

An Extraordinary Consistency

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There were certain things that Lax did almost every day of his life. The one thing he did most was to write into notebooks. When he was out of the house, he carried small notebooks which he often later copied into a larger book when he returned home. The form that the words took on any particular day was a result of what he felt like writing that day and never a result of any outer demand

or responsibility. His writing was an ongoing reflection of the process of his life – a dialogue with himself. This seemed to take on mystical proportions in *21 Pages* and *Psalm*. Some of his work may have seemed fragmented to some people but a review of his overall work will reveal an extraordinary thread of consistency. The last time I visited with him, in November of 1999, he told me that he hoped this would appear as evident to others as it seemed to him.

For most of his life, he wrote in a vertical form, at first with a few words to a line as in *Circus of the Sun* but later more with one word or even just one syllable to a line. In addition to the fact that he simply liked the way the words looked on the page, the vertical line was meant to slow down the reader and give clarity to the words. Lax was very concerned about the precise meanings of words and never used words casually even in conversation. I can't remember spending a day in his house when he wasn't looking up words in more than one dictionary to determine the best meaning for a particular word. He was a literary alchemist refining each word to its essential gold. One day, as I often did, I asked him what he had been thinking about. "I've been thinking about 'is,'" he said.

His poems were also songs that had a musical structure and rhythm. A very good example of this is "Sea and Sky," a long poem in which the rhythms were somewhere in between Bach and plainchant. Many musicians were inspired by his work. One of his poems was performed in Geneva as an oratorio. He often sang the words when he was alone or rarely to his friends, but rarely. "I don't want to press my luck," he would say.

He might write at any time of day but he often wrote late at night, on waking at night, or in early morning. He loved to work, live and walk in solitude. He liked to wake slowly, moving out of the dream state and into morning meditation and when he was feeling like it, exercise. He lived, as close as he could, the life of a contemplative. He believed that good writing and good art should be conducive to contemplation. It was because of this that he was able to be present in the moment and to make the moment present to others. His shy, unassuming, gentle way was sometimes mistaken for self-effacement but Lax was strong-willed. He knew who he was and what he wanted. He was a writer and he wanted to write. He didn't need to diminish or control anyone. Rather, he delighted in finding the good in everyone and then trying to help them find it too.

He used to read daily selections from a collection of small books that he kept out on a table: a condensed version of Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu*; *The Teachings of the Jewish Mystics*, edited by Perle Besserman; Eknath Easwaran's *Words to Live By*; and The New Testament. He also read 2 or 3 Psalms from the Book of Psalms almost every day and very often, the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. He read very little fiction but loved the work of his friend, William Maxwell. He also liked to read books by and about the Dalai Lama. When he found a book he liked, he would read certain passages over and over. He didn't always read a book cover to cover or if he did, not in the sequence it was written. He had an uncanny knack for going right to the central thesis of a book. Two of the last books he read and enjoyed immensely were *The Intimate Merton*, edited by Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo, and William Shannon's *Seeds of Peace*.

Lax used to say that "when people can naturally laugh, it's a sign that things may be OK." To be in his presence was to be in an almost continual state of laughter and to enjoy his remarkably intelligent incisive wit. He was an incredibly happy man. I'll never forget that but most of all I'll remember him reading from his notebooks, the light shining through the beautiful clear tone of his voice.