

Emma Lou Thayne and the Art of Peace

Casualene Meyer

We live in a world where peace exists only by reason of a balance of terror. I have often thought that if great numbers of the women of all nations were to unite and lift their voices in the cause of peace, there would develop a worldwide will for peace which could save our civilization and avoid untold suffering, misery, plague, starvation, and the death of millions.

—President Gordon B. Hinckley, September 1985

She has a very real gift that allows her always to see the best in people and situations and lets her deal with things with compassion.

—Becky Thayne Markosian, 1992

Anyone who has been spiritually nourished by the hymn “Where Can I Turn for Peace” knows something of the poetry of Emma Lou Warner Thayne. Thayne, now in her ninetieth year, has fostered peace in fourteen books of prose and poetry as well as in her public service, her antinuclear activism, and her family and personal relationships. Throughout her life, she has held positions of significant responsibility, serving on the Young Women’s General Board of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, on the *Deseret News* editorial board, and for decades as an adjunct instructor of English at the University of Utah. Thayne has also made many friends and done much to promote peace as an antinuclear activist, a current member of the Salt Lake City Citizen’s Council, and a longtime participant in collaborative art projects. An abiding love of family informs all of her achievements. Thayne’s

Where Can I Turn for Peace?

1. Where can I turn for peace? Where is my solace
When other sources cease to make me whole?
When with a wounded heart, anger, or malice,
I draw myself apart, searching my soul?

2. Where, when my aching grows, Where, when I languish,
Where, in my need to know, where can I run?
Where is the quiet hand to calm my anguish?
Who, who can understand? He, only One.

3. He answers privately, reaches my reaching
In my Gethsemane, Savior and Friend.
Gentle the peace he finds for my beseeching.
Constant he is and kind, love without end.

culminating creative work, *The Place of Knowing: A Spiritual Autobiography*, published in 2011, gives readers a look into the life of this gracious woman and artist whose love of the word and the world join in her concern for bringing about peace. This book enables readers not only to admire what Thayne has achieved in her “peaceable walk with the children of men” (Moro. 7:4) but also to comprehend how grace and power operate in every life.

The interview that follows is a condensed and blended version of conversations that occurred on September 9, 11, 14, 25, and 29, 2013; November 14, 2013; February 20 and 22, 2014; and March 1, 2014. With poetic precision, Thayne helped to compile and edit the text. Additionally, she provided two new poems, published for the first time in these pages.

Meyer: We begin with “Where Can I Turn for Peace,” perhaps your best-known work. You explain in great detail the emotional situation that hymn responds to in the book you coauthored with your daughter Becky, *Hope and Recovery: A Mother-Daughter Story about Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia, and Manic Depression*. Will you briefly describe the hymn’s genesis for *BYU Studies Quarterly* readers?

Thayne: I was desperate. I felt there wasn't going to be any life for our Becky; she was terribly sick, suffering from bipolar and severe eating disorders. She was in the hospital, and I was on the general board of the Young Women [Mutual Improvement Association, or YWMIA]. Every year the YWMIA held a June conference; teachers came from all over the world, and the board presented an elaborate program to



Emma Lou Thayne, 2014. Photograph courtesy of Brent Hayes.

introduce the activities and curriculum for the coming year. My friend Joleen Meredith and I, both of us serving on the Laurel committee, had written other songs for this program; she was the musician, and I was the lyricist. The program was just days away, and we needed a finale. I had always wanted to write a hymn, and she had too. Because of Becky's illness, I had been desperately asking myself, "Where can I turn for peace?" and praying for answers for what I didn't understand. Actually, once I began the hymn, it was easy for me to write. Within an hour, I had my three verses and called Joleen. She had a history of depression in her family, so she understood exactly what I was talking about. As I read a line, she composed a line; this was over the phone. By noon we had our hymn. We didn't change anything.

Meyer: You were the first woman to serve on the board of the *Deseret News*, one of the two daily newspapers in Salt Lake City. Talk about that experience.

Thayne: For seventeen years in the eighties and nineties, I served on the *Deseret News* board, the only woman. Tom Monson [President Thomas S. Monson] liked me and chose me for the position. He and I were friends, and we could talk. The board met every week in the room where the Quorum of the Twelve meets, and because of my smaller stature, I had to dangle or slump in one of the big chairs. I never had more calls or letters than I did on

my appointment to this board, because women were just not on such boards. But it was a beginning.

My fellow board members were wonderful, and we became good friends. I knew I was a token on the board, but they never treated me like one. Usually in board meetings they just went in and talked bottom line, but I was curious. I didn't know an awful lot of things, and I asked lots of questions. I felt that I was an advocate for people who had no voice: for women, for the staff, and for readers. I was on the news content committee and had to read every word in both of the Salt Lake City daily papers. And you know, it's still a habit—I can't go to bed without reading the papers.

Meyer: You have used your talent with the written word on a grand, public scale but have also shared that talent, as a teacher, to nurture others one-on-one. Tell us about your work in education.

Thayne: I started teaching at the University of Utah soon after I graduated; I was only twenty. It was after World War II, when the student body swelled from 2,000 to 20,000 students, so there was a great need for teachers. Teaching freshman composition was a new adventure, because most of “the boys”—they were all men, of course, and older than I—were on the GI bill, and having been part of the war, they wrote these marvelously interesting things. It was pretty scary, but it was also really, really fun. Teaching got in my blood as a consequence of that first invitation, and I've taught ever since, in the Church as well as in the education world.

I turned down administrative jobs in the Church until I was invited to be on the general board of the YWMIA, and I left teaching in the ward very reluctantly; I taught M-Men and Gleaners (the over-eighteen singles). The lessons then were by such fine thinkers as Lowell Bennion, and they dealt with the application of gospel principles to real-life situations. Pretty consistently we'd have thirty-six or so in our class. As they later married, some invited me to go as their escort in the temple.

I am eighty-nine years old now. For the past eight winters, I have taught a class as part of the Oscher Institute at the University of Utah called *We Are Our Stories*. The students are all over fifty-five. I keep it to twenty—you just don't want to overcrowd a writing class—and there's a waiting list every time. People want to tell their stories, and I help them to—that's

what the class is about. The students find themselves writing deep things, the kinds of things they've never really expressed, and I feel as if this can be such a gift for their families.

Meyer: You mention teaching as a young graduate right after World War II. Did the realities of this war—especially the atom bomb and the subsequent threat of nuclear wars—contribute to your participation in the peace movement?

Thayne: World War II was the good war for us; we wanted to be in war; we wanted to save ourselves from the powers that were out there in the world. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, I was a seventeen-year-old freshman at the University of Utah. I remember standing in the union building with the whole student body the next morning, Monday. There we were in the ballroom, where we had come for dances and celebrations, and instead we were all very somber. President Roosevelt came on the radio to declare war on Hirohito, Hitler, and Mussolini. For the next four years, we students were heavily involved in what was happening to our troops abroad. During the war, I would regularly go to the library and look at the *Salt Lake Tribune*, which at the time was the only morning paper, to find out who had been listed as missing, wounded, or dead. Very often I would know someone listed, so the war was very close. Meanwhile, almost all the men from the campus were gone to war, and army troops were stationed in the field house. We rolled bandages at the Red Cross and danced with troops at the USO. Silk stockings, gas, butter, and sugar were rationed by coupon; our lives were very much affected by the war. When the atom bomb was dropped and the war ended, we were thrilled. The destructiveness of the bomb we didn't even think about. Our boys were coming home.

Later, when I was teaching freshman English at the U and we were writing a research paper based in part on Jonathan Schell's *The Fate of the Earth* [copyright 1982], I began to get a new perspective, both from this book and from what I learned from my students. They had very different ideas about the morality of nuclear weapons. I didn't consider the loss of life at the time the bomb was dropped; I was just glad the war was over. My being involved in antinuclear activism came very naturally from that initial realization.

Meyer: Let's talk more about that antinuclear activism and those you call your "peace friends"; your activism has been a facet of your art and relationship with other artists.

Thayne: In 1983, David Freed, the retired first cellist of the Utah Symphony and a peace activist, called to invite me to write poems about peace among nations. We were to be sponsored by the Utah Arts Council to perform around the state a peace message. This was my first experience with any kind of making peace. He was going to play Bach, and I was to read a poem about peace between the movements. Can you imagine what a challenge this was for me?

David made a tape of himself playing Bach to let me know when a poem should occur for the program, and each time I was to come in, he said "pome!" This was amusing to me. Very often people pronounce "po-em" as "pome." At night I went out to my studio and I'd listen to his playing, and then I'd go to sleep with Bach ringing through me. I'd sleep with the notion of a peace poem, and the night would deliver one to me. I ended up with a suite of six poems that were for me chronological.

Right at that time, a friend of mine called attention to a piece in *Time* magazine, in which Catholic bishops had written a message to their people saying, "We ask you to consider as we have considered the possibility of nuclear war." I fell in love with the word "consider"—just think of how seldom we're asked to consider—so then I ended up with six considerations called *How Much for the Earth?*

I was at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts (VCCA) in 1983 for three weeks. You'd apply, and if you were accepted it was like being sponsored by the Medici: it was only ten dollars a day for everything—board and room and this beautiful place and the experience of associating with all the other artists. At VCCA, in the evening after dinner, we would gather in the library and hear poets and writers read, see painters' work, and hear composers—whatever they'd created during the day. Walter Arndt, foremost translator of Pushkin, heard my reading of these peace poems, which I was revising during my stay, and he said, "Those poems must not stay in Utah." He offered to translate them into Russian and German at Dartmouth, where there was a chair in his name.

Later, after I'd been in the Soviet Union in 1984 and read these poems in various places, I received a contract from a publisher in the Ukraine. The contract was made out to Lou Thayne Emma (Russians had never heard of a double first name like Emma Lou) to publish 40,000 copies of these poems, all proceeds to go to the Soviet Peace Fund. What kind of a dream is that? Here I'd been on a trip to promote peace, and this happened, and I thought, what could I ever hope for better than that?

Meyer: Tell us about that trip to the Soviet Union.

Thayne: It was in 1984, thirty years ago. I went to the Soviet Union as part of an educational exchange tour. We were definitely behind the Iron Curtain and very aware of the deprivation of a Communist society. I wrote a 600-page book about it but didn't have it published. Now it would be a real period piece. Watching the Sochi Olympic Games made me realize what a different place Russia is now.

Meyer: And didn't you also attend a nuclear test ban conference? What impressions remain with you, and why do you feel that such involvement was fitting for a poet? I'm thinking Shelley—"Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." Do you think there's anything to that?

Thayne: It's been twenty-four years since I attended the Nevada-Semipalatinsk congress in Kazakhstan to urge all nations to sign the nuclear test ban treaty. From that congress I realized that the world would be a lot less dangerous if we could have that test ban treaty signed. The treaty could have made a huge difference then; it still could today.

My talk to the congress was about people and our connect-edness. Everything at the conference had been very factual but not moving. We needed to connect with each other and with our purpose emotionally. Poetry is about feeling; that is why in my talk I read from my book *How Much for the Earth*. People seemed to respond to what I was saying.

I still find occasion to use these poems in the cause of peace. More than twenty years after the test ban treaty conference, I was invited to read from the book together with the saxophone of Clifton Sanders at Utah Valley University for a peace-among-nations celebration. What a glorious serendipity to have

the keynote speaker be Jonathan Schell. I told him how much his book *The Fate of the Earth* had meant to me, how it changed everything; it changed my point of view on the atomic bomb.

I've recently been working with friends about the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, which is going to come up for a vote again. The United States, Israel, and China are among the twenty-one nations that have signed but haven't ratified the test ban treaty. Thirteen other countries, including India, Pakistan, and North Korea, have neither signed nor ratified it. So that's still on the table. Last August three of my peace friends and I had a telephone meeting with former senator Bob Bennett and invited him, if he could, to talk to people in Congress who oppose it, about why he favors it. That's what we're doing right now.

On another front, I have a friend who is extremely interested in ridding the world of landmines. Another friend who had recently returned from Iraq told me that a landmine is the perfect soldier, who never gets tired or afraid, but stays right there on the job ready to kill people.

Meyer: It seems your talent for loving others and your talent with the word empowered you to participate in the cause of peace. What is the relationship between art and advocacy?

Thayne: It has every relationship. There are so many people working behind the scenes to make good things happen—it was these peace friends who helped me go to the Soviet Union and later on to the 1990 Kazakhstan test ban treaty conference. They are this nucleus of people who are constantly finding ways to push our civilization toward peace; I'm the recipient of their good work. What I do is write things for publications and for people; that's been my main thing. Sometimes they ask me to write something for a given cause, but most of the time I just do it on my own. Writing's my deal, you know.

I've never been one who has marched or joined protests. I have done my activism on the page mostly, writing articles and letters to editors. I have friends whom I respect enormously, who do march and protest, but the spoken and printed word have been my way to voice my opinions.

Meyer: Most people would consider you “old,” and yet you are still an artist and activist in the cause of peace, lifting others with the power of your words and social consciousness. Talk about this.



Emma Lou Thyne surrounded by family and friends at the gathering where she received the 2013 Gandhi Peace Award. Photograph courtesy of Emma Lou Thyne.

Thayne: I thought by the time I was eighty-nine things would slow down. Nelson Mandela in Africa felt that older people who had been active in the community should not be put on a shelf but be called into some kind of service to help with present problems. Along with Richard Branson and Peter Gabriel, he came up with what he called a council of “Elders”; these councils are all over the world now. But in Salt Lake we could not be called the council of Elders, so we are the Citizen’s Council. We started out with two former governors and people from all walks of life, all past retirement age. We still want to have something to say about how our state is run. We work on things like redistricting, ethics, and Medicaid extension. We don’t make a lot of progress sometimes, but we keep working. I just love our meetings; everyone knows more than I do. I go and learn. They are former legislators, people who have been in every branch of government, educators, businesspeople—they represent a wide spectrum of skills. You can imagine how much fun those meetings are, even as I hobble in on my walker.

On September 29, 2013, I was given the Gandhi Peace Award at the aviary in Liberty Park. Of course it was an honor, but I feel I’ve been led in every direction I’ve gone. For example, last fall I was invited by BYU and the gifted Jared Oaks to write

a suite of five poems about the beauty of Utah to be set to music and performed by soprano and mezzo-soprano; I love soprano duets, so this has been fun. I think I'm being invited to do a lot of things because people think I'm going to die, which I will . . . any minute. That's fine. But still, life is a kick when all these fine things are happening.

Meyer: We have talked about your public life and influence; now let's talk about the loving family relationships that very much inform your poetry and prose, that give you reasons for publishing peace. What was your birth family like?

Thayne: I don't have to think, "Now I will love someone." I just do. It's a simple imperative, a gift from my family. My mother and father loved each other; they were in a honeymoon marriage. They were happy people, both interested and interesting, and that's a pretty good combination. My father was an athlete and a referee. His saying was, "Try hard. Play fair. Have fun." Imagine having someone you live with teach you to live your life like that. In our family, we cheered for each other. Mother and Father made sure that we were always cheering for the other people, too. He was the athlete and the people person; he was out in the business world, and everybody loved him. Mother was at home. A poet and a painter, she brought aesthetic balance to our home. It was amazing that they were so good together, because they were so very different. He'd go to the opera with her, and she didn't miss a football game with him. She had a literary club and a sewing club, and that was the extent of her leaving the home. It was she who killed the rattlesnakes. It was also she who taught us how to hammer and saw. Her thing was to pray at night, plan in the morning. Her faith was just unlimited, and so that's something we also learned by osmosis.

All three of my brothers, Homer, Rick, and Gill Warner, have recently died—oh! I miss them. We grew up knowing that we were loved, so we loved each other. We liked people, so we were invited into rewarding groups, places, and relationships. My husband, Mel, now takes my brothers' three widows and me to our traditional Thursday lunch.

Meyer: And what about your own marriage? How has it contributed to your art and achievements?

Thayne: Mel and I met on a blind date. He was running a boating concession on Pine View Reservoir in 1949 while he waited for a scholarship for his master's program in American history at Stanford. At that time nobody had a boat or water skis, so they had to come to him to buy time on the lake. He taught them to water-ski or took them for a boat ride. One of my best friends lined us up for a date to go waterskiing, which was a little strange because that winter I had broken my back—I went over a cliff skiing and landed in pine trees. I was barely out of a body cast and into a brace, but Mel said he wasn't concerned; he just gave me a big Mae West life jacket. He was such a good teacher that I got up the first time I tried, and that's very unusual. It probably helped that I was a snow skier, too.

That waterskiing date has always seemed to me to be a good metaphor for our marriage: I always feel connected to this wonderful rope that's pulling me in a certain direction. Mel knows where he's going, and I'm free on my end of the rope to play any way I want to in the wake. Of course, sometimes I get to drive the boat, too. But for a big part of our lives, Mel has supported me financially, socially, and spiritually, and it has made for a wonderful life.

Meyer: In reading your work, I think it is clear that your family—five daughters, sons-in-law, and grandchildren—are also part of your wonderful life. What would you like to say about them?

Thayne: My daughters and I have had a very close and supportive relationship throughout all of our years together. We go to lunch every week—anyone who's in town, usually at least four of us—and we have a girls' trip every spring, twenty-eight crazy times so far, mostly near home (St. George or the West Coast), but occasionally to such destinations as Ireland and New York. My daughters are my fun and my support, maybe especially in these later years, and each is her own unique self.

My sons-in-law are dandy guys; I like them a lot, and they like each other. I've got a son-in-law here at the table with me right now. He's my physical therapist; he makes me move!

Mel and I have eighteen grandchildren, and in the spring we'll have eighteen great-grandchildren. Most of the time when our whole family meets, it feels like a cast of thousands; there are so many of us.