

A Winter with Bob Lax

Tom Cornell

In 1956, in my senior year in Fairfield College and faced with a family crisis, I took a full-time job as switchboard operator at an asylum for the insanely rich near Westport, Connecticut. The doctors were as crazy as the patients. Among the aides were lesbian sadists and freaky alcoholic guys who looked like they came out of a casting session for a movie about Nazi death camps. Joe Rush was one of the few sane ones: Irish-handsome, clean, smart, and kindly. We started to talk as he passed by my switchboard.

“By the way you talk,” he said, “you should know about the Catholic Worker.” I told him I went to the Catholic Worker’s Chrystie Street headquarters every chance I got just to keep my sanity. He told me a friend was coming to visit from the City. Would I like to meet Bob Lax? “You mean Bob Lax from *Seven Storey Mountain* – Thomas Merton’s friend?” Joe was surprised I recognized the name. I told him I was a *Jubilee* magazine reader. Lax was one of the editors.

As it happened Lax’s visit fell through, so Joe decided we two should go to the City on a Friday night to see him there. We met near Penn Station at an Irish bar and drank our supper from 3 to 9. I had wondered, “When a Jew converts to Catholicism, does he then drink like an Irishman?” No, I

discovered. Lax taught me a trick. For every beer you drink, drink a club soda at the same rate of speed. You will piss a river, but you won't get drunk.

At nine I was ready to walk over to Grand Central and take the New Haven train back to Bridgeport. Lax responded by inviting me to stay that night at the apartment he and Joe shared on Avenue A and 11th Street. "Take a look at the apartment. See if you want to move in after you graduate from Fairfield." We climbed the three flights. Joe opened the door. Lax turned a light switch. The bulb was burned out. So were all the others. Lax felt around, putting his hands upon surfaces that must have been beds or cots and after a few tries he said, "This one, Tom. You can sleep here."

The next morning I found four other men in that three-room apartment. This was a building that had been condemned for human habitation since the end of World War I, but had been re-opened to meet the housing crunch during World War II. It hadn't been painted since the fall of the Czar.

"What do you think?" Lax asked as we dressed. "I'll move in in September," I said. "See you then!" Before I left town that morning I bought and installed a pack of 60-watt light bulbs. In September I brought a bucket of paint and a brush.

Jubilee paid the rent on our apartment plus one next door used for the magazine's guests. A w.c. serving four apartments was on our landing. There was a bathtub with a lid in each kitchen, but no heat or hot water. The rent was \$20.68 a month. Whoever stayed in the other apartment was given a key to ours so they could use our stove and refrigerator. Very chummy, but oh so cold!

I was going through the process of making out an appeal to the Selective Service System to be recognized as a conscientious objector to war and to military service by reason of my Catholic faith. I wanted to do a good job not only because I didn't want to go to prison (I would eventually, not because I failed to gain c.o. status but for burning my draft card during the Vietnam War) but in hopes I could set a precedent that would make it easier for other Catholics to follow. I had no adequate counsel. I probed Lax on the subject but he was a sphinx. Like Merton, he had been a c.o. during World War II, but Lax, not yet Catholic at the time, sought c.o. status as a Jew, arguing his claim from the Torah rule that fruit trees must be spared (no chance of that in modern warfare) and the advice that "those who have no heart for battle" should withdraw. Lax had no heart for battle.

By the time I was sharing his apartment Lax was long since a Catholic but still a Jew. There's no taking the kosher out of pickle! He sat there, long horse face, long legs, and all he could say is he didn't know if he would do the same all over again, but then again. . . . He wasn't going to make my mind up for me and he wasn't going to make believe the question is any less difficult than it is.

Rarely speaking, Lax was a presence. Living with this mainly silent man, I learned how important simple presence can be. He was there.

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