Robert Lax was a writer and poet who developed a unique style of contemplative abstract poetry, and a contemplative who, outside of a formal monastic context, adopted a lifestyle based upon simplicity and prayer which was an inspiration to his many friends and visitors. Born in Olean, USA, he was part of a circle of that included Thomas Merton (who paid tribute to him in *The Seven Storey Mountain*), Ad Reinhardt and Jack Kerouac, but in the mid-1960s he abandoned his career in New York to live on the Greek islands of Kalymnos and Patmos, seeking “to put himself in a place where grace could flow.” In this article, Robert Hirschfield presents a central feature aspect of his spirituality – living slowly.
He longs to live married to slowness

This line by the poet Jack Gilbert [1] refers to Dostoyevsky’s contemplative, Alyosha, in *The Brothers Karamazov*. But it also brings to mind the contemplative abstract poet from Olean, New York, Robert Lax. The poet’s astounding life journey included writing for *The New Yorker*, working with the poor in Harlem, performing as a clown with the Cristiani Circus in Canada, and even spending time as a scriptwriter in Hollywood. He gave up the noise and the marketplace life of New York City in the early 1960s and journeyed to Greece to pursue a life of poetry and prayer, a life of simplicity. He lived for nearly forty years on the islands of Kalymnos and Patmos before returning home to Olean to die in the millennial year of 2000. He was 84. On his gravestone at nearby St. Bonaventure University in Buffalo, in his signature vertical style, is his ruthlessly compressed autobiography:

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slow
boat

calm
river

quiet
landing
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One of the touchstone words in Lax’s spiritual vocabulary was “waiting”. By this he meant being still, standing one’s ground, knowing one’s ground, but never quite knowing the reality of what was awaited, longed for. In his volume *33 Poems*, recently reissued by New Directions, he puts it this way:


“What you see,” said Paul Spaeth, keeper of the Lax archive at St. Bonaventure, “is the opposite of what can be called social action. What you see is a slowing down and waiting on God. Very much in keeping with the monastic tradition. Also very similar to the Buddhist tradition of moment to moment mindfulness.”
Robert Lax with Thomas Merton (middle) and Ad Reinhardt (left). Photograph courtesy of the Thomas Merton Center, © Bellarmine University

Unlike his friend Thomas Merton, the Trappist poet and author who shared Lax’s interest in Buddhism and brought his name to the world in _Seven Storey Mountain_, Lax never lived a life of structured monasticism. A Jewish convert to Catholicism, he built for himself an interior monastery, within which he wrote, prayed, contemplated, and received many visitors: poets, painters, writers (he’d been friends with the legendary abstract artist, Ad Reinhardt, and with Jack Kerouac), and spiritual seekers. “Lax can be thought of as a mystic,” said his biographer Michael McGregor, who nevertheless refrained from using that word in his book _Pure Act: The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax_. He shared his subject’s aversion to the superficiality of labels. He wanted readers to come to their own conclusions about who he was, what he was.

Steve Georgiou, a seeker from California and author of _The Way of the Dreamcatcher_, a book of dialogues with Lax, remembers their walks down to Skala, the Patmos harbour.

He would walk with a slow roll like the roll of a boat. He would take his meditative steps, encouraging you to slow down yourself and feel the actual experience of walking. For Lax, there was no seam between walking, praying, writing. All experiences were to be fully absorbed, integrated into a life fully lived. Once Georgiou saw his friend writing a single word – “river” – over and over. He asked him why. “I want to live with the word for a while,” Lax said.

one word at a time.
I believe
I believe
that all people

BESHARA MAGAZINE: ROBERT LAX: A LIFE SLOWLY LIVED 3
A New Form of Poetry

Lax wrote: “True poetry calls for the refinement of ends and means.” He first made his name with a collection of poems entitled Circus of the Sun, about his days with the Cristiani Circus family. In their skillful performances, he found the closest thing he had ever seen to a fully present existence – the ability to be entirely in the moment, to perform a ‘pure act’. The emergence in mid-life of his New Poems – vertical abstracts with lines often reduced to units of single words, single syllables – mirrored the refinement of a simplified life with its focus on bare units of attention from which nothing was excluded.

the
world
is
il
lu
sion

the
world
His New Poems demanded to be read in a new way. Reading the horizontal line, one is more prone to scan and move on. Dovetailing with the beginning of the computer age, his poems are inadvertently defiant in the way they make readers stop, stay with each word, each syllable. They have to reset old notions as to what words actually are, what syllables are. They can, if they wish, take them apart with the wonder of children taking apart toys and putting them back together again. The re-ordering of the accepted verbal cosmology.

For a man who has been called naïve in his assumptions about the day-to-day world, Lax’s words about the value of slowness featured a strong practical side befitting one to whom people came with
intractable life problems. “He really believed”, maintained McGregor, “that if you slowed down and waited, things would reveal themselves to you, you would get put on the right path. He was interested in something that was sure over something that was quick. Most of us want to make a decision and move on. He didn’t think moving on had a great value. He wanted to know what was true and what was right, and that involved slowing down.” [9] This, from Lax’s *Journal C*, is a proverb from Kalymnos:

where among kalymnians is the greatest degree of wisdom to be observed? I think, almost certainly among the fishermen.

what are the wise things they say and the wise things they do? Only by living among them, watching them carefully, listening attentively can one learn from them gradually.

learn to be a fisherman? learn, slowly, to be wise. [10]

Lax’s niece, Marcia Kelly, tells the story of driving her car in downtown Olean as a teenager and seeing Lax waiting for a bus home. Her initial impulse was to give him a lift, but seeing how absorbed he was, in his one little spot, in everything around him, she just let him be.

The poet was horrified by the noise and speed of motorbikes on Patmos in later years, and would never go anywhere by plane. When he was old and ill and too weak to live on his own, Kelly urged him to come back home with her and her husband. He at first refused, as it would mean having to return by plane. She suggested they go by boat. He accepted. So the old traveller, who lived a life of voluntary poverty, made his final journey on an ocean liner from Southampton.

A time traveller from the time of the Desert Fathers, Lax – known for his inexhaustible sense of humour and pun-making – could poke fun at his tradition and its ideas about time and spiritual permutations over time. Here is his “Shorter History of Western Civilisation”:

*Egyptians*  
 *Babylonians*  
 *Persians*

*Egyptians*  
 *Babylonians*  
 *Persians*

*Jews & Greeks*

*Jews & Greeks*
This poem was one of the poet’s rare excursions into social criticism. Estranged from the pace of the world, he was still attuned to the things of the world. He listened on his radio to the BBC. But he digested the news slowly, the way he digested all things. Silence left a lot of space inside him for things to orbit in Laxian leisure and land, as he did, on quiet ground.
To explore the life and work of Robert Lax further…

Listen
to him read some of his own poems:

“Something I remember”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EY5IM00YNqs

“Is was – was is”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dh6VVpoPQc

“Alley Violinist” (read by Garrison Keillor): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C18adaZj7aQ

Read


- his series of late vertical poems Peacemakers Handbooks I–IV on the Bonaventure archive site: http://web.sbu.edu/friedsam/laxweb/new_page_1.htm
Read and Watch
some of his friends’ impressions:

**Michael McGregor**, his biographer, professor of English at Portland State University:

  A short article which gives a good potted biography and a lovely sense of the spiritual aspect of Lax’s life: [https://magazine.nd.edu/news/poetic-man-of-god/](https://magazine.nd.edu/news/poetic-man-of-god/)


**Nancy Goldring**, friend, artist and professor at Montclair State University:

- *Putting yourself in a place where grace can flow to you.*
  A memoir of the time she spent with Lax on Patmos, including typescripts and the recording of a poem on which they collaborated, *Legend* (1991):

**Steve Georgiou**, friend and scholar:

- *Remembering Robert Lax*.

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Image Sources

Banner picture: Robert Lax at St Bonaventure University in 1990, when he was invited as the first Reginald A. Lenna Visiting Professor of English to spend three weeks giving readings on campus. He also received an honorary doctorate. Photograph: Paul Spaeth, courtesy of the Robert Lax archive.


Other Sources


[9] In a personal conversation with the author.
