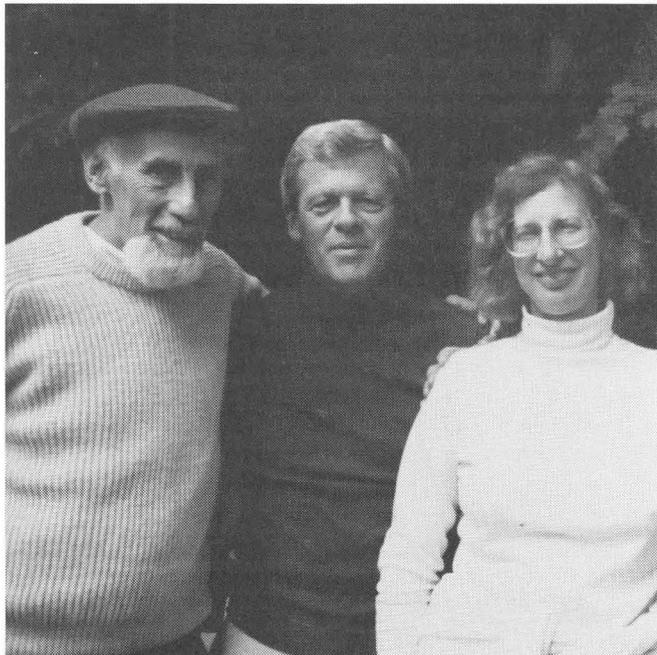


CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT LAX

by **Marcia & Jack Kelly**

Robert Lax: Somehow you managed to do whatever it was in a very nice way in your *Sanctuaries* book. You found a way of going from one thing to another without making a big fuss about it, without its being just a grab bag of various things. At *Jubilee* we were very ecumenical. We liked all religions and we ran things from all religions, but we weren't trying to be just a patchwork quilt about it either. We were trying to find the essence of all religions from the inside and to be sympathetic with all of them from the inside; not reacting allergically to outer signs at all, but get to the essence. And in that way people understood it because we weren't just trying to force a new kind of ecumenism on the world, but get to everything from the inside and the spirit; and say we know you Muslims have been taught to pray this way, and we sympathize with you. We know that the essence of your prayer is to give thanks. So that's what we want to find, the prayers that come closest to the essence. These are the ones we want to include, and it's an inner search in ourselves and in the others that will help us to discern which are the right ones that come closest to what we mean. And then we can find out how they harmonize. There are the kinds that are just thanking the Most High for His bounty, for example. There are others that thank Him for the fact of this particular occasion or this moment when we are all together which is a rare occasion, and so on. And there are some that include all of that without getting very wordy about it. And slowly, I think, you can winnow through them to the ones that give everybody a kind of equal voice, and every one of the graces we include sings and says what it should be, what we hope it will be saying.

□ In the fall of 1990, for the first time in ten years, Robert Lax came to the United States from his home in Patmos, Greece. He was invited as the first Reginald A. Lenna Visiting Professor of English at St. Bonaventure University in Olean, New York. This is part of a discussion recorded during a casual dinner with his niece, Marcia Marcus Kelly, and her husband Jack Kelly. They are co-authors of *Sanctuaries: A Guide to Monasteries, Abbeys, & Retreats of the United States / The Northeast* (New York: Belltower, 1991). It is reviewed in this issue.



ROBERT LAX with JACK & MARCIA KELLY

Tuxedo Park, New York - September 1990

Marcia Kelly: In my recent attendance in churches, many do what Dan Riley did that night at Mt. Irenaeus — what do they call them? — “intentions,” prayers for a person, or a community, or a group in the world. Sometimes the priest does it, sometimes individuals throughout the congregation do it. It’s kind of a nice thing. I look forward to hearing it. Do you hear that in Europe?

Robert Lax: In Greece among Greeks I was going to say “not so much,” but sometimes someone like Damianos who is very sincere and has religion at the center of his life will say something like, “Thank heaven for this food and for this company — may it be good for us.” Something like that. He would do it when he was alone, or at any other time. I think anyone who does longer ones, or the kind that Evangelicals do, probably would be other Evangelicals in Switzerland or Germany, places like that. Not in Greece.

Marcia Kelly: What about in church? Does anybody do it like here?

Robert Lax: They do, Again, in Catholic churches. Maybe even longer ones in Protestant or Evangeical churches. I think all those things reflect phases of development in various countries, in my view, toward a contemplative way of living. But a lot of them are at a point where popularization is important — making contact with everybody. First of all, before you lead anyone into contemplative forms, or quiet forms, just to find out what we’re all talking about and what we’re all praying about so we really do make lists of specific things we want to be grateful for, specific intentions. And I guess in some ways you can imagine that if the world never outgrows the need for specific intentions, you have to, because if it’s so contemplative that everyone is silent and forgetting all the problems, we wouldn’t be in a good state either.

Marcia Kelly: We were all in Olean on Environment Day and a group suggested everybody in the world should get up at 7.00 a.m. to contemplate a better earth so with all the thoughts and energy concentrated together things might change for the better.

Robert Lax: As media change — and “the medium is the message” — the media get more pervasive and more subtle, I think the message becomes that too. In the old days you needed an evangelist like Billy Sunday who got all red in the face to get a message across to only a few people. You still have people like that using radio and television in that same way, but I think slowly, because television and those things are improving technically, someone who had a quiet message, like Mother Teresa might have, would be just as effective and be leading people more toward a contemplative religion than one you might reach if you were only doing a heavy rhetorical approach. The Quakers, I guess, sit silently together until one of them feels he has been moved by the Holy Spirit. My picture of it is that when they are sitting quietly they bring the best insights they have at the moment into the meeting. And if the whole television experience in religion got to be sort of like a Quaker meeting, that could be beautiful. There is no reason why it couldn’t because I don’t think our perceptions are that much different. The guy who delivered the package today would certainly be as tuned into anything we might want to say if we said it in the right language and at the right time as anyone you could meet. Everyone throughout the country is ready for, has the perception for a quiet message, a deep and sensitive one, but habits have to be changed sort of gradually as the medium is used, and as the medium gets across the whole country. It’s getting to be one tribe of some sort through that medium. But I think we have to be careful when we already have the goal in mind not to let us be thrown by outside signals that

might be divisive. You don't always have to eliminate the signal, as long as you're sensitive to the fact that it's an old signal or is one that is in the process of change.

Marcia Kelly: Jack, do you remember in one of Merton's books the statement he made about contemplatives?

Jack Kelly: Give me a clue.

Marcia Kelly: He was questioning contemplatives as a group.

Jack Kelly: Like what is the purpose of a monastery?

Marcia Kelly: Questioning contemplatives as a group. Do you remember, Bob?

Robert Lax: That happened from time to time . . . he can certainly be questioning the validity of the contemplative monastery if it doesn't have any social engagement, but if it does it might be a different thing, and if it doesn't it will leave room for someone to have that social engagement. That might be good, too. Now this is my own thinking on it. If you're a business man and don't feel a department of pure research is worth it for your particular business, you might make a big point about junking it. But if you already realize that a department of pure research into something like penicillin, or even something less useful than penicillin, was very important to your business, you would keep it and whether or not it was producing penicillin or a great discovery every year, or something you could market or all the rest, but it was having results in the active world, you would still keep it because you realize that without research you're losing a great value in all that you're doing. I think that is true with the real contemplative vocation. They are to do a work that doesn't have a direct connection but does have an important connection in its own way with all the action in the world, and they are right to hold out for the value of that kind of life because people who overlook it are cutting themselves off from a great resource.

Jack Kelly: That's a great analogy of business research to the contemplative life. I remember the Redemptorist Fathers in Esopus, New York — that great, huge building that looks like the English Parliament — where the nun we talked to said they were invited by the Fathers to build their convent there. The priests at the time, this was thirty years ago, felt it was very important to have contemplative nuns nearby but for no practical purposes. That came up, more than once, where bishops had asked nuns to come into their diocese. The Trappistines in Wrentham, Massachusetts, were asked to come in and found a community simply because the bishop felt it was important to have contemplative nuns in the diocese.

Robert Lax: Another thing that Merton says is that — this first part is mine — one way to get an ecumenical movement started is to have a lot of meetings with people of various religions, and have them talk things over and come to realize that there are a great many points of agreement. That's sort of an active and external way, and it should be done and followed up, and it will be followed up. People love to do those things and with good reason. But, — and this is where he starts and I think he is right too — that the actual working of an ecumenical movement of bringing different traditions together takes place within the being of a single person who is actually reading those books — reading the Holy Books — of all the traditions in a sympathetic way, understanding them from the inside by himself, and in himself adapting the best of what he's

learned from all those religions at a deep level into his own personality, into his own life. At that point when he corresponds as Merton did with Christians or Muslims or Buddhists or anyone else, he's talking to them almost as a Muslim or a Buddhist would talk and they recognize it. At this point, he knows — he's been there. He's not just trying to make bridges to it, he has arrived. And he hasn't done it as an act. He's done it because he knows there is this much wisdom all over the world and that it must be gathered and absorbed into one single living being after another, and that is what he has set himself, or has been born to do, and that is what he is doing. Then it begins to happen when there is one person like that, everyone does recognize it, and that's why they publish his correspondence — every scrap of paper he left around is of value — because it's all got these qualities in it.

Jack Kelly: Do you think that a person like Merton, who said that he was born to do what he did, was also born with the ambition or drive or energy to do it? Or is that another matter?

Robert Lax: Yes. I think the potentialities are there. And then everything from there on depends on whether he accepts or rejects one opportunity after another to do something that's in the right direction. Every moment, practically every moment, the way I see it, the way I think many people see it, every moment is a moment of decision. And so each word you speak, you choose, and so if you go on choosing the best word you can at each moment, or the best action you can at each moment, you're doing the best you can. And you arrive at the realization of your best potentialities. If you deliberately choose time after time the dumbest or worst action you can take, you're certainly retarding your progress.

Jack Kelly: That's what you mean by "make the next thought a good one."

Robert Lax: Yes, I think it's a good saying because by the time they arrived at it in Chinese philosophy they had a lot of other hot slogans but when they found this, they said, "Oh, boy, this says everything we've been trying to say."

Jack Kelly: Who is the Chinese philosopher?

Robert Lax: I think it's Wang Yang-ming. But the whole thing about it, and this is not just my own view but it certainly is my own view too, is keeping an eye on what YOU do particularly. You don't have to keep a big eye on the good things you do. If they're good, they're good and you can forget them. But anything that might not be good then you have a real eye on that so you can make good choices when that sort of choice comes up, and where you're used to making a wrong choice, you can then make a right one. If each person who is seriously interested in the progress of the world starts looking that way at his *own progress* then I think the world progresses quite the way it should. It isn't a selfish activity every time you do have a victory over your own worst qualities or whatever they are, the weaknesses, but the better it is for the whole community you're part of. It's great to be picketing industries that are throwing chemicals in the Rhine and nobody says you shouldn't, but you certainly should be very careful how you're disposing of your own waste and all that sort of thing. At every level of life you should be making the same kind of very careful choices. And then, if you're doing that, I think your effectiveness on all public crusades gets to be much greater . . . someone like Gandhi, the person he conquered first of all was himself, and Great Britain came later. And I think it happens that way with other things.

Jack Kelly: Let's say a person has gotten him or herself to a point where they are interested in doing better — in a job or life situation, whatever. Step one would be what?

Robert Lax: Trying to understand what they mean by that first perception. Is it a bad job or am I doing it badly? Is there any way of its possibly being done well? A thousand things like that. The same with a relationship. Does the problem come from the other person who certainly may have faults as a human being or does it come just as much from me? I must have faults as a human being too, and which of these faults is mine, and all kinds of things. What is there I can do about it from the inside before I do anything about it from the outside. There are some situations you could do instinctively and probably rightly reject out-of-hand. I mean, some old buddy comes by and says, "Let's rob a bank tonight." You're likely to have the sense to say, "No." Or at least, "Not tonight!" A lot of things are like that, but when they're not clear cut, then you have to think about them, have to know. Thinking is a good thing, and making lists. Just as I said making lists for all the approaches to the graces or something like that, making lists of ALL the things that might be involved in a situation that you're unhappy with, is often very useful. I'm finding that all the journals I kept at *The New Yorker*, where I was conscious of being very unhappy about a million things, not only unhappy but puzzled, and asking questions about a million things including "Should I eat meat?" or anything like that. Or, if I say, "I don't believe in killing," where does it stop? How do I feel about killing dandelions? In all of that, so you don't take anybody else's answer for it, you list all the questions and, I think through doing that, you arrive at some kind of way of life, or way of going on.

I think while I was there [at *The New Yorker* in the 1940s] I really used to have visions of sitting on an island taking care of sheep, things like that. Greece really started talking to me, I think, at that point. The other thing that happened was that I'd go down for a chocolate milkshake, I felt I wouldn't be killing anything doing that, drinking it in a place that must've been a Greek soda shop in the same building, and seeing the waiter leaning against the refrigerator in some way that was just as clear as anything that you could see the sunlight coming through the olive trees; and then the shadow of the olive tree right on his shoulder, nobody could stand that way except from years of standing under olive trees. That was all I got from it. It was a very clear pre-vision. But this year, thinking of things that have happened, thinking about those times at *The New Yorker* while I was in Patmos and comparing why I was feeling good about being in Patmos and then remembering how I was feeling at *The New Yorker* and realizing what a rich time it had been, how much really had happened during those years that prepared me for other times. The experience of going through it, what was happening inside me, all the thinking I was doing on paper, and everything like that, I was really not just pacing up and down, I was writing. That was driving S. J. Perelman crazy. You know he'd hear this typewriter going in the other office and he was thinking, "Young blood," and he couldn't write a thing. But I was realizing that it had been a very rich year, since I lived through it, and I probably learned a lot from it. And in going through papers now in the attic and finding those same papers, I'm certainly glad I've done it all. Or, at the Stuttgart show, seeing the drawings I made when I was very unhappy at *The New Yorker*. Nobody's fault that I was unhappy, except that's the point my life had come to where I better be unhappy enough to do some thinking. But to see drawings from then up on the [museum] wall in some way that they were supposed to be good, was a very pleasant experience.

Marcia Kelly: Are your *New Yorker* journals in the boxes at St. Bonaventure?

Robert Lax: They're in there, yes.

Jack Kelly: If your unhappiness at *The New Yorker* had driven you out to some place else that might not have been good, but it gave you a place to sit and write and think.

Robert Lax: That business about “Don’t just do something, sit there” is good. Give yourself enough time to know why you’re moving before you do too much moving seems to be good. *The New Yorker* gave me a nice little cell to sit in and all the paper I needed, and a good typewriter. Otherwise, what they say you do I’m sure is true — that you take your whole town and your whole world with you. If you don’t clean it out by yourself, then all you do is take all those worries and say, “I’ll go south,” or something and live there. You just take them all along, and you only have to start them all over again, so you may as well sit somewhere and work them out.