

chance of coming away feeling as though the book has a small smile at the edge of its mouth. For all its love of Merton, this book doesn't take itself, or Merton, too seriously. It allows for a pinch of something that it is easy to forget when idealizing or eulogizing about someone: *irony*. There is still a fair amount of Merton-praising in *We Are Already One*, but the book also points in the direction of a discussion, in Merton's company, of all the things that the hermit-writer cared about so much: prayer, creativity, relating to our neighbours, and the struggle for peace.

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### **In The Beginning was Love Contemplative Words of Robert Lax**

Edited by S. T. Georgiou

Forward by Jonathan Montaldo

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On the inside flyleaf of this slim volume is a photograph of Robert Lax. The face, which his friend Thomas Merton described as 'horse-like', gazes at you unsmiling. Visible is the quality Merton perceived as an 'incomprehensible woe', a melancholy laced with kindness. Merton credited Lax, whom he met while both were students at Columbia, with a greater spiritual instinct than he himself possessed and, while Merton's voice and talent certainly earned him a lasting fame, Lax (arguably the more gifted writer) nurtured a lifelong indifference to the world's attentions. His teacher at Columbia, the poet Mark Van Doren, identified Lax's recognisable 'woe' as a struggle to express fully the joy he felt in being alive - his love for the creation and the creator of existence. If Van Doren's diagnosis was even close to the truth it goes some way toward explaining the uniqueness of Lax's work.

Born to Jewish parents in upstate New York in 1915, he was brought up in a Reform Jewish household, started writing poetry as a teenager, studied English at Columbia and there met his lifelong friend and kindred

spirit, Merton. Like Merton, Lax had a fascination with Eastern traditions and also had been drawn by the Franciscan presence of St Bonaventure University which was situated near his childhood home. The theosophy of his uncle had also broadened his interest in the philosophical and theological diversity of the world; but it was the Franciscan influence that took root, and he was baptised in the Catholic Church at the age of 28.

In his introduction to this volume, which he has also edited, the theologian and writer S. T. Georgiou draws a picture of Lax which conveys the impression of a complex man made simple by the disciplines he imposed on himself through writing and asceticism. Following years of what might be described as 'drifting' in the manner of Kerouac, whose admiration he also earned, he settled at last on the small Greek island of Patmos where he lived out the life of the teacher/hermit. Along the way the world had made its mark and he took with him to his hermitage the legacy of his days as a Hollywood screenwriter and as a film critic for *The New Yorker*. Holiness may have been his aspiration but like all saints he was no stranger to the earthy, and his writing is born of both.

Coming to Lax's work for the first time, as I have through this collection, is an experience also reflective of contrasts. On the one hand it requires navigation through his deceptively simple forms to the complexities of layered meaning. On the other, it is variously reminiscent of more celebrated and familiar voices: Eliot and Cummings immediately come to mind in lines and forms that challenge preconception and expectation:

the part must be studied  
as part of the whole;  
the whole must be studied  
as being made up of parts.

The echoes here of Little Gidding, while hardly self-conscious, allude to the art of form and meaning doubling back on itself to emphasise a simple, profound mystery and truth: nothing stands alone, and everything does. The seriousness and play of Cummings also intermingle through these - what are they? - poems? meditations? They defy too much categorisation but at the same time conform enough to the rules of the craft to intimate clearly that this is a writer, a poet, one who knows what he's doing:

world  
bad

ly  
needs  
good  
things  
to  
be  
done  
for  
it

Is it that the portrayal of the world as 'bad' is a 'ly/lie'; that its 'good things' 'ly/lie' in its 'need' for our acts of love? A few moments meditation on the shape and the sense that Lax creates here leads readily to a contemplation of the mystery of the cross, of suffering as the cradle of compassion, and of the 'good thing' that is done.

The structure of this book also defies reference to it as a 'collection' or a 'volume'. Not for nothing is the subtitle 'Contemplative Words'. If it is a collection of anything it is simply of words; some in verse form, some in strange, broken litanies, and some in apparently prose paragraphs. All speak of the ruminations and meditations, thought patterns and prayers, wonderings and insights of a man more deeply in tune with himself and his environment than most of us ever are. At times he is in intimate conversation with his reader, as here:

i have listened to all the desires of my heart. i have  
not bounded off on every suggestion (i have  
bounded off on some; perhaps on too many). but i  
have listened to all my heart has had to say; have  
allowed it to speak its own language.

At others he is almost didactic:

if today's mistakes do not teach us to make better  
choices tomorrow, we have learned little from them.  
& if we have learned little, we have gained little in  
any sense.

More than a hint of Julian of Norwich and of Meister Eckhart runs through the pages, and at times Lax seems to be 'on' something. It is, of

course, nothing other than the ecstasy of living which Van Doren perceptively saw and which characterises the language of the real mystic as opposed to the spirituality addict. It passes the authenticity test by taking us beyond ourselves, not to a fantasy, but to the tangible and transcendent realities of creation. He spells it out in a stunning passage in which he recognises the weirdness on the way to truth:

the undersea vision, even at shallow depths, is almost narcotic, whatever is seen is seen with such peace, such composure. to look thus wide-eyed at all phenomena would surely be a kind of joy, a kind of psychic nourishment.

Towards the end of his life Lax was known to read only one thing each day: a passage from the writings of the spiritual teacher Eknath Easwaran, a student of Ghandi, who developed a meditation discipline which drew on the teachings of all the major religious traditions. It was this, Lax's willingness and ability to focus and go deep, to go under, that enabled him to surface with such profound clarity. Lovers and readers of Merton are accustomed to the practice of needing to read the same sentence over and over again. The work of his old friend invites us to embrace that practice as an art form, an intention, and a hidden joy.

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The quotations from the book under review are taken from pages 23, 52, 81, 43 & 48 respectively.

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**The Many Storeys and Last Days of Thomas Merton**  
**A documentary film written and produced by Morgan Atkinson**  
**Duckworth, Inc. 2014. 60 minutes. \$25 US, \$37 elsewhere**  
**[www.morganatkinson.com](http://www.morganatkinson.com)**

In this film we are given a short introduction to Thomas Merton's life in the monastery and his ongoing struggle with Abbot Dom James Fox over the direction of his vocation. His wish to visit Asia was finally granted when Dom James Fox retired and the young Dom Flavian Burns was