

In May 1997 I sought Robert Lax out on Patmos, not as a means of accessing Thomas Merton but rather as a “desert father” who could give me personal wisdom regarding midlife transitions. The hour-long conversation my wife and I had with him in his simple one-room residence, in the presence of his cats and a student assistant, was an epiphany. Our interaction was spontaneous, convivial, and reflective, punctuated with outbursts of belly laughing and some of Robert’s favorite lines from spiritual classics. He listened intently to the concerns of my life, parenthetically asking me about the meaning of my surname. Probing him about the dynamics of his own midlife transition to Patmos, he responded with levity, “I think I’ve been a bum since I was 9 years old when I also had a desire to write for myself about big issues I had been thinking about as a boy.” Never “having taken jobs seriously as careers” he regarded his move to Patmos as more a change of location than of vocation. For that matter he understood his life as mostly spent “preaching to himself” with others accorded the opportunity “to look over his shoulder.”

I sensed in Robert a deep contentment with his decision over 30 years ago to come to Patmos, where he had lived in 20 different houses, his needs always being serendipitously provided for by the grace of God. As we conversed a neighbor entered to bring him food. He spoke to me with an endearing hospitality of heart, at one point reading from Thoreau’s *Walden* about intentional living, at another, quoting Julian of Norwich, “that all would be well.” He exuded a simple, sincere piety, suggesting that when one is in doubt about life’s direction one should “dash off with a bowl of soup to someone who needs it,” perhaps reminiscent of his own dependence on such generosity during his European wanderings in an earlier season of life. Towards the end of our visit I queried him about Merton whom he eulogized as “a very good friend” and “mentor” who “gave everything he had in a down to earth way”; thus he “should be celebrated in the way he is.” At my request for his “best” writings Robert recommended for my reading his *21 Pages* and *Journal C*. I left his company with the consoling awareness that I had indeed been in the presence of a veritable “desert father” who was happy to write “for little tiny presses.” While obviously frail in body, coming to the end of his own journey, he nevertheless displayed both a deep-seated serenity, and a humble, joyful disposition. He gave me the gift of illuminating midlife wisdom born of many years of contemplative living. He evidently had no regrets about his life. Rest in peace Robert. I was “graced” to have met you.