

and scholarship the author considers his great gift to a modern world to be that he makes what many people consider to be remote and inaccessible available to all, and delivers insights that all can access in their daily lives. Further, his diaries ensure that his human frailties are always in view.

The author advises the reader to take a week or a month over each of her chosen archetypes, to explore the implications of how they could illuminate aspects of their own life. Using the concept of Anam Cara from the Celtic spiritual tradition, she considers that it would be good practice when embarking on this spiritual journey to have a soul friend with whom one could share difficulties and discoveries made on the journey. The book could also be a fruitful source of material for group work for those who undertake to embark on this spiritual adventure in the company of fellow travellers.

There are an increasing number of books and retreats where the multidimensional aspects of our spiritual lives are explored. I think this book could be of use as a starting point to investigate many of the interesting figures she introduces us to from across the ages - from Miriam and King David of the Hebrew bible to Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day in the twentieth century - and to explore the ways in which they can serve to illuminate our own spiritual journey.

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### **Pure Act—The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax**

Michael N. McGregor

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Those coming to Lax predominantly through an interest in Merton would know little about him other than the epithet 'the hermit of Patmos', the mutual friendship between Lax, Merton & Reinhardt as described in the Seven Storey Mountain, and through the macaronic correspondence

between them written over nearly 30 years. Aside from their years together in America until Merton entered Gethsemani in 1941 – they only met 6 times thereafter – this book barely touches on Merton

But then this book is not about Merton; it is about Lax. And what a fascinating life it is, and how well does the author reveal it, correcting our misconceptions of the man. For a start he would best be described as a solitary rather than a hermit, preferring his own company and thoughts, but also quite prepared to engage with others. He wrote in a letter of 1983: 'i guess you know this doesn't mean i don't like people. i do; but in sort of small doses. one human encounter gives me enough to think about for week.' He first visited Greece in 1961 at the age of 46, staying intermittently on a variety of islands including Kalymnos and Patmos but returning to America frequently in search of employment; he didn't permanently settle on Patmos until 1981, living there until his death 19 years later. By that time his health was starting to fail, his writing was becoming more and more aphoristic, and he was swamped by dealing with the correspondence from his increasing number of admirers.

The author first met Lax on Patmos in 1985, and for the rest of Lax's life visited him on regular basis, the two becoming firm friends. Nearly all the chapters of the book start with a brief section describing the author's meetings with Lax or interviews with those who knew him, using this to set the chapter in context, an excellent way of helping to illuminate Lax's life from a variety of viewpoints.

Lax always knew he wanted to be a writer. But he also had to make a living. And thus up until the time that he moved permanently to Greece there was an inner conflict between writing for the market and writing for himself. So he had to make his living by writing for magazines and journals, including *The New Yorker*, as a film critic and editor. He also worked briefly as a scriptwriter in Hollywood and as a photographer. But for almost all his life he barely ever had enough money to pay his rent let alone afford the barest necessities of life. But one could live so much more cheaply in Greece compared with America.

In New York he met the Cristiani circus family who took him to their hearts, and in 1949 he travelled with them around America. This experience was to provide him with a fount of inspiration, resulting in his first book of poetry published in 1959, *The Circus of the Sun*. In the Cristianis he found people who, by their 'unearthly sweetness and grace' had embraced him wholeheartedly as a poet, a philosopher, a friend. As the author points out: 'The Christianis remained his vision of how to live in the world as individuals and as a community.' Part of what bound them

together was that they unselfconsciously practiced a specialised and dangerous art, something Lax also found in the fishermen, and more particularly the sponge divers, of the Greek islands.

The poetry in *The Circus of the Sun* in many ways is similar to Merton's early poetry, in that ideas and impressions are conveyed by many words, with long lines and dense stanzas. But for Merton, Lax, and most definitely Reinhardt, their art increasingly became stripped down, simpler, sparser, letting it reveal, as in the title of one of Lax's later works, 'the thing that is'. For Reinhardt the end result was canvases all of black. For Merton, some of his later verses of zen-like simplicity. And for Lax his poetry tended to the more and more spare, eventually paring down to a single word, even a single syllable, on a line – by doing so hoping to return the words to their pure meaning unadorned by any cultural or societal reference. Moving towards this ultimate purity, for example, the poem 'One stone' of 1960 consists of nineteen stanzas, no line of more than two words, the last five stanzas being of one or two lines each, consisting solely of the words 'one stone'. The book includes a later poem, 'This Bread is Bread', which simply has a single word on each line. For him what was being left out was equally important. As Merton wrote to Henry Miller about Lax's poetry, 'I can understand that his poems did not click: I suppose you have to know what is in all the blank spaces.'

This, of course, is a publisher's nightmare. Who could hope to sell volumes of poetry consisting of mainly white pages with a few words spattered down the left hand side? And so his work remained largely unknown aside from a few poems that appeared in literary magazines. Small volumes were published in conjunction with the designer and publisher Antonucci whom he first met in New York in 1954. But in 1955 he met in New York a young Swiss photographer Bernhard Moosbrugger and the writer Gladys Wiegner. Years later they were to set up the publishing house Pendo in Zurich. It became Lax's principle publisher, the first volume coming out in 1981. Subsequently, for the rest of his life, he made yearly visits to Zurich. The couple also arranged readings, book signings and interviews – and so gradually his writings became more widely known.

At the centre of the book Chapter 15, 'A New Poetics', the author expertly charts the changes in Lax's poetry, and the influences that formed it. Amongst others there was Reinhardt, but also his friendship with Kerouac. If it was Reinhardt who impressed Lax with his total dedication to his art, it was Kerouac who taught him to be freewheeling, spontaneous, to use words 'fetched up from the deep' rather than 'hunted

down like quarry'. The chapter includes several complete lengthy poems. At the end of the chapter the author concludes: 'It wasn't going to set the world on fire, he knew that, but it was a fire of sorts to him, the kind that appeared on the apostles' heads at the first Pentecost.'

Lax's family were Jewish, but in 1943 he was received into the Catholic Church. He meditated daily and practised yoga but he was rarely able to attend mass in Greece except when there was a visiting priest. And so he moved further and further away from formal religious practice. Going even further, the author quotes a journal entry by Lax from 1979: 'But at the point where one is living a fully spiritual life, the contemplative and mystical life, he is out beyond the delimiting terms of any particular religion.' Lax had said to Merton in 1939, 'You want to be a saint.' Perhaps Lax himself fulfilled this.

This book has a comprehensive index and bibliography, and all quotes are fully referenced. There is also a generous section of photographs. So read this beautiful book, be inspired to seek out some of Lax's poems, find a quiet place and use them as a sure guide to that pure act that is God.

*Note:* The author's article about the Merton-Lax correspondence, 'Decoding the Anti-Letters—A Whirling Dance of Wisdom and Wit', was included in *The Merton Journal*, vol. 23:1, Eastertide 2016. The same issue contained a review of *In the Beginning was Love—Contemplative Words of Robert Lax*, edited by S. T. Georgiou.

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