

## Pillars of My Faith

*A taste of a time when the Church was smaller and more rooted in relationships.*

## A GREAT SEA OF SUPPORT

By Emma Lou Thyne

ONE SUNDAY night, my three brothers, their wives, and my husband and I sat around the old black Monarch stove at our Mt. Air cabin and talked, as we have at someone's home one Sunday night a month for nearly forty years. We talked about growing up in the Church. We remembered. We listened. We laughed a lot. We knew more than we had before. But even in this group of my dears who have been in on much of my growing up in the Church, surprisingly little of what we saw as "true"

matched each others' views that Sunday night—let alone reasons for looking for that truth.

"Why have a Sunstone symposium?" one sister-in-law asked. A woman whose loving kindness and ingenuous generosity of spirit I adore. "What can it do but stir people up, make problems?"

We all had read the reports in the papers that morning of an authoritative opinion that facts do not make testimony nor



The family of Emma Louise Stayner and Stephen L. Richards.  
Front row: Emma Louise, Grace (Emma Lou's mother), Stephen L., Lynn (grandson), Russel, Gill; Back row: Willard, Claude, Stayner, Irene, Steve, Alice.

I was raised lovingly. And certainly "relatively," with ease and joy, in a day when structure and stricture played a so much smaller role.

us remembered things exactly alike; more importantly, no two of us remembered anything but ease and joy in growing up Mormon in a day when structure and stricture played so-much-smaller roles in any of it.

Later, I wondered into the night about why a Sunstone symposium? Why, too, *Dialogue*, *Exponent II*, *SUNSTONE*, study groups, talk? Why not just the *Ensign* and the *General Handbook of Instructions*? Why the constant bubbling and boiling, the anti-Mormon Deckers and Tanners, the proponents and the opponents? Why the inability of those in or out of the Church to leave it alone? Why might the Iron Rodders move without questions, the Liahonas without answers?

Into my head came Eugene O'Neill's 1946 *The Iceman*

"truth" history, and that we should not indulge in criticism of authority, even if the criticism is accurate. We all had our own opinions of the opinion—and they were all different. I was fascinated. There we were, the newest in-law in the group had been there for more than thirty-seven years, four of the rest of us racing with the same genes, tuned to the same background, as close in age and mutual conviviality as the luckiest of siblings, yet with interpretations of Church orientation as various as our feelings were harmonious. No two of

EMMA LOU THAYNE is a writer and poet. This paper was presented at the Pillars of My Faith session at the 1985 Sunstone Theological Symposium in Salt Lake City.

*Cometh*, a drama of love and hate, of human frustration and loneliness, of passion and spiritual bankruptcy—of nine drunks living every day in a bar on pipe dreams. Most of all, I thought of Larry Slade, O'Neill's world-weary cynic and commenter, age sixty—my age now exactly. I hunted up the play, a long one, four-and-a-half hours of inexorable reading. It was as bleak, as laser-beam insightful, as I remembered. Larry the philosopher saying: "Have you no respect for religion? . . . To hell with truth! As the history of the world proves, the truth has no bearing on anything."

So why a Sunstone symposium? An education week down south? Or even a general conference?

Larry goes on to say, "I was born condemned to be one of those who has to see all sides of a question. When you're damned like that, the questions multiply for you until in the end it's all question and no answer. As history proves, to be a worldly success at anything . . . you have to wear blinders like a horse and see only straight in front of you. You have to see, too, that this is all black, and that is all white."

O'Neill's play is about pipe dreams, derelicts drinking themselves into a stupor while telling themselves that tomorrow . . . tomorrow . . . they'll find "peace." He conspires to send them out into the world beyond the bar. One at a time they go. One at a time they return. When their pipe dreams are shoved into reality, they melt, they turn sour. Their lives go dead, until guileless Jimmy Tomorrow says, "What's happened? I don't feel a thing. There's not even a kick in the booze."

Larry watches "from the grandstand" of his distancing as Hicky, who has insisted on the reform of others and lost himself in the process, says on his way to jail and maybe execution for shooting his wife who forgave him once too often, "Do you suppose I give a damn about life now? Why, you bonehead, I haven't got a single damned lying hope or pipe dream left!" The Iceman cometh.

Why a Sunstone symposium? Maybe to make sure we search out not only truth, but how to hold to our pipe dreams.

How to deal with the potential coming of the Iceman. And that's why tonight I am glad my topic is "Pillars of My Faith," not "Subscribers to My Doubts."

Still, I ask myself, how did I get to be "one condemned to see all sides of a question?" To be full of pipe dreams even as I'm full of questions? One who sees a lot more grey than either white or black? One who knows why a Sunstone symposium is all right. And yet be one of the privileged partakers of the simplest of answers to growing up at all—in and out of the Church—love; I have been offered it at every turn. At home, in the ward, in the neighborhood, on committees, and in

classrooms. In anything that had to do with the most hopeful and promising of pipe dreams?

It had to be my pillars who helped put the whole non-structure together.

**M**AYBE I can talk about my pillars best in terms of Sunday—the Sabbath—and what that meant to my becoming.

As much as I've loved being a girl, for as long as I can remember, I've also relished being "one of the boys." As an only daughter with my three brothers, Homer and Rick, just older, Gill just younger, tossing balls and ideas

about, throwing and catching either, never doubting that I could—or should; glad too that I didn't have to get up early to go to priesthood in Highland Park Ward through the block or wear a white shirt and black bow tie that Earl Glade Jr. had the deacons wear to pass the sacrament. I liked that I had choices—to kick the football or slam the Flexible Flyer on Crystal Avenue, or to put my sixteen dolls to bed behind the couch, or make, as Father said, "the best dang Sunday night sandwich in forty-eight states" for him and the crowd in the kitchen listening to Charlie McCarthy on a Sunday night.

Sundays were simple, slow moving for us. Father, Homer "Pug" Warner, was gone every Sunday morning for nineteen years to MIA General Board meetings, where he started the M-Men basketball program whose final week we paid more attention to *by far* than to any general conference. And Mother, Grace Richards Warner, was always there as needed to kill the



The Warner children in Sunday dress at the Mt. Air cabin.  
Homer, Rick, Emma Lou, and Gill.

Such was our mix of life and church.  
Never static. Never separate. Never somber.  
By osmosis, authentic.

rattlesnakes, in both a literal and figurative sense.

I was reared lovingly. And certainly "relatively." I was the first baby blessed in the new Highland Park Ward; my Uncle Stayner Richards was for fourteen years our bishop; my Uncle Claude helped design the chapel; my Grandma and Grandpa Warner and Aunt Edna Heiner and her family brought the best lemon pies and buttermilk biscuits to Relief Society dinners; and my Uncle Willard Richards was Sunday School superintendent. And some Sunday School it was—a thousand of us!

In the summer we lived in the canyon—never came down—and our one Sunday meeting per week was announced by us on our "bugs"—go karts—and a megaphone—from the Victrola. Up and down the road: "Sunday School, 11 o'clock, Stephen L. Richards's!" Sometimes sixty of us gathered on the screened porch of his cabin to sing "Our Mountain Home So Dear," "For the Strength of the Hills," and "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth."

After that, there was dinner, formal even in our boots and tucked-in pants in the canyon, Father carving, me in my ringlets, serving, Mother supervising, everyone joking, talking sports and Grandma's trips. She lived with us and determined my sense of life—and death.

Sunday meant a head rub from Aunt Katherine Stayner, Grandma's youngest sister, our second mother, who had been on a mission and who had never married, had her own ad agency, and who could grow hair on my bald uncles' and father's heads (you who know them, know how successful she was!), or soothe out and send to sleep any of us. There was always an after-dinner nap, reading the funnies, sometimes climbing the apple tree to read a book alone, throwing a ball, or Father pulling us on a sled or, when we were in the canyon, taking us on a hike to the Crow's Nest.

Always it meant visiting, leisurely with ourselves, often with Mother's and Father's friends, who became ours. Into the Hupmobile, later the demo Mercury from Ford Motor, in our Sunday clothes, off to see whom? It didn't matter, it was a spree: Father's only brother in town, Uncle Harry on Eighth

East, Aunt Irene in a wheel chair; Grandma and Grandpa Warner and Aunt Edna five blocks away—Aunt Edna now the only one left of that whole generation.

And always, if they hadn't already come through our wide front door to visit Grandma and the folks, some or all of our most unusual uncles, Mother's six brothers and their wives, always home on a Sunday afternoon, their homes as different as their contact with the Church. Uncle Willard, portly as his namesake great-grandfather Willard Richards, who we all knew had been with the prophet in Carthage Jail, and whom I

was to revere as the first editor of the *Deseret News*. Uncle Willard laughed and took us for rides. He sometimes had a bus or truck, was in on a railroad, had horses for us in the canyon. The best rides? On Sunday, Uncle Gill—Dr. Gill to everybody else—could cure anything, came to give us shots and was home to show us his singing canary and a library furnished with leather. Doctor to apostles and Grandma's club ladies, medicine must have been his religion.

Uncle Claud, a writer of books like *A Man For Tomorrow* and a biography of J.

Golden Kimball, was among the first to write about a thing called "Family Night." He had seven back operations and couldn't sit well, especially in church. Uncle Bus lived often out of town, and when he came in, we scouted out our one ash tray for him and sat wide-eyed as he told exotic tales of far-away doings. It was no different to visit him or have him in our living room than it was to be with one of the two general authority uncles.

Uncle Stayner, one of the first six assistants to the Twelve Apostles, never was not smiling, doing magic hat tricks, juggling, or playing pool at the table in his cool basement. Uncle Steve was apostle at twenty-nine, and later in the First Presidency; we listened to him on the radio at conference time, but all remember him much more on his boat on the Snake River or Hebgen Dam or Great Salt Lake, chuckling over catching a fish or one of Aunt Irene's jokes. Like about the little boy coming through a line shaking hands after a meeting in St. George, saying on meeting Uncle Steve, "You're an apostle? I



Warner family gathering at the cabin.

By couples: Mother and Father—Homer C. "Pug" and Grace Richards Warner; Children and spouses: Homer and Kay Warner, Rick and Marian Warner (and Julie), Gill and Nedra Warner, Mel and Emma Lou Thayne.

Testimony was obvious but no more forced than participation in sports or a hike to the armchair, and just as natural.



thought they were all dead." And salty Aunt Irene answering, "That's right, dear, they are; it's just that some of them refuse to lie down."

And the wives of these men? Like my mother, never adjunct, very much present. Except for Aunt Jane, Uncle Stayner's wife, I never saw them in church, including Grandma Richards, who, in her younger days, had been president of the Relief Society for ten years. Something was afoot besides church attendance.

More Sundays than not we ended up in Uncle Steve's and Aunt Irene's backyard on B Street and Seventh Avenue playing hide and seek or miniature golf with our cousins under the arbors or in the secret passage-ways of the huge old home where often his best friend David, later President McKay, came, too.

It was on Uncle Steve's pool table that our wedding gifts were displayed after he married us in the temple, Mel and me, and in that manorly living room on the oriental rugs where our reception in the winter of 1949 brought together friends and relatives with so much electricity that a fuse blew and the lights went off to let us celebrate by candlelight.

Such was our mix of life and church. Never static. Never separate. Never somber. By osmosis, authentic.

Mother aesthetic, Father athletic, both believed in learning by exposure, taught us through their own combining. All aspects of our lives fell into the spiritual, the enlivening. There was taking clothes and pot roasts to Brother Phillips, nursing baby chicks and Mrs. Weggeland when she was having a baby. There was the entwining of Bible stories and love for rocks and trees; ice cream cones from Laura Larsen's or Snelgrove's combined with Longfellow or James Whitcomb Riley after we memorized the Articles of Faith for Primary, then stories of sports or Book of Mormon heroes read in the hall by Mother

or Father where we all could hear as we went to sleep.

Sacrament meeting? In the evening, and attended not at all regularly. More often the family sat by the fire or played ping-pong in the basement, but always together. When we started to date, we went to the sacrament meeting chosen from the listings of speakers in the Saturday night paper.

Testimony? To the goodness of life, people, engagement with both. Obvious but never that I can remember borne by either Mother or Father in a church setting. No more forced than participation in sports or a hike to the armchair, and just as natural.

The Church? Like the Word of Wisdom, a way of life that allowed everything else to be more alive. An after-life? The divinity of Jesus Christ? As certain as daybreak.

Scripture? To make a point, they talked of the "Blessed are they . . ." and the "thou shalt" much more than the "thou shalt not." Grandma's New Testament gift to me read like diaries kept—at my desk in my room and in private. The whole orientation was always more private than proclaimed.

Priesthood? The dew from heaven distilling, power to heal my combination measles and

whooping cough when I was four, blessings ever since full of assurance and cure. Priesthood was not something my father, uncles, and brothers, and later, husband, wore, but a meeting they went to, a power they drew on.

Faith? Constant. Personal and family prayer as certain of efficacy as of the predictions of the barometer that came across the plains and was never wrong, Mother always tapping it as she "worked on the weather" for any of us traveling or otherwise.

Love? Never even wondered about. A loving Father in Heaven simply an extension of a loving father at home.

Rebellion? Against what? The sun coming up over Pine Top? Snow curtaining against the street light? Father stomping his day off on the porch—home from a trip, a meeting, refereeing



The Laurel Committee.

Front row: Emma Lou, Betty Jo Reiser, Joleen G. Meredith;  
Back row: Heidi E. Vriens, Sharon Staples, Elizabeth Haglund,  
Eleanor Knowles, Gwen Anderson.

I have been offered love at every turn.  
At home, in the ward, in the neighborhood,  
on committees, and in classrooms.

a game? Mother setting up her easel, the smell of oils and turpentine? Thunder and lightning crackling over the crags, the wind blowing us swooping and swaying in the young maples, never really afraid but loving the chance-taking, the adventure. But far from angels we were. More, curious, mischievous, inventive, sometimes show-off, takers of lumber for a tree house, creators with our cousins of initiation rites and punishments I blush to remember.

But guilt? Over what? There could have been plenty, goodness knows, but induced by us, certainly not by Father's motto that comes through the years to me as: "Try hard, play fair, have fun." Easy words to translate into harmony with a divine will that we never talked about, but took for granted as we brought home stories, questions, friends, knowing that the one thing we would never be was condemned—even as we learned that to mind was to be without "the little willow to tingle our legs" as occasional prompter. No permissive household this, but a place of refuge and acceptance.

God? Like Father and Mother on the sidelines at our tennis matches. Usually the finals on Sunday, right after Sunday School. If we weren't playing, we were in the bleachers at old Forest Dale rooting in the then decorous silence of a tennis match for someone else in the family, Father keeping track of errors and placements, Mother never missing a point, both with their arms open to console or celebrate as we came off the court. Each of us knowing we had done *all right*.

But, as illustrated in that Sunday night discussion with my brothers, for all our similarities and congeniality, even with my being "one of the boys," we grew up, of course, different. For me, any philosophical struggles with the Church were to come later, be assuaged, shared by other "pillars" than just my mother and father, Homer, Rick, and Gill, the strong people we married, the solid, felicitous friends like Corinne Godbe Miles that I'd grown up with.

I had help. With no whys or whethers, Father simply dropped us off at East High for early morning seminary. There I encountered my first real learning of history and doctrine from Brothers Cecil McGavin and Marion Merkle. I loved singing with a vengeance born of getting up before I was ready

all the hymns that were to become like poems memorized from the cardboard folders of only words.

At the LDS institute at the university, Brothers Lowell Bennion and T. Edgar Lyon took over, Lowell to be a life-long mentor, inspiration, and friend who kept a freshman Lambda Delta Sigma skeptic afloat and then braced me through adulthood. At the institute, for a girl much more interested in Chi Omega and the College Inn than in the Book of Mormon, those men held forth with valor in everything from scripture and Beethoven to preparation for marriage. Later, Marion Duff

Hanks brought the Book of Mormon alive and made remarkable sense in understanding people, including me.

But it was not just proscribed LDS pillars who held me up. It was Dr. Louis Zucker, self-named "Jew in Residence" and his Bible as Literature class, Jack Adamson and his study of the intrepidity of Job and the loving-kindness of Hosea, Methodist Clarice Short, Catholic Kathryn Grant, Jewish Maxine and Victor Kumin, and broad-



Emma Lou with her daughters:

Shelley T. Rich, Emma Lou, Megan T. Heath, Dinny T. Trabert, Rinda T. Kilgore, and Becky T. Markosian

As the years pass, wonderful others have  
become for me not so much pillars as  
a great sea of support who keep me afloat.

based Esther Landa, to say nothing of tennis friends of every faith teaching me about mercy and justice and good will.

It's hard to recall a single "assigned" woman teacher in those formative years. The first came when I was seven years married, and it was Sister Blanche Stoddard bringing the New Testament to our Sunday School class in Monument Park Third Ward, where we have lived ever since among many remarkable teachers. But it was also slipping across ward boundaries to hear young Neal Maxwell field questions, make connections, use the language in more compelling teaching than I could resist, introducing me to C. S. Lewis and G. K. Chesterton along with Jonah and Joseph. (I remember a question from the class: We know how beautiful Bathsheba was, how dire David's temptation. But whoever said what the wife of Potiphar looked like?)

Then Neal and I were on the general board of the MIA, together, he and Elizabeth Haglund teaching us all how to take leadership to the field. There was Florence Jacobsen, a leader with foresight and the gumption to act on it, Carol Cannon and Edith Shepherd, towers of good sense and restraint to channel my impetuositities. There were committees, Mia Maid, Laurel, writers, who honed and fed and chastened me—the Laurels so

intriguing we've laughed and eaten and talked church for ten years since our release. Always there has been the ward, where we have lived long enough to watch heads bald and backs hump with the doing of good by genuinely good people, people dear as family. And for me, Mutual classes, Relief Society lessons, Sunday School classes to teach, learn from, always with the exchange, that crazy love. Genuinely caring bishops and stake presidents, strong pillars, have honored my eccentricities and been friends in my callings. And a Lowell Bennion study group, Nauvoo Pilgrims, friends both in and out of the Church, camaraderie in "positive looking."

On boards, in the center of the Church as well as otherwise, I have sometimes also seen the crumbling of pillars. Having grown up with un-deified authorities, I find myself disappointed in those few who curry deification. Along with the Christian goodness, I have seen, as anywhere, protection of turf, resistance to change, intolerance of difference, sometimes bewildering silence or puzzling interference on issues, and least appealing of all, ambition. Above my desk I wrote in 1974, "Freedom is allegiance without ambition." Freedom I respond to. As I do to expertise, depth, integrity, authenticity, kindness in those I work with. Much more, I'm afraid, than I do to position.

For nine years, as "one of the boys," I have sat congenially with all men, mostly general authorities, on the *Deseret News* Board, comfortable sometimes, sometimes comforted, often discomfited and discomfiting, still one of those condemned to needing a Sunstone symposium as much as the *Church News*.

As the years pass, not only the adults sitting around that fire at Mt. Air, but those wonderful others sitting everywhere—many of them women across the country—have become for me not so much pillars as a great sea of support who keep me afloat. Much more than holding me up, they give reason to my flailings and loving buoyancy to my plungings. Just as do now our own children, their husbands, and their children, to say nothing of my intrepid husband.

What could be more satisfying than to sit all amazed at the grace and graces of one's family? A month ago on the first vacation that all five of my daughters and I have ever taken alone together, we lay, the six of us, on the beach at Santa Barbara on a Sunday afternoon not unlike those leisurely, enrapturing Sunday afternoons of my growing up. Now my girls are all women, and lying there, sun worshippers that we've always been, there, on our towels on the beach, spontaneously, we had a "testimony meeting." With attendance to nothing but each other, they told me how they felt, and I told them how I felt. It was grace all right, and gracious, that coming together, that same gentle osmosis that drew me into believing even as I questioned and quested, that allowed us that mutual exchange. Oh, yes, I loved it.

Now as a questing, grey-haired woman who might have grown into the cynicism of O'Neill's Larry Slade from seeing at least two sides to everything, of being in a position to see often sides I would rather not see at all, I sometimes think of fading away, comfortable, comforted in not having to look, let alone contend. And I think, No. No, Mother, Father, you gave me

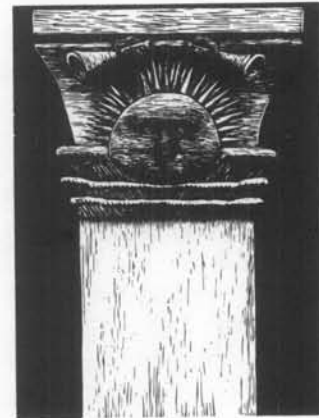
more, you and all those quite human but rather glorious others. You gave me a reservoir of faith sufficient for the most demanding Trappist monk. Whatever it is, I believe in it. I get impatient with interpretations of it, with dogma and dictum, yes, with the institutionalization of those most private connections. I rail and I take issue, but somewhere way inside me there is that insistent, expectant, so help me, sacred singing—"All Is Well, All Is Well." My own church, inhabited by my own people—and probably my own doctrines—but my lamp, my song, my church. I would be cosmically orphaned without it.

Maybe I'll find in the years to come, as Larry Slade says in *The Iceman Cometh*, that "life is too much for me!" I'll be (as he describes himself) "a weak fool looking with pity at the two sides of everything till the day I die." Maybe, Larry Slade, I will. But more likely, I expect I'll be hoping that truth can be found, talked about, made peace with. Never distorted, ignored, or most of all, feared. That even my pipe dreams will be kept alive and well. Thanks in great force to my pillars and my sea of support. And a Sunstone symposium as well as education week and general conference.

In the meantime, even on the days I struggle trying to stay afloat, maintain balance in a leviathan organization so different from the relaxed, personalized church I grew up in, I'll trust that the faith of those pillars and that buoyant sea of my maturing will have bequeathed me both hope and charity—if not always clarity—more lasting than any doubt. The faith that whispers I have inherited much more than the wind, the wind. ☐

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