

Where Can I Turn for Peace?

Emma Lou Thayne

9/11. FOR SEEMING FOREVER, a call for help. Since 2001 a blast of grief swallowed like debris from the heap of rubble and human remains on the streets of Manhattan, of the New York until then mesmerizing for its plays and Times Square billboard of sports or perfume or long-ago Camel cigarettes with smoke blowing casually from a woman's mouth five stories high. For my generation, this was a celebration place for the *end* of war in streets jammed with servicemen kissing jubilant girls, not the start of something called war but indefinable as the knot of despair in a psyche used to buoyancy, now amorphously ending plans to travel or invest or save for retirement. Or even, as reported later, to diet, Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers stock plummeting.

Like a New Yorker who said, "We couldn't bear to look, and all we did was look." And see.

At our front door at 7:00 P.M., our Siberian friend, Valentina, just home from her annual month in a disintegrating Russia. Arms around

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me, crying, her response so like our disbelief, "Oh, Emma Lou, not in America." No. Yet together we sat with Mel to watch for more hours in horrified verification of Yes—in America.

In the week that followed, our president declaring that we were at war, the suspension of belief in taken-for-granted security, mobility, everyday American pursuits of pleasures and palaces. Warnings of more terrorism. A frightful need to peel off the secrecy of who might be responsible. Even a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, Betty Williams, admitting to an audience of women honoring women of peaceful inclination that her first impulse on hearing about the attack was, "Let's nuke 'em." In most responses bewilderment, disbelief, then Get on with routing them out, the doers of evil, the killers and their accomplices!

Naiveté and trust swelled as we took to "God Bless America" and expectation of strength to overcome. I was a girl again, back on the campus watching our ROTC boys march from the plaza of the Park Building into army trucks singing "I am a Utah man, sir, / And I will be till I die," Pearl Harbor and war suddenly a reality, any not-believing dispelled then in four years of lists in the paper of "Wounded, Missing, Dead," stars in windows along the bus route changing from blue to red to white as those boys we'd gone to school with met the enemy in far-off places like Iwo Jima and Tobruk and Utah Beach. War. Now a new kind of war, the enemy a phantom of hate and secrecy and cunning.

On Friday came the day of memorials, of presidential edict to pray for faith and hope, for the release of hatred and anger. In Washington, in the National Cathedral, the President and assembled dignitaries heard "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and proclamations of love for right that could surely counter acts of evil. In Salt Lake City in the new Conference Center, twenty thousand at a time heard two sessions of the First Presidency and music, including the signature rendition of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" by the Tabernacle Choir. Be patient. Hold to your faith. Trust in the Lord—televised to millions.

The first number that the choir performed was "Where Can I Turn for Peace?" "When with a wounded heart, anger or malice, / I draw myself apart, searching my soul . . ." words I had written in personal anguish those years before when our daughter was desperately ill. Now, surprisingly, they resounded with an expansion greater than any private agony. For my country, for my people and others around the world: where to turn for peace? The hymn ended:

He answers privately,
Reaches my reaching
In my Gethsemane,
Savior and friend. . .
Love without end.

Half an hour later I was at a birthday lunch at the Red Lobster with seven of my oldest friends. We'd been pals since grade school, for more than seventy years. Two were in wheelchairs (both have since died); one was bent with osteoporosis, another with rheumatoid arthritis and a stroke; two of us had healed from small strokes, and another from bouts with debilitating depression. But we would make the lunch no matter what. We had been part of that "good war" Tom Brokaw described in his *The Greatest Generation*. Our husbands had served on carriers, in planes, in the invasion with General Eisenhower. Mel was overseas at nineteen helping to free Paris. Now we sat, remembering and shaking our heads over a new kind of war. It was noon, time for the moment of silence to honor the dead, the injured, the heroic in New York and Washington. In a crowded restaurant, what for our table of old women? We were linked by three quarters of a century of keeping homes as we kept our equanimity in capricious history, from the Great Depression to four distant wars, through recessions and deaths of enough loved ones that we were older than almost everyone. But we were there, caring about each other, our progeny, our intimate welfare, and our now-broader-than-ever take on the world.

Without cue, we eight bowed our heads and took hold of hands, something we had never done in all our years of celebrations and trials. On one side I felt Virginia, in a wheelchair from a broken hip and despondence over the recent death of her husband of fifty-two years. On the other, Pat, on an hour's leave from duties as matron of a temple. I felt in their hands a pulsing of strength. No timid or forced flowing of self into self: This circle raced with a kundalini usually evoked by intense well-being, from meditation or sensuous awareness. None of us could know what even the next hour might bring; but in that moment of connecting to each other and to the God we all believed in, I was privy to a peace beyond understanding, what mystics seek and devotees hope for. The peace that moments before felt so bludgeoned by a whole new acquaintance with

horror. A poem I wrote during the Gulf War about the birth of my eleventh grandson ended:

And to you, little boy: When you are
the weight of a man, do more than whimper
I am only one, there is nothing I can do.
There is so much.

Was it all just grandma talk? I am still only one. In a world now shivering again—my world this time—I talk to my friends or to my senators in Washington: What to do? How to help? How ever to make even a minute difference? What comes to mind is that circle of very old friends, matriarchs all, leaning on our learned belief in restoration through prayer.

And I remember a magic New Year's Eve in 1986 when 500 million of us around the world joined in just such a prayer and meditation for peace. On the program were members of sixteen faiths. In scripture and music sacred to their traditions, each brought personalized faith to pray and meditate for world harmony. That night to a packed Kingsbury Hall on the University of Utah campus, I told of my mother's tapping our ancient barometer to "work on the weather" when any of us were traveling. Now we were working on the weather of peace. That year President Ronald Reagan and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev held their first meetings. The end of the Cold War was barely three years away. I also remember in 1990 being with 300 delegates from twenty-three countries, come together in Kazakhstan in the then-Soviet Union, only a border away from Afghanistan, to champion a universal test ban treaty. Since then, I think of the daring and dignity of my peace friends, eager to dismantle mines, making roads and fields safe for innocents in Cambodia or Afghanistan or to take food and schools to the hungry and uneducated instead of bombs. And I find solace in the good I know to be in those asking for patience in any plans for scouring out terrorism. We need each other. And each other's strengths. And prayers.

Meanwhile I'll remember what that "Battle Hymn of the Republic" has to say. Written by a woman, Julia Ward Howe, during the Civil War, it declares: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. / He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored." What better to trample out than this season's yield of anger and malice? To be healed by whatever grounds us in hope and love? No, I will not let invaders

of our financial and military strongholds have access to my strongholds of faith and caring. I must find ways still to nibble away at whatever anger there is the world as it grows in nations across the globe and in hearts filled with fear in my own neighborhood.

Blazing in my mind will stay the impromptu prayer of President Gordon B. Hinckley in the closing session of Mormon semi-annual conference on Sunday, October 7, 2001. In one of the Saturday sessions the day before, he had said, "I have just been handed a note. It says a U.S. missile attack is under way [in Afghanistan]. I need not remind you that we live in perilous times."¹ An impatient, inflamed 90 percent of the nation approved the bombing to begin rooting out the terrorists. But there had to be more than bombing.

Articulate as well as compassionate at ninety-one, he ended his Sunday talk, "Now we are at war. Great forces have been mobilized and will continue to be. Political alliances are being forged. We do not know how long this conflict will last. We do not know what it will cost in lives and treasure. . . . Let us not panic nor go to extremes. Let us be prudent in every respect. And above all, my brothers and sisters, let us move forward with faith in the Living God and His beloved Son."²

Then, without precedent of any president in more than a century and a half of Mormon general conferences, his spontaneous prayer: "Bless the cause of peace and bring it quickly to us again, we humbly plead with Thee, asking that Thou wilt forgive our arrogance, pass by our sins, be kind and gracious to us and cause our hearts to turn with love to thee."³

And from the invocation at a luncheon the next day for the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Utah by one of my best "peace" friends, Dee Rowland, government liaison for the Salt Lake Catholic Diocese: "Let us pray for those who are powerful and those who are powerless. Let us pray for those who are hopeless without power and those who are with power but without conscience. Let us pray for all those who lie under bombs and for those who dispatch them and for those who

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Times in Which We Live," Saturday, October 6, 2001, LDS General Conference, retrieved in November 2003 from www.lds.org.

2. Ibid.

3. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Till We Meet Again," Sunday, October 7, 2001, LDS General Conference, retrieved in November 2003 from www.lds.org.

make them. Let us pray for the innocent, the firefighters, the police, and the rescue workers, for the villagers halfway around the globe and for the soldiers, and for those who go to kill and are killed. Let us pray for all who believe and yet do not hope. Let us pray for all those who hope and yet do not live out their hope. Let us pray for ourselves and for all we love and for all, finally, who await our love."⁴

And for any suffering this war will cause and has already caused. As Jeanette Rankin has said, "No one can win a war any more than anyone can win an earthquake."

The earthquake continues these months after the war in Iraq has been declared over. Nothing could have brought that reality closer than a visit in November 2003 with a thirty-three-year-old officer of an engineer battalion home on two-week leave from duty in Iraq.

He called me from Arizona where he was home, to be with his wife and two young daughters and to see for the first time his five-month-old son. After his degree in engineering, he had gone to Harvard for his MBA, started a dream job near Phoenix. Three days later he was called to head up his group of nearly two hundred headed for Iraq, November 2002. Their primary task: locating and dismantling land mines. Mines, he told me, are the perfect soldiers—always on duty, never any worry about morale, just right there to blow to bits any unwary man, woman, or child who might cross a street or head for a field. I thought of Mel's dearest friend nearly sixty years after his World War II encounter with a mine in France. Miraculously, he had lived, and his wounded legs had healed for him to play basketball and coach tennis. But a twelfth surgery in recent years on his nose could not stop the hemorrhages that send him from Manti to the emergency room in a Salt Lake City hospital every few months these sixty years later.

Now my young friend tells me of leading his battalion, called "9-11," on high-profile missions. In emergencies, they are the quick response, the first to arrive with soldiers to search for bodies and machines to clear the debris, like at the bombing of a U.N. center.

The day before we talked, the death toll in Iraq since "victory" had passed the 115 killed in combat. Regular army personnel were going home after a year there. Men like him in the Reserve or National Guard

4. Typescript in my possession, courtesy of Dee Rowland. Used by permission.

had just been told that their service had been extended to a year and a half and could be extended over and over again.

In the Union Building at the University of Utah, as of Veterans (Armistice) Day, November 11, 2003, students had hung a black paper chain, like those we used to make for Christmas of red and green. I had heard about it. Students always in the forefront of any awareness. Nothing could have prepared me for the sight. Strung across the two-story ceilings, up and down columns, over walls and windows, the black reminder. Down the broad hall students bent over studies or slouched in overstuffed chairs, on break from classes. Next to them high windows reflected the prayed-for snow on still-leaved trees after long drought. Relief. In lower case, *theater* at the far end hung high between wide scallops of the black chain. A red poster in the front foyer:

CHAIN OF REMEMBRANCE.

Each one of these links represents an individual who has died as a result of war since September 11, 2001.

Soldiers

Civilians

Iraqis

Journalists/Reporters

All part of the conflict.

ONE HUMAN FAMILY

On this day, 17,000 links.

My young captain was headed back to Iraq the next day.

"So how do you feel about being there?" I asked.

"Nobody wants to be there. People are getting along, doing a job. Can't do anything about getting out sooner. People still thank us—mostly poor people. The 10 percent who were wealthy under Saddam are leading the resistance. We have to keep telling ourselves that the only thing worse than war are the reasons that drive people to war. We can't ransack and then desert. We need to see it through. I wish Bush would be more humble, get some help. Iraq would welcome Middle Eastern support more than anything from the West. They don't trust Christians. They want the United States out, others in. As long as we're there, attacks will never stop. Too much bad blood."

Nearly forty-five minutes later after our long visit, I knew an in-

formed sadness I could never have imagined even as I had anguished over the idea of my America delivering a first strike. Pearl Harbor had driven us to war to protect ourselves from an already invading enemy. I asked, "And what can we do, back here, to support you?"

"To give total support for troops, there needs to be a human face to war."

I had my human face—his. Beneath his dark crew-cut, his picture with his battalion in army fatigues, eager and young. For a long time, he will be waving good-bye again, holding his baby and hugging his wife and little daughters. And then he'll be back in that Humvee approaching overpasses laced with hidden bombs and digging through rubble for bodies.

The black chain a statement in my grey head, I ask, "But how do I show my support?"

"Be for or against. Be politically active. Voice opinions either way. Just don't be passive."

I thought of my poem to my eleventh grandson: "Be anything but maybe."

"Soldiers resent not caring—forgetting," he emphasized. "Now instead of faces of the dead or interviews with their families in the media, there are only minor headlines: 'Two soldiers killed in Baghdad.' Write your congressman. Say you want the reserves home. Tell them we're people over there."

People. Of course. An idea needs to be peopled. Our talk took me back to 9/11, this time actually to Ground Zero. Where better to mourn the start of a war and cheer the preservation of more even than the Leonardo exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art? It was the end of March, an annual girls' trip with my five daughters. There in the silence of 5:00 o'clock on a late afternoon, the gaping hole, smoothed mud waiting for the newly designed mega replacement with a 1776-foot pinnacle. Faces from posters and TV floated over the emptiness. Cold. We walked the short block, and those faces followed us to the quiet of St. Paul's chapel. Part of lower Manhattan for 235 years, it had been the haven, the resting place. Miraculously, even its windows were not shattered in the blast and collapse of the Twin Towers. Hundreds of workers found comfort here in twelve stations around the chapel, from buckets of candy and lip balm to massages and counseling. And praying. They still inhabit this rainy Sunday. Gashes from their belts and boots are left as sacramental marks in the benches where they slept, after foot baths dried by hands that stroked

away the burning of hot ashes, with teddy bears cozied into their arms as they sat dazed from fourteen-hour duty in rubble. How like the searching of my young captain and his battalion in a seething Iraq two years later.

Helplessness? Distance? The human spirit can span it all.

I now remember the next day being on top of the Empire State Building, tourists looking down at bug-sized police cars, sixteen of them converging to control the crowd assembling for blocks. "Why?" I ask a stranger peering down next to me.

"A protesters' parade," he points out.

"But why? The war has already started. So many I know protested every way we knew how before last week. But what's the point of protesting now?"

His answer is exactly like that of my young captain in Iraq. "Look at me. I was in Vietnam for five years. I would still be there if it hadn't been for protesters. And for people being more than anguished at the reality of war."

Here in the baffling conundrums of politics and power, we can offer sustenance of heart and means. I can do more than grieve over death and destruction. I can love my country by caring enough to keep informed, by listening to all sides and expressing my views. I can hold hands and pray with old friends or for a newly found one on his way back to Baghdad. *Please, not another link in the black chain.* I can hold to my faith that prayers do matter, whether in cathedrals or conference centers, places of meditation or with children by a bedside. I can turn for peace every hour of every day or night and be assured that He will answer privately, reach my reaching—anybody's reaching. And for that reaching, reach to others on either side of battles way beyond my ken. Only by working on the weather of peace can we expect to nibble away at any anger in the world.