

All Rings, One Ring: Robert Lax – A Centennial Tribute

By Steve T. Georgiou

“all dreams, one dream; all message, one message . . .”

Robert Lax, *Sea & Sky*

2015 marks the centenary of both Thomas Merton and Robert Lax (born January 31 and November 30, 1915, respectively). Numerous programs celebrating these two great friends and contemplatives have been conducted at colleges, churches and retreat centers throughout the year, among them the Fourteenth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society at Bellarmine University held in June in Louisville, Kentucky. In the spring of 2015 a monthly lecture and discussion series centering exclusively on Lax took place at the Santa Sabina Retreat Center in San Rafael, California, led by Lax scholar Steve Georgiou. The following tribute by Georgiou, an outgrowth of these sessions, celebrates this “other” anniversary, of Merton’s great soul-friend and fellow poet, sage and mystic.¹

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In a poem written in the 1970s entitled “Three Rings,” Robert Lax demonstrates how three (initially separate) rings can gracefully meld into one ring. This simple and lucid verse selection reveals a profound gift of Bob’s – to make us more aware of unity, wholeness, cosmic solidarity and human oneness, despite natural differences. For anybody who knew Bob and/or has read his work, this over-arching, inter-relational unity is *love* – and not just any love, but the love of God. As he once told me, “There’s no other place I’d want my work to point to.”²

Bob didn’t preach about this love, nor did he try to control others in the name of God. He simply lived his compassionate, creative, nurturing, peaceful, joyful life everywhere he went. With few possessions, traveling lightly, emanating a singular authenticity, he drew others to him, into a blessing-circle of wisdom and charity. He was, for all intensive purposes, a humble, unassuming witness of what Christians call *agape*: universal love, reflective of the love of God for humanity. In this role he served as a lighthouse of inspiration for many, if not an instrument of grace.

Bob attentively made his way through life, imparting his agapaic reflections both in his writing and in day-to-day encounters. He was a



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poet who “walked his talk.” He deemed every person to be unique, and treated them as such. He embraced all things in both a happy and a holy way, a trait noticed by family members, friends, teachers and fellow-workers throughout his life.³ I’m reminded of a quotation from Father Thomas Hopko, a prolific Eastern Orthodox writer, who defines what it means to be a saint. It is impossible to meditate on this definition and not think of Bob:

Every saint lives in the present moment. . . . Every saint pays attention to details, and does the smallest, seemingly most insignificant act with the greatest love and devotion. . . . Every saint pays attention to persons, and not to structures, institutions, parties, programs. . . . For the saint, only the person counts; everything is subordinated to the good of the person.⁴

Because everyone who knew Bob has their own special take on the man, I offer a tribute based on my own experiences with him, many of which are summarized in my book, *The Way of the Dreamcatcher*. When I first met Bob on Patmos in 1993, I was, in many ways, disillusioned with life, having suffered a series of taxing personal incidents. But Bob, a conduit of love, simply flashed his empathetic “It’s OK” smile and essentially said, “Relax; stop clinging to your pain; go with the flow” (Georgiou, *Way* 33, 55-56).

What did Bob mean by “flow”? to mindlessly cast myself into the sea of life and drift with the tides? Though born and raised near Ocean Beach in “laid-back” and “ultra-groovy” California, I hardly think so! I believe what he meant was to transcend my own stagnant condition and move with a higher purpose; to trust in a greater vision, power, or flow, as he put it. But exactly what kind of “flow”? With time, I came to understand that by “flow,” Bob meant the almighty, preexistent flow of divine love, a sacred round that begins within the very heart of the Trinitarian God. Here the Father turns to the Son, the Son turns to the Spirit, and the Spirit turns to the Father, all in an inter-relational act of supreme cyclic love. In essence, what matters most is shared unity, especially in the mysterious core of God. A divine, interdependent ring of *agape* thus encircles heaven, a model of love for life on earth. Interestingly, this circuitous “uber-flow” is seemingly replicated (in creation) by whirling galaxies, orbiting planets and even (microcosmically) by the human circulatory system. Hence Bob’s fascination for circles and spirals, wheels and gyres, all God-born emanations of the playful supernal round that is love, a veritable “Circus of the Sun” (to quote the title of Bob’s famous poem), revolving around Christ the Ringmaster, the infinite God of Compassion.⁵

I think that as Bob grew in this divine love-flow, he was increasingly moved, if not mystically inspired, to bring others into this circle of bliss, this holy ring that unites life. For while he spent much time in solitude communing with the Creator (and co-creating through him), he always returned with gifts of the heart to share with others, to draw all things into the round of love. In this manner of “departure and return” he very much functioned as a hermit for our time, one who well understood that the life-saving wisdom gleaned through solitude, creativity and prayer cannot be left in the hermitage for years on end (as in days of old), but instead must be readily dispensed. The violent and fragile state of our world absolutely demands it.⁶

Especially when Bob came to reside on the holy isle of Patmos, a refuge known in early Christianity as the “Isle of Love,” he increasingly took on the semblance of a tzadik, that is, a charismatic Hassidic sage, one who upholds the life of the community and functions as a conduit of higher love and blessing. As with a tzadik, people sought out Bob’s advice (traveling to Patmos to

meet him); the local community nurtured him; and devotees regularly visited him to learn about life, poetry and spirit; and Bob, through word, art, laughter (and/or simply pointing to the holy quiet of a sunset), gently pulled them all into the circle-dance of love. I think that as Bob danced in love, all “circles of love-flow” swirled into one circle; all “rings of compassion” mystically melded into one sacred round uniting all life born of love. Circle-flows of heaven, earth, sky, sea, sun, moon, prayer, art, people, angels – all became magnificently, exquisitely One, a supracosmic image invoking the dream-like paintings of Chagall.

Interestingly, in his final years, Bob might position a page on an old wooden board and fashion a Zen-like circle in one brisk movement. What did it mean? Did the circle hint of the impending “full circle” he would make with his own life – that is, dying in the hometown of his birth, Olean, New York? Was it a final minimalist expression pointing to the purity of essentials, to the “center ring” of irreducible nothingness (symbolized by the circle’s empty interior) on which inner illumination depends? Was he demonstrating how the radical emptying of the worldly self (“becoming zero”) actually prepares one to receive the fullness of enlightenment in God? Did the circle suggest that the meaning of life will never be totally realized until all of creation completes its circuitous return to the Creator?

Taking into account the vast contemplative depth of Lax, famously documented by Thomas Merton in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, all of these hypotheses are likely. But perhaps most significantly, Bob may have been indicating how in the course of “riding the flow,” that is, in completing the full round of life in love (and thus finishing a “birth-to-death circumference,” or spirit-cycle), a “blessing-space” quietly forms, becomes defined, made distinct by the circle’s empty – and yet spiritually full – interior. This compassion-ring of grace is *immaterial transcendence*, the “invisible Glory” on which life totally depends. Though dwelling in all and accessible to all, it takes on consummate definition at the close of one’s life, at the sealing of the circle, the return of ending with beginning.

It is this subtle yet eminently sustaining “Spirit-Presence” that Bob’s poems, dreams and wanderings consistently point to – the non-dual loving Power in which all opposites are reconciled and unified, and through which all life incessantly swirls, ultimately passing into new form. It is this “unseen” and yet “seen” Mystery through which Bob is still spiraling, infinitely free and at play, as are we all, if only we awake to life’s holiness and become the bright conduits of love we were born to be. As Bob suggested to me:

move freely,
dance freely,
sing freely;

then I shall know,
and you shall
know too,

that
you
are
free.⁷

1. On September 19, 2015, parts of this tribute were read by Marcia Kelly, niece of Robert Lax, at Corpus Christi Church in New York (where Merton was baptized into the Roman Catholic faith on November 16, 1938) as part of a centenary celebration honoring both Lax and Merton, organized by the ITMS Corpus Christi Chapter.
2. S. T. Georgiou, *The Way of the Dreamcatcher: Spirit-Lessons with Robert Lax, Poet-Peacemaker-Sage* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 2010) 101; subsequent references will be cited as “Georgiou, *Way*” parenthetically in the text.
3. Lax’s wisdom, creativity, compassion and natural predisposition to charity and the contemplative life were observed since his youth, first famously noted by Thomas Merton in *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 180-81, 236-38. Mark Van Doren, Lax’s English teacher at Columbia University, said of him, “He was so filled with love that he could not state his bliss” (*The Autobiography of Mark Van Doren* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958] 212). Catherine de Hueck Doherty, founder of the Madonna House Apostolate in Canada, said of the twenty-four-year-old Lax: “Love spoke loudly in his every gesture, it shone in his face and spoke through his words. There were many incidents with this son of Israel, but I’m afraid it would take a whole book. He is the kind of man about whom books may someday be written” (*Not Without Parables* [Notre Dame: Ava Maria Press, 1977] 77). The Spring 2001 issue (26.1) of *The Merton Seasonal* – dedicated entirely to Lax and published in the year following his death – includes a compendium of tributes that praise his spiritual and creative genius. The Italian avant-garde publisher Francesco Conz said of Lax, “He will be remembered as the last of the mystics to close a former epoch” (*The ABCs of Robert Lax*, ed. David Miller and Nicholas Zurbrugg [Exeter: Stride, 1999] 218).
4. Thomas Hopko, “The Way of a Saint” (www.stpaulsirvine.org/hopko_way.html).
5. *Circus of the Sun*, written in 1950, was Lax’s first great masterwork. It describes a day in the life of the circus, and in the process allegorically suggests that the passing of each earthly day is a cosmic circus in itself, a Christocentric circus in which we are all participants, utilizing our gifts to praise the Son (Sun) of God, the Origin of All. Interestingly, a major reason why Lax, born a Jew, became a Catholic is because he felt that Christ the Ringmaster wholly embodied the attributes of peace, love, freedom, creativity, joy, wisdom and grace. Many of these Christ-like attributes can be seen throughout *Circus of the Sun* (and in its companion-piece, *Mogador’s Book*). Lax would take note of these Christ-like qualities in the people he met throughout his travels, be it in Marseilles, at pilgrimage sites in Europe or on the remote Greek isles of Kalymnos and Patmos – all successive approximations of a “transcendent circus,” if not a wondrous, festive City of God. In this sense, he saw the entire world as a “Circus of the Sun,” a celebration of the Son, a circuit of His love and grace. Indeed, many of Lax’s spiritual ideas – already evident in *Circus of the Sun* and in *Mogador’s Book* – were further worked out in his subsequent life-experiences; the books form the theopoetic basis of his life. For a recent compendium of Lax’s circus poems, see *Circus Days and Nights*, ed. Paul Spaeth (New York: Overlook Press, 2000).
6. The label “hermit for our time” was first given to Lax by Peter France, in his book *Hermits: The Insights of Solitude* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996). Certainly Lax was not a hermit in the classic sense, but as evidenced by many acquaintances and friends in his past, he seemed to be a natural-born solitary who ever needed the generative silence of “a place apart” to delve into the purity of essentials and the essence of creation. “I need it for my work,” he wrote, “as a photographer needs a darkroom” (Robert Lax, *Journal C* [Zurich: Pendo, 1990] 6). Because Lax comprehended how deeply creation is interconnected and how the individual can (gently) influence the universal, he also understood how his wisdom could directly assist others: “I’ve found that my solitary work, my writing and meditation, comes to help out other people” (Georgiou, *Way* 65). On Lax’s need for solitude, see also James Harford, *Merton & Friends: A Joint Biography of Thomas Merton, Robert Lax, and Edward Rice* (New York: Crossroad, 2006) 104-10, 219-20 and Michael McGregor, *Pure Act: The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015) 237-38.
7. Poem enclosed in a letter to S. T. Georgiou, published in *In the Beginning Was Love: Contemplative Words of Robert Lax* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 2015) 115.