as it is lived and known” (p. 343). For Huebner, spirit and

spirituality are normal human experiences that should be included in formalized spaces of teaching and learning.

Mysticism is often considered the rarified realm of deeply religious hermits (Soelle, 2001; Teasdale, 2001). It is presumed that these unique individuals have either a divine gift or they experience the mystical after years of discipline and devotion. This understanding of mysticism and its monastic roots and practices is documented across diverse religious traditions (Sufism, Judaism, Christianity, Indigenous communities, and Hinduism).

There are educators (hooks, 2003; Palmer, 1998), theologians (Teasdale, 2001; Soelle, 2001), and philosophers (Browning, 1979) who promote a counter view and articulate a universal, democratized, and humanly accessible experience of the mystical. Underhill (1914/2020) in her secular description of the mystical argues that to be human is to be mystical, “Though these great spirits have as it were a genius for Reality, a susceptibility to supernal impressions, so far beyond your own small talent that there seems no link between you: yet you have, since you are human, a capacity for the Infinite too” (p. 64). Mysticism is ongoing, active, and a constant practice geared toward merging with the wholeness of all. Teasdale (2001) offers a direct definition of the commonness of mysticism, “Mysticism means direct, immediate experience of ultimate reality” (p. 20).

The field of Theology has a well-developed language of mysticism and mystical experiences. It is possible for holistic educators to embrace that language without also accepting the religious practices and traditions out of which those definitions emerge (Palmer, 1993; Huebner, 1999; Hansen, 2021). This is the direction taken in this paper, employing the language of theology to describe the mystical and its formative value for

holistic educators by focusing on the universal aspects of the spiritual as it shapes and energizes the values of transformation, inclusion, and wholeness.

### **Teaching as Holism and Healing**

Spiritually informed wholeness can be understood as a deep, soulful, impulse to heal the fragmented and divided in self, others, and the world. Palmer (1999) describes the educator’s calling as “healers in a wounded world” (p. 2). Holistic educators as healers are not saviors or missionaries imposing a cure or prescription of normality on students. They access the inner energy of holism for self and others to sustain compassion, empathy, and wholeheartedness as they name the wounds inflicted by powerful social norms that dehumanize. Through their spiritual presence they invite forth the inherent elements of human wholeness as an act of healing.

Holistic educators as healers believe in the divine humanity of learners, never seeing students through a deficit lens needing repair and fixing. Instead, they work to create moments where inner-completeness can emerge by fostering classrooms of refuge and solace. Healing as wholeness is a deep and ongoing sense of connection, union, reciprocity, and completeness with self and others (Palmer, 1998; hooks, 2003; Hersey, 2022; Rendón, 2012).

Love is central to healer educators as both a metaphor and ideal relationship for wholeness among teacher, student, text, and the world: “The goal of a knowledge arising from love is the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds . . . (it) aims not at exploiting and manipulating creation but at reconciling the world to itself” (Palmer, 1993, pp. 7-8). bell hooks (2003) notes that love is a force for justice, creating a flourishing community of healers engaged in the

act of radical inclusion as, “All these incredible movements for social justice succeeded when they evoked an ethic of love rooted in the embrace of spirit. It is crucial for spiritual nourishment that we all attend to what works even as we understand the need to continue to resist” (p. 183). As hooks suggests, love is not sentimental and soft. It is active, connective, and relentless as it seeks the restoration of fullness through transformation of self, others, and world.

### **Mysticism as the Center of Wholeness**

Teasdale (2003) in his description of mysticism names several characteristics of the spiritual and mystical that support the central claim of this essay that mysticism, spirituality, and wholeness are bound together. Teasdale notes that mysticism is, “practical, experiential, unitive, integrative, and transcendent” (pp. 22-24). The mystical is “practical” and “experiential,” with immediate and mediated connection to the lived world that requires an intentional relationship *with* and reflection *upon* the concrete to the extent that it changes the person. The mystical is “unitive” and holistic as it acknowledges the inherent connection between all things and all beings. The mystical is “integrative,” unifying the psychological and emotional elements of consciousness, unconsciousness, will, memory, and emotions with the body and spirit. This yields a sense of full-commitment to the task of inclusion, avoiding a sense of divided-self, separation from others, and conflicting sources of knowing. Finally, the mystical is “transcendent,” allowing the person to see beyond the immediate context to a wider form of reality that is boundless with potential and possibility.

In the remainder of this paper, I will describe Underhill’s (1914/2020) three levels of mysticism as I experience them as a holistic-prophetic educator in higher education seeking healing and

wholeness for self and learners. My main calling and commitments to holism lean towards the day-to-day activities of academia and my classroom. My experience with mysticism continues to refuel my soul when encountering institutional imperatives that seek to divide and split apart my deep wholeness and that of the students in my classes. In this way I try to emulate hooks’ (2003) link of the mystical and social justice, “No, it was those mystical experiences that enabled me to understand and recognize the realm of being in a spiritual experience that transcends both authority and law” (p. 161).

### **Evelyn Underhill and Mysticism**

As I studied Underhill’s (1914/2020) *Practical Mysticism*, I found myself tacking back and forth between my experiences in the natural world, her descriptions of mysticism, my professional practices as a holistic-prophetic educator, and my growing understanding of self as mystic. This last claim, *self as mystic*, is hard to accept as I hold a form of social bias that mysticism is the realm of the few and not accessible to me as an ordinary educator. But the more I embrace the mystical the more I feel complete in my gifts and calling to create classrooms of sanctuary, healing, and wholeness.

Underhill (1914/2020) posits three levels of contemplation when considering the spiritual stages of mystical engagement. She notes, “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). I will articulate the essence of each level, starting with a definition, moving to ways I recognize the stage in my life, and offer examples from my teaching. Poetry will weave together the mystical,

the metaphorical, and the lived experience. In this sense, my poems function as Greene (1988) suggests, to “defamiliarize” and “disclose aspects of experience ordinarily never seen. Poetry does not offer us empirical or documentary truth but enables us to ‘know’ in unique ways” (p. 131).

### **In the Beginning**

The journey of self toward the Real is iterative, tacking back and forth between knowing, being, and living. It is accessible to all who seek this wisdom. As Underhill (1914/2020) 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. (p. 44)

And yet there is always a place of beginning, an entry point of illumination. A place where healing of the fragmented self begins, even though the start is really one moment along a continuous spiral of knowing and being. Time is not linear for mystics; it is holistic and fluid. This poem describes the starting point of my journey toward becoming a mystic educator, a teacher involved in the work of inclusion and healing, who invites the institution of higher education into a more just and holistic sense of itself.

### **Becoming Non-self Self**

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,  
Listen to the unheard heard.  
Follow the silence.

### **First Level of Contemplation: “The Natural World of Becoming”**

Nature is the entry point for mystics to a relationship with the emergent and immanent presence in all things including self, others, and the world. Level one is the belief that we are all one and intimately connected, the human and more-than-human world. There is no real and enduring difference between me and the other because we are all capable of forming a relationship with the Real that is present in all. Distinctions that divide are distracting and dehumanizing, an artifact of rational thinking and social norms that create boxes and categories resistant to holistic thinking and being. Underhill (1914/2020) describes level one as a pouring out of self into the unity of nature.

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 is right: for all things in this world towards which you are stretching out linked together, and one truly apprehended will be the gateway to the rest. (p. 47)

In this early stage of mysticism, one sees with new eyes the inherent union of the world. And in this stretching out and longing to connect, a person encounters a wisdom that is both simple and complex:

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, 1914/2020, p. 49)

I experienced elements of level one mysticism from childhood through an undergraduate degree in Environmental Education. I experienced nature as a direct and unmediated intimacy, characterized by connection, bliss, and joy. I remember, especially as a child, standing or laying down for long periods of time, just being one with nature, being whole and complete. My sense of individual-self dissolved into the water, air, insects, birds, and mud. I was awed by the interconnected and generative ways that nature kept me fascinated and curious to experience more and to know more about who I am.

Level one informs my teaching in the ways I strive to see the unique qualities of students and to allow those perspectives to change me as a teacher and us as a collected class. There is little difference between standing silently in a woodlot watching nature unfold and standing in a classroom watching the miracle of the unique qualities of humanness unfold. As a level one mystic-educator I learned to challenge the structures of academia and society that seek to confine students and my pedagogy to prescribed categories. Only when every heart, body, and mind is completely present can a full description of self, other, and text become revealed and liberated.

Eisner (1996) writes in *Cognition and Curriculum Reconsidered*, that we know the world through our senses so we should tell each other about our understanding of self in the world through our senses. Creating assignments that encourage multiple forms of representation is one way I create spaces and opportunities for students to show up in their wholeness in ways that a traditional paper or final exam can rarely achieve. For instance, I might bring a poem to class that relates to the topic of the day. After reading the poem I invite, never demand, students to lift out words, images, or phrases that speak to their heart. The sharing of words or stanzas, often accompanied with moments of contemplative silence, can dissolve the boundaries of intellect and invite the wisdom of the heart which fosters a shared sense of community and connection.

Through the “simple seeing” of Underhill’s mysticism, I seek to cut through the noise of traditional forms of teaching and learning to witness students in their divine complexity. Underhill captures this intense and intentional looking past the presumed differences to the center of every living thing as a, “turning away from the label, you shall surrender yourself to the direct message poured out towards you by the *thing*. Then, you considered: now, you are to absorb. This experience will be, in the very highest sense, the experience of sensation without thought: the essential sensation, the ‘savouring’ to which some of the mystics invite us” (p. 49). As a holistic educator, there are few experiences as powerful and liberating as when I am absorbed in the act of witnessing the deeper essence of a student into being in ways that elevate our collective understandings.

### Nature Boy

Earliest memories,  
All of nature.

A sense of oneness and mystery.

Pine trees, wet ground, blackberries, and frogs.

Mud holes brimming with life.

Laying on my belly, blissfully wondering.

Standing still on a woodland trail,

Watching life fly, crawl, and swim.

Mesmerized by awe, complexity, and mysterious  
unity.

### Second Level of Contemplation: “Metaphysical World of Being”

Once a mystic becomes aware of and more conversant with the experiences of level one, there emerges a longing to connect with the energy linking together all the individual pieces of the human and more-than-human world. A search for the transcendent essence of the ever-enduring love that unifies all and holds all in a gentle embrace.

Underhill (1914/2020) captures this transition from simple interconnectedness to a curiosity around what resides behind the connections that foster meaning and purpose to life:

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. (p. 52)

Underhill is pointing to the mystical *why* and *what* that resides one layer deeper than the interrelated and communal nature of reality. In reaching out to

connect, the seeker must learn to set aside elements of ego, ideas, and frames of knowing that bind self to the social world. The mystic educator must learn the disciplines of quietness and attentive listening, “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” (p. 58).

I can trace level two from early adulthood where 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 mystery, wonder, awe, and joy leaned heavily toward the unknown-known. I slowly learned to be and to see beyond the separate forms of self and the world to the deep Love out of which connections with all things emerge. I learned to integrate the temporal world (the focus of level one) with level two mysticism and its emphasis on the eternal and transcendent.

Underhill (1914/2020) notes that the temporal and the transcendent are in conversation with each, not discordant:

Thus understood, they do not conflict. You know that the flow, the broken-up world of change and multiplicity, is still going on; and that you, as a creature of the time-world, are moving and growing with it. But, thanks to the development of the higher side of your consciousness, you are now lifted to a new poise; a direct participation in that simple, transcendent life ‘broken, yet not divided,’ which gives to this time-world all its meaning and validity. (p. 59)

The shift from an intense focus on the present and its unique elements to seeing beyond to the holistic led me to a commitment to transcendent and

transformative forms of teaching. I practiced attentiveness to the divine nature of students while also seeking the sacred presence of wholeness that everyone in class could connect to. I learned to become accustomed to and trusting of Truth that is beyond the known-knowing of the intellect (Palmer, 1998). Underhill describes this trust as the “ultimate sentence and melody, which exist independently of [our] own constructive efforts”. Attending to level two requires the discipline to remain centered and present *to* and *with* the All. It is far easier to yield to the myth of normality and accept the normative definitions of faculty/student roles that divide the self from wholeness through right behavior, beliefs, and categories.

As an educator, I describe my calling as the holistic impulse to serve and foster healing spaces for students who are disempowered and dehumanized by institutional policies and norms. One of my class norms is to listen to the silence in self and others. In stillness, what is silenced by social and academic norms of compliance can speak and deepen our relationship with that which is greater than self. I tell students that we are practicing a form of “spiritual wait time” instead of the secular version of wait time. I know I am operating close to level two mysticism when I act and speak without a rational justification, only attending to an inner-voice that speaks beyond logic and compels the speech of healing, well-being, and justice.

In those fleeting moments of reaching level two mysticism, the whole class lifts to a different plain of knowing and being. We are less focused on the temporal concerns of structure. We live into the transcendent knowing-unknowing of ambiguity, wonder, and awe that frame the boundaries of the academic texts we are studying. Mystics refer to this experience as knowing through unknowing because definitions drop away, and one lives the holism that is ever present. This is what Huebner (1999) names “moreness” as the goal of education

and Krishnamurthi calls this unity the attainment of “Ultimacy” (Forbes, 2002).

### Behind the Curtain

The world is rich with tricksters, jesters, and clowns.  
The raven, coyote, and dragonfly.  
The divine’s sleight of hand artists,  
They are not what they appear to be.  
Fleeting and transformative mischief makers.

More like curtain pullers than lever pullers.  
More like truth tellers,  
Sharing to those who can decipher,  
their undecipherable wisdom.  
Learn to walk sideways, see in the dark, hear the  
silence into speech.

### Third Level of Contemplation: “*Divine Reality*”

After a time of living into the transcendent spaces of Love, learning to trust the tricky nature of the jesters, the unfamiliar and disorienting nature of level two becomes increasingly trustworthy and reassuring. Even though level two, as Underhill (1914/2020) notes, “offers no material to your image-making mind” (p. X) it is still full of mystery felt and grasped. This is the strange mystical paradox of holism as comforting-discomfort or unification-disunification.

As one surrenders or yields to the wisdom surrounding all, one experiences a form of knowing and expressions of understanding that lack a logical explanation or rational foundation. The ability to see and say things that should not be known or understood by the rational and technical mind becomes more frequent with the increased ability to trust Truth beyond Truth.

Underhill (1914/2020) characterizes the transition from level two mysticism to level three as fluid and passing, not solid, definitive, or predictable. It

is more like breathing where the expansion of the lungs naturally yields to the incoming air. Level one is about connection with the uniqueness of all, level two is about trustworthy wholeness or Truth that embraces all, and level three is about surrender, yielding, setting aside, or abandoning self-agency. In the double-speak of mysticism, the more a person feels lost and disconnected from known markers of meaning the closer the person is to Truth and acting out a genuine life, “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, 1914/2020, p. 62).

Through the struggle and isolation emerges a sense of deep connection, devoid of attachment and direction. Questions of why, purpose, status, and ego dissolve into the world of the eternal and transcendent. The relationship with knowing is no longer a one-way longing for meaning where the conversation is directed from the person outward. In level three mysticism there is a sense of reciprocity, mutual accountability, and action that Underhill (1914/2020) notes as:

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. (p. 63)

In my late 40s and early 50s I learned to embrace and feel comfortable with the uncomfortable unifying gifts that emerge in close, one-on-one, reciprocal relationships with Love. Painful because it cannot be controlled, only present in fleeting ways during conversations and interactions with students. Joyful because it feels like an energy and knowing that comes from me/not me, self-agency is replaced with transcendent action.

It is during one-on-one advising or mentoring conversations with students that I sometimes experience this sense of surrender, spiritual intimacy, and connection. At times, the conversations are joyful and exploratory. Other times, they are hard and focused on truth-telling when a student is failing, breaking norms, or dehumanizing others. I know I am moving toward level three wholeness when I feel the academic world of norms and policies shifting and the concreteness of roles soften. I strive for a letting go to:

eradicate the last traces of self-interest even of the most spiritual kind—then, you have established conditions under which the forces of the spiritual world can work on you, heightening your susceptibilities, deepening and purifying your attention, so that you are able to taste and feel more and more of the inexhaustible riches of Reality. (Underhill, 1914/2020, p. 64)

My heightened senses create space where I am acutely aware that now is the time for deep listening to self, other, and Love. As I listen for the openings, the widenings, the truths at the center of the students being, I gain a sense of wisdom and certainty on how to proceed. I let the Words beyond the words speak to the spiritual essence before us, action becomes an unconscious speaking of Love. In these delicate moments we often reach a place where the temporal elements of pain, frustration, or disappointment are no longer the

central focus. The sharp edges of negative emotions begin to smooth out, allowing both of us to see a way toward understanding and wholeness in the relationship and the choices before us. Students often ask how I knew what to say or how I put into words an intangible and ineffable experience or thought. I am increasingly comfortable answering that I don't really know, but I have learned to trust the holistic and healing gift of Wisdom that is beyond both of us and our institutional roles.

As a mystic educator I am committed to creating and sustaining places and spaces where the fullness of learners can materialize. I operate from the assumption of wholeness for every student I teach. My calling as a holistic-prophetic educator is to invite the healing completeness to the surface, to push through the detritus of roles, assumptions, and past negative experiences that often obscure the true essence of each learner. Level three mysticism is central to this mission.

### **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.  
Attentive listening to the other.  
Hearing their joys and troubles into deep speech.  
Trusting the Silent Voice within,  
Love binds all,  
Wounded, wandering, and wondering.

### **Final Contemplation: *Braided Love***

As I deepen my study and experience of mysticism and holism in education, I experience Underhill's levels as a dynamic and fluid trinity. They prefer to dance together rather than attend separate parties.

As such the three levels of mysticism are three interrelated classroom moments of human flourishing and knowing in the presence of Love. The division into levels is arbitrary and more a convenience driven by the limitations of the written word and the human mind to comprehend the ineffable.

To ease into this interconnectivity, I often draw from my knowledge of the natural world for images and metaphors that bridge from a particular moment to the more universal wisdom of Love and Wholeness. And then back around and out again my teaching goes as I connect self, others, and text. Nature is an embodiment of the integrated levels of mysticism as each element is unique and supports the whole. Classrooms can be an embodiment of wholeness through the ecological interplay of human uniqueness and communal unfolding. It is my rational mind and drive to sort, categorize, and control through "technique" (Palmer, 1999) that forces an artificial overlay on what is already complete and whole in self and others.

Mysticism in the classroom fosters a sense of healing wholeness that manifests as attentive listening that creates a sacred space for students to unfold toward their natural state of being. Underhill (1914/2020) makes the argument this way:

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. (p. 45)

When student flourishing truncates institutional systems, I trust Love to provide the words and the passion for action.

### **Wings of Divine Presence**

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.

### **Author Bio**

**Paul Michalec** is a Clinical Professor and Chair of Teaching and Learning Sciences at the University of Denver. He teaches courses in the social foundations of education and teacher preparation. His primary area of research is teacher formation and spiritual development, drawing from the fields of philosophy, ecology, and theology. He holds a Master of Theological Studies from the Iliff School of Theology.

*\*I want to express thanks and appreciation to Dr. Julie Todd. The core of this paper was developed in her course Mysticism and Activism at the Iliff School of Theology. Her encouragement and feedback were instrumental to my understanding the potential of mystic-educators as healers to form and reform the practices of teaching and learning in higher education classrooms.*