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The wisdom of Robert Lax: 'Cultivate, exercise compassion'

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

One day in the mid-1990s, I received a letter from Patmos, Greece. It began:

Dear John, I've been following you for years. No one in the world seems to work harder for peace, and I feel sorry for you because things seem to be getting so much worse. Quick, drop everything. Take the enclosed ten dollar bill, go immediately to the nearest pub and buy yourself a big, tall beer and drink it on me. My treat. We are together in the journey and life of peace ...

The letter was signed by Robert Lax.

I remember staring in disbelief at the ten dollar bill which had traveled so far. I was thrilled to hear from the great poet, who I knew was Thomas Merton's best friend and had famously left the U.S. in 1962 to live in solitude and peace as a hermit near the cave where St. John the Evangelist may have written the Book of Revelation.

I wrote back and we became friends through correspondence. I sent him regular care packages of books, articles and peace materials until his death on September 26, 2000. So I was delighted, while visiting the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky last month, to come across a gorgeous book about Robert Lax.

The Way of the Dreamcatcher: Spirit Lessons with Robert Lax, Poet, Peacemaker and Sage by Steve Georgiou celebrates Lax's peacemaking life through interviews, reflections, and poetry. The original Novalis edition (now out of print) includes stunning color photographs of the young author with the wise old poet standing before the cobalt blue Aegean sea. The photos bring Lax and his wisdom to life.

Thanks to Georgiou, whom I know from the International Thomas Merton Society, we finally learn why Merton and so many others considered Lax a true contemplative, mystic and saint. Here for the first time we get a glimpse into his peaceful mind, heart and spirit.

Steve tells an amazing anecdote of wandering around Patmos in 1993, unaware of Lax or even Merton when a young man he met urged him to go meet the village poet because he thought they would have much in common.

Steve knocked on Lax's door. Lax let him in, and so began a long fruitful friendship that led to a series of interviews and eventually this beautiful tribute.

Born a Jew, Lax befriended Merton at Colombia and also converted to Catholicism. After teaching for a while, Lax worked as an editor at *TIME* magazine and *The New Yorker*; a Hollywood screenwriter; a reporter for the progressive Catholic magazine *Jubilee*; and even a circus clown.

Lax's dear friend Jack Kerouac called him "a laughing Buddha." Living in Greenwich Village in the late 1950s and early 1960s, he befriended Bob Dylan and was with him the night he wrote "Blowin' In the Wind." Later, he knew Padre Pio, and stayed in touch with a wide array of artists, writers and thinkers.

Lax was barely known in America, except in Merton studies, but his poetry was widely read throughout Europe. His book of poems, *Circus of the Sun*, which compares creation to a circus, was called "perhaps the greatest English language poem of this century" by *The New York Times Book Review*. Another reviewer considered him the best poet after T.S. Eliot.

"Lax was born with the deepest sense of who God was," Thomas Merton wrote. "He was much wiser than I, and he had clearer vision, and was, in fact, corresponding much more truly to the grace of God than I. He had seen what was the one important thing."

In a memorable scene in Merton's book *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Lax and Merton are walking down Fifth Avenue one day when Lax asks: "What do you want to be anyway?"

Merton hesitates, and says, "I guess I want to be a good Catholic."

"What you should say," Lax declares, "is that you want to be a saint."

"How do you expect me to be a saint?" Merton asks.

"By wanting to," Lax answers. "All that is necessary to be a saint is to want to be one. All you have to do is desire it."

That conversation set Merton's heart and mind on a long search that took him to Gethsemani. Lax, on the other hand, seems to have achieved a palpable holiness at an early age. Merton really admired Lax. That comes through in the recently published collection of their many letters, called *If Prophecy Still Had a Voice*.

"We are meant to be holy, all of us," Lax told Steve Georgiou. "We're all called to be saints."

Lax's advice to the young graduate student is short and simple: "Relax," "Slow down," "Simplify," "Love everyone unconditionally."

“Every day I try to find out more about the spirit of peace within myself,” Lax told Steve. “Everything I do now, I try to relate it with that. Writing is my craft, and if I can in any way cultivate peace through it, then I’m happy? Who knows what one loving act can do? Who can trace the measure of a single peaceful word said from the heart?”

Throughout these conversations, Lax sounds like a Catholic Zen master, and like Steve Georgiou, I’m glad to hear the lesson:

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Unconditional love. That’s the bottom line. Everything is here because of love. That’s why we were created -- to love. Love keeps things going, not just for now, but forever. Love gives life and makes sure what’s around today will be around tomorrow. It’s all about compassion. That’s what the cosmos best responds to.

Every moment is a gift. Relax, get into the moment, and do all you can to listen to it. I mean, really, really listen. Be present to the moment with everything you are.

It takes practice. After you’ve listened for a while, you start responding. I think you start working your gifts in response to what you’ve heard. You become appreciative of the moment. You give back because you begin to see how everything is on loan, a gift from God.

Learn how to look. Take time to look to see what’s right there in front of you, to let what you see sink in. When you look at a flower opening or a tree moving with the wind, you just relax and take it all in. Try and see everything like that, if you can.

Looking and listening lead into everything... . You become more totally aware of reality. It’s so true -- everything we need to live well is already within our possession. Wisdom is right before our very eyes.

Jesus doesn’t tell me to hate or to kill. He tells me to love. More and more, I’m emphasizing the power of peace. So many good and lasting things proceed from peace.

You shouldn’t fight fire with fire; you address fire with water. And the water is agape, nonviolence. Cruel people are still people, but they have somehow forgotten how to love. Being cruel to them will only reinforce their cruelty.

But what might kindness do? What might peacefulness do? I think that’s what Jesus was thinking about.

Be gentle and patient both with yourself and with others, no matter what comes along. In this way, waiting becomes a fulfilling, very meaningful experience. If you live gently, honorably, focusing on the cultivation of your heart, good things are sure to follow.

Prayer is a way of doing instantaneous good for all things in all places. It’s a way of ending out love everywhere at one. It’s a power that everyone has access to, and it can transfigure the world. Prayer makes everything you do more real, lasting, meaningful and fruitful. Through prayer, everything just flowers and flows.

Try to live as purely and as simply and as gently as you can. Relax. Be flexible. Be forgiving. Be creative. Be loving. You are a peacemaker. Those who cross your path may need you.

Listen, be discerning, use all the radar you can generate in your waking moments. Try to keep the balance. The whole world's watching, counting on you to do the right thing, the loving thing. So let in the light whenever, wherever you can.

Lax was the real thing, a rare contemplative and solitary who spent his life in poverty, peace and silence, reading, writing, and meditating. I'm so grateful to come across *The Way of the Dreamcatcher*, not only to learn more about the great Lax, but to learn from him how to be an authentic peacemaker.

Turns out, *The Way of the Dreamcatcher* is only volume one of a trilogy. Steve Georgiou was so profoundly influenced by Lax, he kept on writing.

The second volume, *Mystic Street: Meditations on a Spiritual Path*, focuses on Steve's theology studies in light of Lax's teachings. The recently published final volume, *The Isle of Monte Cristo: Finding the Inner Treasure* deals with Steve's experiences as a professor of religion in the Bay Area in light of Lax's teachings. I'm just now savoring these other fine books.

"The greatest thing you can do in this life is to cultivate and exercise compassion," Bob Lax told Steve Georgiou. "Life is about learning how to flow with your basic goodness. It's about entering the heart and making it the fount of your being."

Through these beautiful books, we see how Bob Lax became a fount of peace, love and compassion, and feel stirred up to do the same.

Here's to you, Bob! And thanks!

This week, John is speaking at the annual Sabeel Conference in Bethlehem, Palestine/Israel (see: www.sabeel.org). To hear a new podcast interview with John Dear, go to www.jesusradicals.com. His latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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