

Follow the Light, Lulie

Mary Lythgoe Bradford

Emma Lou Thayne, a giant in Mormon literature, passed away on December 6, 2014 at the age of 90. She was born Emma Lou Warner on October 22, 1924 in Salt Lake City. She received a BA in English from the U. of U. and taught there and in the Division of Continuing Education from 1946 to 1976. She also taught at the U. of U.'s Institute of Religion, was head coach for the University's Women's Collegiate Tennis Team. She received an MA in Creative writing in 1970 and was chosen by Thomas S Monson to be the first woman on the Board of the Deseret News. She also served on the Boards of the Utah Arts Council, Utah Endowment for the Humanities, the LDS YWMLA and the Salt Lake City Citizen's Council. The Salt Lake Community Service Learning Center is named after her. She is survived by her husband Melvin E Thayne and by five daughters: Becky Markosian, Rinda Hayes, Shelley Rich, Dinny Trabert and Megan Heath; and by 19 grandchildren and 18 great-grandchildren. (Andrew Hall, "In Memoriam: The Dawning of a Brighter Day," <http://associationmormonletters.org/blog/2014/12/in-memoriam-emma-lou-thayne/>)

Emma Lou Thayne may have been the most expansive person I have ever met. She managed to transform every event in her life into grist for her creative mill. Accidents and illnesses that would fell a normal person formed the sculpture that was her finest work of art—her own life. She once said: "I may never be a sculptor. But in my own realms of endeavor with my own limited abilities and training—and ridiculously wide-ranging inclinations—I know this: If I focus, let go and wait, holiness will visit. The muse will whisper, the thought will arrive."¹ She understood that her ability to focus was the secret of many of her amazing contributions.

Declaring "things happen," she transformed whatever happened to her into a poem, an essay, a cause. It was said of her mentor, Lowell Bennion, that Emma Lou never saw defeat. In the hospital

for a back operation that took thirty days' recovery, she accepted this as "time to lie and think."² She kept a diary and planned for a day in the week for herself to do with as she would—a plan that organized her life from then on. Forty-seven years old, mother of five girls, wife of a busy real estate broker and bishop, she was serving on the General Board of the Mutual Improvement Association with Lowell Bennion, who also hosted a trip to the Holy Land. This trip became a lodestar for Emma Lou, inspiring a book, and installing Lowell as exemplar and friend.

It was also during this period that I first met her. She recruited me as a writer of lessons for the Young Women's program. From that first meeting, I was welcome in her home, her cabin in Mill Creek Canyon, at luncheons and parties. Our shared interests included devotion to our professors and mentors, Lowell Bennion and William Mulder. When I began research on Bennion's life, she raised travel money for me and later proofed the manuscript and wrote its foreword.

As students of Dr. Mulder at the University of Utah's English department, we shared a friendship with his widow, Helen Mulder, who sent me her tribute to Emma Lou in which she lauded her generosity to her colleagues, especially to Dr. Clarice Short of the English department at the University of Utah: "After the death of our dear friend and mentor in the English Dept., Professor Clarice Short, Emma Lou [served] as her literary executor, collected Dr. Short's unpublished poetry, found a biographer and saw the book through publication. It was a tribute not only to Dr. Short but to Emma Lou as an example of her unwavering friendship. Dr. Short's book is a cherished volume we can place next to the fourteen books of poetry and reflections that Emma Lou has written herself."³

Lavina Fielding Anderson, writer, historian, and friend to us both, also described Emma Lou's powerful talent for friendship: "She could reach across any boundary to find a way to connect and celebrate. I think that her absolute fearlessness—particularly in times of harsh judgment, and line-drawing in the Church— . . . stemmed from her belief that the Church was hers, not the other way around." Anderson concludes that "she lives in a wonderful world . . . because she refuses to shut any doors or windows of enlightenment, and she welcomes everyone into that world."⁴

Lest we think of Emma Lou as a Pollyanna, I maintain that she, like Bennion, saw a tendency for Mormons to celebrate suffering rather than alleviate it. She knew exquisite suffering herself, but she found many routes to healing, always sharing her findings. When the first of her five daughters, Becky, developed bipolar disorder and eating disorders, she arranged to publish their account of this frightening disease. The proceeds financed a fund at the University of Utah for further research. Her famous hymn, "Where Can I Turn for Peace?," was inspired by this experience.

In her essays and autobiography she is straightforward, even intimate. For example, in recounting the birth of her last daughter, achieved after much pain and addictive medication, she describes her agony in deciding on a tubal ligation and the peace she found through the good offices of her doctor and nurse. She was always open to advice from new friends, even during chance meetings. Sustaining many injuries as an athlete, she always bounced back. Then in 1986 while driving down a canyon road with son-in-law Jim Hayes, a crowbar from a passing truck sliced through the windshield, into her head, and out the back window. Jim, a plastic surgeon, drove her to the hospital, where she underwent the first of eight surgeries to restore her eye socket and broken jaw. During that time she became despondent.

She had always been able to count on the restoration of sleep. "Plan and pray at night," her mother had taught her, and the morning would reveal poems and answers. Suddenly, Emma Lou admits, "I was someone else in my skin. I didn't laugh, cry, nothing."⁵ Sleep was full of monstrous dreams until two friends brought relief. One, a professor at Brigham Young University, reached Emma Lou "with her tender touch." Another friend, a professor at Notre Dame, said simply, "But of course I understand. You died."⁶

From then on almost every event would bring adventures from what she called "the place of knowing." She saw things others could not see and she heard music others could not hear. A mystic understanding was hers. She concluded that she had died when the crowbar hit her, bringing a vision of deceased family members gathered around her table. This motivated her to renew her already energetic contributions to the causes of peace, justice, and women's rights.

A year after her accident she spoke to the first international conference of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) at the University of Utah, where she read her poem "Women of a Different Tongue." Always a tireless speaker for worthy causes, she found herself the only woman speaker at the Test Ban Treaty Conference in Kazakhstan in 1990, where she read poems from her earlier visit to Russia and was told that hers was the only speech broadcast in its entirety on the local TV station.

Always a willing traveler to writers' and artists' retreats throughout the country, Emma Lou found renewed vigor in responding to the works of other poets and artists. Maxine Kumin, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, United States Poet Laureate, and New Hampshire farmer, became a fast friend, as did William Stafford from Oregon, whose habit of writing a poem a day inspired hers. In 1983 at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Paul Fini, an unusual painter from Chicago, introduced her to his partner, David. Thus began a powerful friendship that inspired Fini to leave his astounding paintings to Emma Lou when he died of AIDS. His paintings of the fourteen Stations of the Cross were so strong that Emma Lou was able to organize their display in the "City of the Saints" and then donate them to the national AIDS foundation, where they traveled across the country with the AIDS quilt. A year later, Emma Lou represented the LDS Church at World AIDS Day. If she had ever been fearful of joining unpopular causes, that fear left her. "With the privilege of a matriarch," she wrote, "I had once again been opened to possibility through exposure to the world, to the quality of people unlike me."⁷

Emma Lou claimed that her death experience opened her up to a deeper understanding of her life and the lives around her. She felt obligated to share it. At her first meeting after the accident with the board, she was disappointed in the response of her colleagues. "I even took the six-pound rusty iron rod that hit me—and the Brethren showed great concern . . . saying how grateful they were for my survival . . . but about death—not a word." She believed that she had a message that was not only personal but had been sent to her for a larger purpose. "My mentor, Lowell Bennion, taught me that what matters most is relationships, vertically to the divine and horizontally to the human."

How then to communicate this? So far, she admitted, she had talked only obliquely about what she had been given—and she had been reluctant to “acknowledge the light that had come into my soul.”⁸ What was it that she so devoutly wished to share? That light which had ushered her into “the place of knowing”—a light that wiped out fear, chasing goblins away, opening her to deeper poetry and wider love. How was she to communicate this? Through her poetry and other written words, yes, but more directly through personal involvement in worthy causes. She had always been involved, but now she vowed to pay attention to what had escaped her in the past.

As her friend, I wonder what could possibly have escaped her. Though she enjoyed a rich inner life, she was constantly facing outward. Her attention span was so deep that I can only compare it to that of her mentor, Lowell Bennion. As one of his students, I marveled at his open-door policy. How could such a busy man be constantly in touch with suffering students? I went to him one day with a question: “I have two proposals of marriage. Which one should I take?”

“You can choose not to choose,” was his response. I realized afterward that his answer came from the quality of the attention he applied to each of us. He knew that when asked by the “right man,” I would simply stop by to inform him.

Emma Lou developed the same inspired habit of paying intense attention. Whether greeting me on an unexpected visit or allowing me to host her at my home, she fixed her laser gaze on me and my problems as if I were her only friend. This ability certainly suffused all of her relationships.

Perhaps she was born into it? One daughter, Rinda Hayes, felt that her ancestry—pioneer Mormons on both sides—and her place in the family as the only girl with four brothers “grounded her in the rock-solid virtues of hard work, integrity and generosity.”⁹ Rinda believed that her mother had inherited leadership abilities that made her the “president of everything” and the “head of every committee.”

But she also knew the importance of finding refuge from busyness. She and Mel built a cabin on Mount Aire Peak that became

her sanctuary and the family hub, a space that cradled her daughters as they grew with a brood of cousins.

As I write this, I have before me an issue of *Exponent II* from summer 2000 with pages sixteen and seventeen facing each other: Emma Lou's poem about her Bench at Castle Craggs Rock facing two of my Irish poems, hers a courageous plan for her last moments on earth—a burial beside a stone bench from the mountain near her beloved cabin. Looking ahead—she still had years left—she paid tribute to the “green graph of my mountains / Holding up the sky / where I traveled without maps and never lost / Hearing the waters. . . . It will harbor the mulch of red leaves, the white of / Snow, the marvelous breath of spring / And this May knowing exactly where I will be.”¹⁰ A photo of the bench accompanies the poem.

On the facing page is a photo of the Ardgroom stone circle in Beara, Ireland, where I have spent many happy months at Anam Cara Writers' and Artists' Retreat, founded by Sue Booth-Forbes, née Susan Paxman. In the summer of 1997, Sue Booth-Forbes rented an Irish cottage on the shores of Galway Bay as a month-long writers' retreat for herself, Susan Howe, and me. Emma Lou joined us with Laurel Ulrich and Marie Cornwall. Sue later recalled this occasion as part of her inspiration for her Anam Cara Retreat, which she founded the next year. Sue writes that “Emma Lou has been my mentor, one of my *anam caras* (Celtic term for soul friend) since I began my term as editor of *Exponent II* in 1984. . . . In August 1997, she was part of the group of Mormon writers and poets who joined me in retreat in a cottage by Galway Bay on the Connemara peninsula in Ireland. During her stay she experienced life-changing moments in Our Lady Assumed into Heaven and St. Nicholas Cathedral in Galway that she describes so eloquently in her memoir.”

Sue recalls that very soon after she opened her retreat on the Beara Peninsula, “Emma Lou came with her five incredible daughters. They blessed Anam Cara with their creative and joyful spirits and helped form the ambience for those writers-and-artists-in-residence who have followed them.”¹¹ In her memoir Emma Lou calls her visit to Connemara “soul-retrieval work.” She continues, “From some ancient piece of Celtic lineage, I had absorbed truth Just thinking about it . . . I radiate and quiver, my temples relax

without instruction to the coming together of the earthly and the metaphysical. . . . I know now that it is possible to share the gift of the mystic with another of like intent, availability, openness to light.”¹²

“Openness to light” filled Emma Lou’s life. Her daughter Rinda offered this vivid image of Emma Lou finding light:

I was asked to speak at a women’s conference in St. George[,] Utah . . . probably because they figured they could not get my mother . . . I told them that I could probably bring my mother with me. . . . [T]hey asked if I could be the keynote speaker at 9:am[sic] with Mother as the closing speaker at 4:pm [sic]. A week before the conference, Mom called with a “bit of a situation”—she would never call anything a problem. . . . She had just realized that she had promised to speak at the same time at a stake conference in Salt Lake. . . . As my heart went into panic mode, she said, “Don’t worry—it’ll work out.” “Really Mom? You’re going to speak at eleven in Salt Lake and four in St. George?”

“Let me work on it—I’ll call back.” And she did. “My trusty friend”—she had many “trusty friends”—“will fly me down in his private plane.”¹³

Rinda described the darkening sky as she gave her talk. No Emma Lou. At 3 p.m. as Rinda prepared closing remarks, Emma Lou swooped in looking as fresh as a daisy, father Mel with her “looking like he’d just stepped out of a mixmaster.”

“Tell me what went on so I can pull it all together,” Emma Lou said, and she did just that in her closing speech. Later, she described the plane trip. As the skies darkened with the pilot advised to turn back, Emma Lou said, “Look at the tunnel of light. Let’s aim for that! Let’s go for it!”

“Few people have said no to Mom,” Rinda recalls. “There they went, zooming through the tunnel of light to land in St. George just in time.”

Emma Lou continued to speak and write until age ninety, when Rinda arrived “just in time” to hold her during her last breath. “I pictured her in that little plane bobbing through that tunnel of light. . . . She was going away with a smile on her face, heart open, ready for the next adventure.” At her funeral service, Rinda

declared, “Never believing in skittering on the surface of life, Mom wanted to experience it all—the exuberant joy, the wrenching sorrow. . . . She wanted everyone to experience the breadth and depth of real emotion.”

When Emma Lou departed this life, President Thomas S. Monson announced it and then sent Jeffrey Holland from the Quorum of the Twelve to speak at her service. All five of her daughters gave moving tributes, and she was buried near her bench in her beloved canyon.

It is difficult to assess the towering contributions of this buoyant spirit. I will not try. I can only offer a grateful prayer.

Notes

1. Lois M. Collins, “Alive Again: Emma Lou Thayne Finds Hope, Recovery and a Vibrant Life,” January 15, 2011. <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/700100745/Alive-again-2-Emma-Lou-Thayne-finds-hope-recovery-and-a-vibrant-life.html>.

2. Ibid.

3. E-mail from H. Mulder to author, December 7, 2014.

4. E-mail from LFA to author, December 8, 2014.

5. Collins, “Alive Again.”

6. Ibid.

7. Emma Lou Warner Thayne, *The Place of Knowing: A Spiritual Autobiography* (Bloomington, Ind.: iUniverse, 2012), 204.

8. Ibid, 61.

9. Rinda Hayes, from a talk delivered at Emma Lou Thayne’s funeral, December 12, 2014. Talk transcribed by Hayes and sent to author. All quotations by Hayes are from this transcript.

10. Emma Lou Thayne, “The Bench at Castle Crags Rock,” *Exponent II* 23 no.4 (2000): 16.

11. Sue Booth-Forbes, e-mail message to author, April 6, 2015.

12. Thayne, *The Place of Knowing*, 231.

13. Hayes transcript, here and following.