

Robert Lax and I first met in Olean, New York, the first week of September, 1980. He was understandably shy of a biographer with a tape recorder and questions. I was driving him around Olean and he started to talk about W. H. Auden. He said the nuns were whispering that Auden was likely to convert. For some reason I began to sing “Whispering nuns don’t tell” to the tune of the old Inkspots’ song “Whispering Grass.” At that moment, or one soon after, we became friends.

My biography of his lifelong friend, Thomas Merton, would have been quite different without Bob’s help. But I had to abandon the tape recorder and remember what he said, no easy matter when he was talking and I was driving from Olean to Toledo.

A week later we were at Gethsemani, and at a Merton-Maritain Conference in Louisville. I recall our exchange of sympathetic looks across the table in the middle of one long presentation, and our signaled delight in Tony Walsh’s “If I were a young man I’d have a garden of weeds.”

After my book came out we were back in Olean for a few days. Bob had sent me the best line I received about my biography. From Kalymnos came word the book had arrived: “This was like a long letter from Merton.”

It must have been on one of our walks in Olean that Julian of Norwich came up, perhaps the afternoon of our encounter. A small girl and her two shy friends invited Bob to an ice-cream birthday party. Bob had such meetings with total strangers. I cannot recall anyone else doing so. Usually strangers came bearing gifts or invitations; always they were honored and a little in awe.

I wrote to Bob, now in Patmos, of my visit to Julian’s cell in Norwich. He sent back a quotation from Julian’s *Showings*, or *Divine Revelations*. Later I wrote to tell him what he had sent had had a life of its own. I had read it and left copies when I made my visits to hospital for Pastoral Care, and I had sent it to a poet friend in Ireland whose mother was dying. She had had the passage on her last day, the friend said, and it had comforted her. Everywhere, I had such messages. I wanted Bob to know what he had done. I also told him we had used other passages at our wedding.

“And it’s good to think of Lady Julian being at your wedding,” he wrote back. “Someday please quote a line or two of the passage I sent you (for me). I discovered it, the book opened right to it, the day I sent it to you. But now I look all through the book and can’t find it.”

I sent the passage. In all his letters, he wrote asking me to come out, so that we could continue our walks in Patmos. I did not make it. But these passages from Julian that went back and forth—and

went far and wide – make my lasting link with Bob: “In this blessed revelation I was truly taught that any man or woman who voluntarily chooses God in his lifetime may be sure that he too is chosen. Pay true heed to this, for it is indeed God’s will for us to be as certain in our trust to have the bliss of heaven whilst we are here as we shall be certain of it when we are there” (Julian of Norwich, *Showings* [short text]).

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