

Robert Lax – Coming Home

By Jack Kelly

When Bob was living by himself at the cottage on Rock City Hill during the late 1930s, his older sister Gladys drove up to see him, taking supplies and checking his well-being. She told him she'd had a dream the previous night that people from all around the world would someday come to visit this place. They laughed about it, but he remembered because Gladys didn't usually tell her dreams and it was such an unusual dream about such an unlikely place. Nothing momentous had ever happened there, except a group of college boys and girls, mostly from Columbia University, had spent summer college-student time, drinking beer, writing novels (one took place entirely under water), building tree-houses, wandering the woods, and luxuriating in a free house, thanks to Lax's brother-in-law Benji who probably didn't give it a thought, except to pay fire insurance premiums.

One of Bob's Columbia pals wrote from New York, July 29, 1938: "Lax, you don't write. Sir, are you bogged up in your cabin? Are you walled in, is there no mail service, is it eating and drinking and feasting all day, is it watching the birds fly about and no thought for friends? Is it hatching some egg?" – concluding the letter, "Listen, if I find some guy with a car like Joe Roberts we both might come up to Olean this end of August, if you would say so, and if Benji and Gladys would not be awfully sore at putting up one guy twice in one summer" – signed "Merton."

In 1948, *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published and the public got a look at how time had been spent at that cabin, and to the astonishment of the author especially, the book made the best seller list, and exposed how college students spend their summers: drinking beer, writing novels, wandering in the woods, enjoying a free pad thanks to benevolent and caring relatives, while they wonder aloud about life and what they were going to do with it. Nothing unusual except three of the guys turn out to be world-class writers: Robert Lax, Edward Rice, and Thomas Merton.

They went their separate ways, shaping their lives, their desires, their destinies, responding to meetings with remarkable people or books or ideas. Merton came from Europe, to New York, to Olean, to St. Bonaventure, and entered Gethsemani in 1941. Lax moved in the opposite direction, from Olean to New York to France, and found Greece in the 1960s, moving further and further out the Dodecanese chain, eventually to dig in on Patmos, so far from Times Square he knew no one would ever find him. Or if they did, he would acquiesce gently until he could escape into his own brand of solitude, full of prayer and puzzlement.

He lived in a small house on Patmos, a charming two rooms with kitchen and bath, all the basics one needed. The view was fine out to the Skala harbor, the neighborhood quiet, cats and chickens plentiful, scattering off the front stoop as one approached. The path to it wound up alleys from the village below, ancient doorways, curtains swaying in windows, the sounds of the Greek language, and the utter privacy of it, the remoteness from America. He lived like a hermit, someone pointed out, and asked why he'd never joined a monastery? He answered carefully: "I could live with the poverty, and handle the chastity, but the obedience . . ." – ending his answer there.

He had the wherewithal to stay there, remaining isolated, luxuriating in his solitude. He was the perfect example of Franz Kafka's directive: "You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait. Do not even wait, be quite still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked, it has no choice; it will roll in ecstasy at your feet." He chuckled at the identification.

During the 1950s, New York friend Emil Antonucci published *Circus of the Sun*, an acclaimed masterpiece. When Lax was asked in the year 2000, how long he had traveled with the Cristiani circus he replied: "Even 'til now."

In the early 1980s, Thomas Kellein, a young German curator at the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, came across Lax's writings and art while preparing a show of Ad Reinhardt paintings. He was so taken by the purity and quality of the material, he held a joint exhibition of Lax with Reinhardt at the museum in 1985, and Europeans began to roll in ecstasy. Later, Kellein also edited Bob's first collected poems issued by a major publisher – *33 Poems* in 1987. Before, during, and after this period, Pendo of Zurich (the press of Bernhard Moosbrugger) was publishing almost a book a year from Bob's notes and poems. *Moments*, one of 17 in print, appeared in 2000. Edited by John Beer, an early copy arrived in time to read selections out loud as Bob and I sat together. "A good life all in all except for those last few moments in front of the firing squad."

During 1990, Lax received the first Reginald A. Lenna Award from St. Bonaventure as visiting professor and had his round-trip passage paid. Marcia and I met him at the pier in New York, when the *Queen Elizabeth II* docked, drove him to Olean where he stayed in the family house, and watched with fascination as the symphony of that experience began to play, starting slowly, quietly, deliberately, building up like a great composer would, the baton moving surely from one refrain to the next. Many old friends came to visit, one after the other. He had finally come back and here was the chance. So many meals shared and Bob always paused before eating to say a quiet blessing. Noticing that, someone said: "Shall we have a grace?" And that became part of the ritual of a meal. Near the conclusion of the symphony, the three of us were having dinner together, the day before he was to board the *QE II* to return, and a grace was called for. Marcia said, "I hope we can come up with a new one." We'd heard the same or similar rote, offered by many different well-meaning friends, and Marcia continued: "I wish we had a book we could refer to, one from all faiths, so we wouldn't have to say the same one over and over." "That's a good idea," Bob said. Within a few days, we had another book contract from our publisher for *One Hundred Graces*. Bob contributed the introduction, a poem titled "Grace."

After he returned to Patmos, he reported it took him a year to recover from the trip. He was now 75 and willing and wanting to stay put for the rest of his days. He was housed, well fed, and happy. Visitors were frequent yet manageable. He kept his solitude – no one before the afternoon. He listened to BBC radio reports and subscribed to a weekly news magazine, and surprisingly knew more about current events than most.

During the mid-1990s, a friend who had gone to visit reported he needed some help. His mail, an armload daily, had grown out of control. He continued to fill notebooks, delightful and publishable. So Marcia and her sister Connie arranged funding and suitable individuals moved to Patmos, lived nearby and were extremely helpful with cooking, shopping, and organizing. Material was catalogued and shipped to St. Bonaventure where his poems, prose, and photography are archived.



Marcia Kelly, Bob Lax, Connie Brothers at Olean Cottage

In 1995, the International Thomas Merton Society held its bi-annual meeting at St. Bonaventure and we thought it would be a great time for him to come back to Olean. So many of his friends would be there; what an opportunity we said to him. “No dice,” he replied, looking out across the harbor. He would be 80 later that year, and a birthday party would be given for him at the house of his friends Niko and Ritsa Eliou. It was a fine occasion where the party group sang in chorus to celebrate their beloved expatriate poet friend.

Marcia called the coordinator of the Merton conference to ask if there was anything she could do to help. Yes, the reply came, if you could arrange for attendees to visit the cottage, that would be very helpful. Many are interested to go there. The present owner agreed, and cars and vans were scheduled for the shuttle run from the University to the top of Rock City Hill. Marcia was amazed at how many wanted to go there, people from all over the world. The

dream prophecy, fulfilled by the daughter of the dreamer.

In January 1998, I took a short trip to Patmos to see how things were. I’d promised myself that, wanting to see Bob again and thank him face-to-face for all his help, his influence. I chose the mid-winter, the time between Christmas and springtime when movement speeds dull gray days. Except for the flying, I traveled as he would’ve, deck passage on the ferry, settling in a common area nearby electronic games, with plenty of room on former airplane seats, no doubt saved from some crashed plane, quite suitable for steerage passengers, mostly young people heading for their island homes, except for one middle-aged fellow who could’ve used a shower and change of clothes. He was sleeping in a huddled mass of bags and blankets, in a corner. If you passed by him, strong odors emanated like a pulse. I avoided the breezeway and forgot about him. I enjoyed the experience watching how the young quieted down in the seats using their bags as pillows. I too sat comfortably, feet up, coat over my legs and let my mind wander and had a vision of Merton, as sharp as a bell ringing, smiling benevolently. What’s this, I asked myself. Ah, I quickly explained, I’m going to visit his friend and he’s pleased about it. After I got to Patmos and the Rex Hotel, I spent the afternoons and evenings with Petros (his Patmos name), and was there as the phone rang regularly from European friends wishing: “Happy best friend’s birthday.” It was January 31.

Bob seemed well, a little thin and moving carefully, always with a walking stick when he ventured from his bed. He was being well cared for by John and Paula. They had me for dinner every night – Petros insisted – so I would bring desserts from the bakery, an unusual luxury which we all enjoyed. When we were alone, I asked about his plans: would he stay here, was he content? He answered affirmatively, then offered that someday he would like to go to a seminary in Lucerne when he was ready. It was all set. He’d been invited and would like to go there eventually. But not yet.

When I reported this to Marcia and her sister Connie, they realized he was at home in Europe and would never come back to the U.S. He would make his decision about relocating to Switzerland when he was ready. If anyone wanted to see him, they’d have to go there.

The call came from Bob in April 2000 asking if Marcia and I would come to Patmos and help him move to Lucerne. We arrived May 22 and the caravan planning began. Within days of our

arrival, Bob came down with a stomach upset, and despite daily walking exercises he and his friend Niko had been doing, a sore knee added to his immobility. He was about to leave his home of thirty years, but his body was unwilling. Nevertheless, he was adamant to proceed. He did not want to die on Patmos. He knew what was happening, but none of us did or would accept it.

Now our plan was to get him to Brussels for rehabilitation and back on his feet, and into the Swiss seminary. He was healthy enough, we hoped, and good for another twenty years. By mid-June, the wheelchair arrived, passage was booked on the cruise ship *Triton* and the gypsy caravan of Bob, Niko, Ulf, Marcia, and I left for Rome, a pleasant four days of luxury sailing with a pool on the fantail, buffets at gathering places, and live jazz playing every night in the lounge. We were met by a van at Civitavecchia and whisked into Rome, staying at a hotel within a block of the Pantheon. Two days later, the same van took us to the train station and we boarded the Belgian Express. Ulf returned to Patmos having been tremendously helpful, and the four of us, in adjoining compartments, chugged off for 23 hours, through Switzerland at night (we waved), then northern France to the main station in Brussels where Bob's friend Olivier met us with two cars and Laetitia and Joseph to help load bags, wheelchair, and our precious cargo. We went directly to the Deux Alice Clinic where Bob was taken to a private room on the fifth floor. There he stayed for a month with excellent care and physical rehabilitation, but with little result. Complete examinations by competent physicians, x-rays, cardiograms, blood tests revealed nothing. His blood pressure was 120/80, that of a young man. "What did they find wrong?" he asked. "There's nothing wrong," I answered, "It's up to you." His eyes brightened a little. He smiled and said nothing.

During this month, we toured Brussels visiting and evaluating places where he would have proper care. Suggestions came from Br. Patrick Hart, Tommie O'Callaghan, and Br. Benedict Simmonds, but nothing seemed quite right. During a discussion with Bob, Marcia asked: "Would you consider going to the United States, home to Olean? The house is there and nephew Dick has offered it." "No," he said. "Why not?" she asked. "I won't fly." She followed, "If you didn't have to fly, would you consider it?" "Yes," he said, "I'd like that."

Near the end of July, the caravan was reassembled for the trip to Southampton with free-lance gypsies, Olivier and Brigitte from Brussels, Sarah and Lewis from the U. of Iowa, and Bob's film biographer Werner Penzel from Munich, all driving to England where they stayed overnight at Winchester Cathedral. Bob was given the room kings stay in the night before their weddings, complete with canopied bed. He loved it. Marcia and I flew on ahead to prepare the house in Olean.

As I drove to New York July 29 to meet the ship in our minivan, the size of a panel truck with seats for seven, I realized why we had it. Purchased during the past year, it far exceeded our needs. Now it would be perfect. It swallowed us up plus all the pots and pans and baggage of a caravan, and we drove easily from the pier to Olean. A comfortable bed was in Gladys and Benji's bedroom and Bob had a familiar view of the spacious lawn, bushes, and trees that hadn't changed in fifty years. "I'm so glad to be back here where I started," he said to Marcia. "Thank you."

On September 26, the feast day of St. John, he passed over early in the morning, quietly, gently, unhurriedly. On September 29, his body was interred in St. Bonaventure cemetery, which was his request. Almost like a corner had been saved for you, dear Bob, on a knoll, looking across the valley to the University where your writings, full of wisdom and humor, are kept safely; nearby are the friars happy with your company, with a bench to sit on for those who visit, and easy to locate. Your body rests in an idyllic spot. You've come full circle. *Yassou Petros.*