

After the Circus Goes By

Michael McGregor

I don't know how many evenings I spent with Bob Lax during the years I knew him. Dozens. Maybe a hundred. I returned to Patmos each year, staying sometimes for just a few days, other times for weeks. In approach, the visits were all the same – the climb up the hill, the cats at the door, the knock on the frosted glass and that gentle “hello” – the “o” round and full, drawn-out and rising until it was both question (“Who's there?”) and statement (“Whoever you are, you're welcome”).

The first moments inside were similar, too. Bob would offer a cup of water or tea. If he was alone, he would hand me something to read while he shuffled out to his tiny kitchen – a new publication, a poem, a letter from someone I knew by name or from a previous visit. If it was summer, someone would always be there already, and I would have the feeling I had just missed the funniest joke ever told, or a life-changing moment, or the absolution that follows confession. More often than not, all I had missed was the latest exchange in Bob's conversation with life.

The magic of visiting Bob was that once the water or tea had been served and a sweet had been offered, nothing was ever the same. The conversation was endless but it was always going somewhere new, directed not by anyone's will but by the personalities of those present and by the spirit Bob fostered – a spirit of playfulness and a deep desire to love and know. There were themes that came and went with the years and themes that never changed, Bob's preoccupations, which deepened and strengthened with time, like channels rubbed into bedrock. (One of the many things he taught me was to look for the themes that defined my own life. When he was younger, he said, he once wrote for as long as he could, pages each day, with the single intention of finding out what he most cared about.) Anyone who knew Bob knew his concerns: peace, common ground, knowing God, meditation, being love . . . and the inexplicable joy of the circus.

In summer it could be a circus at Bob's. (In the later years, along his entryway wall, the first thing a visitor saw was a sign advertising Circus Roberto.) His bedroom was the center ring – stuffed full of painters, writers, dancers and mystics, many pursuing their arts because Bob had encouraged them. On the wall were photos of acrobats, drawings of animals, and an advertisement for the Marx Brothers' *At the Circus*. Bob himself was the circus high priest – both ringmaster and clown. He sat on his bed with his legs propped up, his clothes mismatched, his face a panoply of glee. Wand in hand, he directed the magic. He was sage and child, clever and simple, alight with a joy that understands sorrow – all a master or clown should be.

But while I loved to see the circus at Bob's, the times I miss most are those nights in winter or early spring when no one but me would be there. When he would be wearing long johns and two or three shirts, a cap on his head. When we would sit by ourselves drinking tea, sipping soup, the lights

mostly off, the town beyond the window dark. We might hear a mouse scurry along the wall then or a cockroach dance across the kitchen. Bob would look up at me and smile, and I would see the love alive in his eyes, not for me alone but for the whole world – the mice and the cockroaches, the cats and the flies. We talked on those nights, of course, about his life and mine, our concerns and preoccupations. But often we just sat like that, musing in silence, two kids on a sidewalk late at night, after the circus goes by.

Michael McGregor, an essayist and fiction writer, first encountered Bob Lax in Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* while living on Patmos in 1985. Impressed by Lax's youthful wisdom, he made a note to look for him in Merton's later books, not realizing Lax was living half a mile away. The two met three weeks later and remained friends the rest of Lax's life. His article "Turning the Jungle Into a Garden: A Visit with Robert Lax" appeared in *Poets & Writers* magazine (March/April 1997).