

In the Beginning Was Love by Richard Whittaker

Remembering Robert Lax—A Conversation with Steve Georgiou

May 11, 2017

My introduction to S. T. Georgiou came via his most recent book: *In the Beginning Was Love—Contemplative Words of Robert Lax*. The name rang a bell. It was buried in memory, but wrapped in an aura and connected with Thomas Merton. I'd never followed up on Lax and had forgotten about him long ago. So it was surprising to find myself suddenly alert in front of that name.

The book had arrived with Georgiou's handwritten note. Perhaps I'd take an interest. It happened that I was headed for a getaway. Perfect. In addition to the beauty of the northern Oregon coast, an unexpected gift had fallen into my hands.

The book did not disappoint and I found myself writing a review for *Parabola* magazine. It was a good start, but what I was really looking forward to was meeting Georgiou. I felt sure it would be one of those rich adventures and, certainly, there would have to be an interview. And I was right on all counts.

By the time we got together to record a conversation, we'd already met a number of times at Saul's Restaurant in north Berkeley to talk while enjoying the food and atmosphere. Then one sunny spring morning, after some exotic dishes, we drove up the hill to the Dominican College of Philosophy and Theology in Berkeley to talk for the record.

Richard Whittaker: You mentioned one of Lax's poems with the line: "The head of the committee said he couldn't use it..." and I can imagine a lot of people wouldn't have known what to make of his poetry.

Steve Georgiou: I think Lax was often marginalized because of poems like, *The sea. The sea. The sky. The sky*—where the nucleus of expression lies in a single word or phrase. People might not have taken that seriously or thought he was too far out. So he could be dismissed by readers who weren't into the idea of how there's a lot of concentrated energy in his verse.

Lax lived his words. There were times I'd see him writing one word over and over again, and I would ask him, "Bob, what are you doing there?"

He would say, "I'm writing this poem."

"Well, why are you writing that word over and over again?"

He'd say, "Because I'm living it. I'm breathing it."

He was kind of like a Zen master who puts all of his meditative energy into painting

one circle. He was like that, I think, with his writing. He didn't revise a whole lot, either.

RW: And the poem you're showing me here is a response to being rejected I take it.

SG: Yes, it can be interpreted that way.

The head of the committee said he couldn't use it.
It shot off, he said, in too many directions.
Throw it onto the junk heap, he said,
out there, where the wildflowers grow.

And Lax was a wildflower. One of his friends back in college was Bob Giroux—later he helped found the publishing company Farrar, Straus and Giroux—but Giroux never really wrote to him about his poetry. I guess he didn't dig it. But Giroux published Merton's autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the book that made Merton famous. I think Lax was on another kind of journey.

RW: I'd guess that you'd need a certain kind of experience before you could appreciate something of the almost mystical force of the apparently simple poems he wrote.

SG: Lax didn't want to write anything he didn't viscerally feel, that couldn't be a kind of mantra in accord with the universe. He knew well enough about Hinduism and Buddhism and Daoism. His uncle was a Theosophist and one of Krishnamurti's caretakers, so he knew something about this stuff from an early age, whereas Merton wasn't practicing anything until his 20s. Then Merton started understanding what Christianity was about and became a Christian. Lax, essentially, was on a different level, because he had some exposure to the world religions by the time he got into Columbia University where they met.

RW: Earlier you mentioned that Lax had gotten a job at the *New Yorker*.

SG: Yes, he became an assistant poetry editor—and he had the chance to move up the ladder.

RW: If he'd stayed at the *New Yorker*, his career was basically made, wouldn't you say?

SG: Right. But he didn't stay. He called life in New York's nine-to-five world "a concrete jungle"—as others had before him. People were anxious; there was a lot of hustle and bustle. Many were turning to alcohol to endure all that. But New York was where you made money and where you advanced. In time Lax realized he had to be in a quiet place, which is why he eventually chose Patmos—and the Greek isles in general. But that's another story.

So after being in New York for a few years, he just said, "It's time to leave." And he left despite having had the chance to go up the ladder of literary and economic success.

RW: From what little I know, he exemplifies someone who follows promptings from some deeper part of himself. Would you agree?

SG: For sure. I think he understood the difference between hearing and listening, and he really emphasized the listening. In fact, one of the things he'd say when we walked along the Patmos shoreline was, "Well, I'm going to go back up to my place now. There's a lot of listening I have to get to."

And listening for what? I think for all the cosmic sounds, his own heart, his own soul.

As a youth, he was sought out by people who felt a need to talk with him. In his twenties, and even before, he had this sixth sense, you might say. In childhood he dreamt that he saved a lot of students in a hallway because a banister had broken. He'd held the banister up long enough so the students could make it through a particular corridor—something to that effect. In a way, his life really was that dream—he held up that banister to help people make it through life. He gave his all in doing so.

Catherine de Hueck Doherty, a lady who founded Friendship House in Canada and parts of the U.S., where they cared for the poor (and who is now on the path to canonization in the Catholic Church), met Lax when he was around 25. She felt he was a gifted soul, as have many who met him—certainly a little different, some might say even a bit off. His mind was not on the nine-to-five world.

There was a Friendship House in Harlem where the young Lax was serving as a volunteer, along with Thomas Merton. Catherine gave Lax a bucket of suds and a mop, and told him to mop. When she came back a couple of hours later, she found him still there, just sitting on the floor by the pail lost in his own world. She experienced this in a humorous way and felt there was something about this "son of Israel"—because he hadn't yet converted to Catholicism—that would result in many books being written about him.

As Merton had written in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "Lax was born with the deepest sense of who God was." Merton said that he was often in this deep, contemplative mode, even in college. He indexed Lax more than anybody else in his autobiography. For Merton, and for others, Lax was a guiding light.

RW: Yes. When you sent me your recent book *In the Beginning Was Love: Contemplative Words of Robert Lax*, the moment I saw the name Robert Lax, I was interested. I'd remembered that name from Merton. And I was immediately touched by the first poem in that book—it speaks of a void, in the center of which is a fountain. It's the emptiness spoken of in Zen and other traditions. He must have been familiar with that deep place.

SG: I think he was more familiar with it than anybody I've met, actually. That's why I was drawn to him. It's a major reason why so many people were turned on by Lax the contemplative, and this going back into his college years. Professors at Columbia like Mark Van Doren and Jacques Barzun had good things to say about Bob. Even when he was younger, his own sister had a dream of him being an important person at some point in life.

He spoke with a rare singularity that, as you said, pointed to the "cosmic fountain," to the nature of what life is about, and which the Hindus also point to. In the Upanishads, there's a phrase, "in our consciousness, in between our thoughts"—it's that living presence which, if we're quiet enough, we can discover, connect with. He was always choosing places to live that would help him listen for that more and more.

He traveled to many places in his life, and for a lot of reasons. Early on he had lots of odd jobs which included bartending and scriptwriting. He was a college English instructor and later a roving reporter for *Jubilee* magazine. He trekked to areas that helped in his inner search like monasteries in the French Alps or Aegean islands like Kalymnos and Patmos—all out of the way locales.

When he got trapped in places like downtown New York, he always somehow managed to find some remote sanctuary on the margins, like a wildflower, in order to be able to do the growing.

Nowadays that's harder to do. I think it's why people aren't satisfied. Modern society is a place of increasing distraction and frustration. People aren't in touch with what makes the wildflowers grow. Lax said it's important to "put yourself in a place where Grace can flow." Those were his words. A place where Grace can flow is exactly the remedy, the prescription for our society these days. People are continually revving up their engines to go faster. Your car can do zero to 80 in a few seconds, but where are you

going to go with all that?

RW: Right. And there's a huge amount of attention given to the surface, so that the surface maximizes its impact.

SG: Right. Surface-level living—instantly! And then what?

RW: And then what? When you go home and spend a little time, that surface is gone and you're just hungry.

SG: You're hungry. But you're also fearful, too, because you never had any contact with what lies beneath the surface. In calmer societies, bits and pieces break through; you kind of feel there's something else there. But we're being conditioned to living a shallow existence. You walk into a café and all the machines are turned on; nobody's talking to each other. It happens all the time. There's a lot of fear there, which is why a lot of people don't go to sleep unless the television or radio set is on in the background. They're afraid of hearing that inner voice. It may be asking, "What are you doing? Where are you going?" A lot of people "have it all," but they "can't get no satisfaction," as the Rolling Stones said.

RW: Right. So let me get a little bit of your own story. You clearly know a lot and you've been teaching.

SG: I don't know about my knowledge. All I know is that before I met Lax, I felt that things should ideally be simple. I mean, these days people can easily become degree conscious and put their PhD or MD in front of their names, but basically, it's your name itself that means everything. It's like Thomas Merton wrote: "What I wear is pants. What I do is live. How I pray is breathe." That's after he met Lax, and that's pretty much how I've tried to operate as I've matured. But having met Lax myself, it was like a confirmation of that.

RW: Okay. Let's go back. Somehow you ended up with a PhD in Religion and Art.

SG: Somehow, yes.

RW: And a PhD is not an easy thing to get. So let's go back to high school, or even earlier. What sort of things pointed you toward the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, for instance?

SG: Well, I started writing poetry when I was nine or ten. My first poem was put in a collection of kids' poetry. It was kind of a crazy poem, "My Experience in Hell"—perhaps motivated by a strong religious upbringing. I'm Eastern Orthodox, which isn't a hellish journey by any means. It's just that you absorb a lot of images and symbols and if you have a creative mind, a lot of these things come alive and influence one's creative output. And shortly after that poem, I wrote "Blue Paradise," a poem about the beauty of the sea, and the calm expanse of it.

From early on, I've been attracted to oceanic settings. I've always lived in San Francisco, only five minutes from the beach. It was a calm place to go. And living so close to the ocean, I feel the rhythms and the waves, and all that becomes part of your psyche.

RW: Would you say something more about your background in the Eastern Orthodox church?

SG: The Eastern Orthodox tradition emphasizes the apophatic, which essentially means the mystery of the Divine, whereas, the Western Christian tradition has always had more of an emphasis on how God is accessible to human reason.

RW: And apophatic also means what can't be spoken.

SG: With Christianity you think of the incarnation of Jesus, but nobody knows the mind of God, or what God is entirely about. So there's always the mystery to pursue. In Eastern Orthodoxy, there's a concept called theosis, which means becoming more and more like God. But that's an infinite journey; it's an ongoing process.

I think there are possibilities of transcendence in every living moment. Putting yourself in an environment like the beach, where you feel more and more awakened, can help. I think life is a series of awakenings. In mystical Christianity, that awakening may begin as a newborn baby. That's the first conscious step towards a more mystical appreciation of life. And in Buddhism, it's not just your physical birth, but your existence with the community, your existence with a greater cosmos, all of which is a conditioning ground for a more Zen-like awakening that can happen in a series of ways, much like theosis can.

RW: Awakening is becoming present to what is, wouldn't you say?

SG: To what is, right.

RW: So with Robert Lax, when he says in a poem, "This bread is bread. This wine is wine." someone might say, "Boy, what a lame statement." But if one were really present to the reality of bread as bread and wine as wine—it's just a completely different level.

SG: Like with a lot of Lax's words, there's the surface level, and there are the more metaphysical levels. You also become aware that Lax wrote in terms of what words can sound like: "this bread" sounds like His bread, too; "this wine," His wine. And to go further, "these hands, our hands," not just a-r-e. So again, the words take on different levels. A famous art historian, R.C. Kenedy, did a critique of this poem and said, "This is the finest poem ever written about the Eucharist."

RW: In a book by Chogyam Trungpa, Shambhala, a Tibetan word, drala, is mentioned. It refers to seeing something as it is. The curtain of thought, reaction and association, which is ever present between us and things, just drops away and suddenly one experiences directly. Trungpa says drala has tones of the sacred or divine. I feel this applies to Robert Lax somehow.

SG: That's wonderful! I don't think I've ever heard anyone talking about drala with Robert Lax. There's definitely something there. I actually met him in that kind of way. If you meet somebody who has been practicing that kind of a drala-existence for decades, the question just automatically surfaces: "Who is this?"

I remember when I met him, thinking that I'd never met anybody who was more authentic. He really had the most real presence of what it means to be completely human, and this in a very gentle, articulate, creative, spiritual, loving, giving way. With so many he met he opened a path. That's something powerful.

RW: Why don't you tell the story of how you met him? It's a great story.

SG: Okay. Back in the '90s, I had a very bad year. I'd broken up with my girlfriend. There was some sickness in the family, and I needed to find myself. The question was, where do I go? What am I going to be doing? And I decided to head off to Greece; being of Greek

ancestry, I thought it would be a good place to go. On Patmos, there's an Eastern Orthodox monastery called the Monastery of Saint John. I'd made friends with a monk there through this little book I'd written on Saint Augustine, on the manifestation of light in Augustine's life and work.

Through letters he said that if I should ever feel moved, I should visit Patmos, become a part of the island, visit the monastery, and see what's up. I knew that Patmos was a place of revelation; it's where John wrote the book of Revelation. So I went. But my contact monk had gone to Istanbul, where the Patriarch—the head of the Eastern Orthodox Church—was. So I was staying in a guest house until he came back.

One evening I was walking along the beach just thinking about things, and still feeling quite disturbed, when I met this young Greek at the dock. He was waiting to take a ferry back to Athens. We got into a conversation. He asked me what I did and so on and when he learned I was a teacher and into poetry and the arts he said, "You should meet this fellow up in the hills, his name is Pax."

I thought, "Wow. I came out here to Patmos to get a sense of peace and to find myself again, and I'm being directed to a guy here called Pax!" (in Latin, pax means peace.) I thought, "This is awesome! I'm going to go find this man." And I asked, "Where do I go?"

He pointed, "Head in that direction up that mountain. He has the last house up that way."

I asked, "When should I go?"

He said, "You might want to go now."

It was about 9 or 10pm, and I said, "You mean right now?"

He told me to go, then boarded the ferry. That was it. I thought, "Okay. I'm going to go." Now these are tight, winding streets. So as I was going up, I kept asking people, "Is there a guy living nearby called Pax?"

A lady said, "Do you want the poet?" She gave me better directions and I found the house. I knocked, but nobody answered. I was thinking maybe it was a made-up story, who knows? And I started to walk away when I heard a voice, "Who are you?"

"My name's Steve."

"Are you a reporter?"

I said, "No. I was told to come find you by this guy at the dock."

Then the door opened a little. It was a windy night, and as the door opened more, the wind pressed the screen against his face. I had an impression of looking at the Shroud of Turin.

He said, "You look a little tired. Why don't you come in?"

So I followed him inside. His house was dark. There was a little light on his desk and then he turned around. I mean, I was blown away by what I saw. He was narrow-faced, tallish and with his white hair and beard, he looked a bit like Gandalf, in Lord of the Rings.

I took a seat at a table and we had a talk. By that point, I knew the guy was not like anybody I'd ever met. And with the little desk light on, there were these shadows playing on his face—chiaroscuro, as they say in Italian. So that's how I met Lax.

That night he never said anything about himself, except that he was a poet, and his name was Bob. Later he mentioned he was a friend of Merton's. I didn't even know who Thomas Merton was at that time, and didn't bother to find out until I was back in the States. When I came across The Seven Storey Mountain, I looked in the index, and there was Robert Lax.

We walked often during the month or so after that initial encounter and talked about spirituality and other things. It became the basis for future visits. I considered him to be a natural-born sage and went back to Patmos several summers just to be with him and talk with him.

RW: So your impression of him came without any preconceptions.

SG: No. He was just a poet.

RW: His quality was what it was, and you felt it.

SG: Right. It was, like you said—bread, bread, wine, wine. I mean, when he handled things, you really felt their essence. How to say it?—it was like there was a lifespan to the things he held, there was a reality to them that went back to some kind of primeval energy.

I mean, if I had an iPhone back in those days, I might have tried to Google him from the shoreline. I might have learned a lot about him without ever having to ask any questions. But there would have been no space for the unknown—the mystery that can result in deeper realizations. It would have been much more cut and dry with far less magic going on.

I think Lax, in a way, knew that, too. He would say, “During the day, I’ll be doing my writing and the things I have to do, but we’ll meet in the evenings.” And during the day, I’d just hang out at the beach, eagerly anticipating those meetings. I also went to the monastery sometimes, but I found my meetings with Lax more interesting. God praise the monastery; it’s a beautiful, prayerful place, but it just made more sense to be with Lax.

So I stayed outside and did my reverie, my praying and dreaming on the shoreline. Then at dusk, I would meet him at the dock. I’d hear his staff before he came into view. I had my duffel bag and I always parked myself in a certain area near the Arion café, and just waited for him. Then he’d come with his big, bright, blue eyes and ancient staff, with tassel cords dangling from his hat and ask, “Well, are you ready? Do you have a plan?”

Everything he said had a metaphysical level—do you know what I mean? And I thought, “Yes. I’m ready. Let’s go.”

So, we’d walk to the pier and along the water. He had the gift of making what was “inside” a reflection of what was “outside.” We had this tandem thing going on. I kind of knew what he was saying, but he wasn’t actually saying it; and yet little by little, I was learning about it. That’s where only one word might mean everything, particularly in how he said it.

With Bob there was a tactile sense to everything because he saw how life is holy, just in being what it is. And if you can awaken to that, you’ve gone back to the Garden of Eden; you’ve gone back to Shambhala, the paradise realm.

That’s our whole destiny in the first place—not to live in a nine-to-five skyscraper world, but to be on the “cosmic shoreline” contributing to the tending of all creation. He knew that; his poetry speaks of that, and he offered avenues of growth toward that, no matter who you were. He had friends who were Buddhist, Hindu, Christian and everything else. He realized that in the mystery of the Divine, many paths open. God works in mysterious ways.

Yesterday I was outside and found this plastic orange circle that simply said, “Wonder” on it. So I put it on my front doorstep because it was emblematic of higher living. Lax offered that transcendence, and that’s why I had to go back again and again, just to walk and talk with him. He became the subject of my dissertation over at the GTU. It was the first one written about him.

RW: I love how you described the way he would pick up an object and handle it, and how it became a real thing in his hands.

SG: It was a once-in-a-lifetime event, in a way.

RW: There’s something magical about that. I’ve heard that description applied to Shunryu Suzuki—the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center—that around him you could feel the

reality of things.

SG: Right.

RW: It's something we rarely have in ordinary life.

SG: It's like you're saying—with these spiritual masters; they're able to pick up even a stone and it's like all the instruments of the orchestra are tuning up to that note. Right?

If you have a mind open enough to perceive this, or are humble enough to perceive it, all of what's going on in the world is operating at a higher level of resonance. It's almost like you're holding up a chalice. So to some degree, this is how people can be stewards of creation. In the great spiritual traditions, people are called to help others understand this, that all things are holy.

On our walks, we'd visit people who were sick, enter their homes. He'd put a chair by their bed, lean back and breathe his way into their existence. And I say that because the word for breath and spirit in Hebrew is essentially the same. In that coming together—even in the most difficult times, like when somebody is ill—Lax had the ability to make people feel better. He brought good things into a room that was full of pain and despair. And by doing that good, he made you want to do good, too. That was something of the magic of him. I mean, just in his sitting by a person's bed and breathing his wonder and joy out toward that individual, he made things different. He offered that avenue of transcendence for someone who couldn't move beyond his or her own bed.

Bob wasn't just caught up in his own metaphysics; he made a daily point of entering into the world. Yes he had his little house on top of the hill, but he always came down to talk with people and to be with them like a true rabbi or teacher. Then he'd go back up the hill and gather more of that energy, and then bring it down again. To some degree it parallels what Patmos was about, too.

Patmos has a big monastery on top. People go there to pray, center themselves—no matter what faith they are. They feel something powerful there, and then come back down again. It's like what we're all called to do, to enter our own inner dimension and come back with gifts to share with others. Over at the GTU one of the buildings has these words on it: "Enter, Seek, Find, Go Forth, and Give." That's the whole mission of life, really.

RW: You're bringing this to life in a beautiful way and I feel Robert Lax in your descriptions.

SG: Well, he had a lot of disciples—or friends, as you might call them. Sure, he knew that he had these things—disciples, a hermitage, wisdom, but he didn't like inflated words. He never promoted himself. He'd bring books, articles, old editions of things down to the dock and sit there next to you and open something up. And it would be like a genesis.

RW: That's just so wonderful, someone who has the capacity to do that.

SG: Right. And then there was the cloth bag he always carried when we took a walk. It might sound self-centered, but during one of our summer wrap-ups, I asked him, "Hey, can I have one of those bags?"

"Sure," he said, "You can have this one," an old bag made of denim.

And I still have it, all beaten up. His father was a clothier and so he knew about the value of clothes. But a lot of what he had was given to him. Basically, he lived on people's generosity. I might see him wearing a pair of bright blue Alaskan canner pants and a Chinese-looking hat with tassel cords. He favored things that were rough-cut and spoke of life-immersion.

RW: In your book, it's said that Lax didn't worry about getting recognition. He gave himself over to allowing something else to take care of such things. I was touched by that.

SG: Yes. I don't think he wrote to be recognized. There's a funny story about him when he was at the New Yorker. One of the editors next to his office was quite well-known. And he kept hearing Lax banging away on his typewriter. He started thinking, "This guy is going to become the next genius, and here I am with writer's block!"

But it was Lax who also had writer's block. He was just banging away on his typewriter in nonsensical fashion, thinking it might help. I suspect he had writer's block because he was in the concrete jungle. But getting back to what you're were saying, he didn't want to get involved in that self-promotional world. He saw how people's psyches could be entirely changed by it. He said, "If I just trust in my gift and the Source from which it came, then everything somehow will be okay."

Along the way, Lax's writings gradually made it into print. People might find his poems in magazines or published by very small presses. Beginning in the 1980s, Pendo Press in Zurich published numerous English-German bilingual editions featuring his poems and journals. Only in the 1990s did anthologies of his poetry emerge. Interestingly, some readers somehow felt guided to his work.

RW: It's curious that in his college years, he was friends with a bunch of people who did become very well-known. Do you think he knew Ginsberg and Kerouac?

SG: Yes, he knew about that circle of writers. Ginsberg and he had some correspondence. He was also a kind of mentor to the young Jack Kerouac.

RW: I associate Columbia University with Daisetsu Suzuki and I wonder if Lax knew Suzuki? I think Kerouac and Ginsberg took courses from him.

SG: He knew about him, partly because Merton and Lax exchanged letters since college.

RW: Now there was an amazing episode in Lax's life where he joined a circus. Could you talk a little about that?

SG: It was a circus in Western Canada. He learned to be a juggler and he also filled in as a clown.

RW: So he was actually performing.

SG: Yes. He had a lot of performance artists surrounding him and saw how play, prayer, poetry, drama—well, it's all about human expression, which could have kind of a divine quality and/or direction to it as well. I believe he met the Circus Cristiani as part of a writing assignment. That's interesting, too, the name "Cristiani" being "Christ-like," and God being like a great ringmaster. Everything revolves around the Divine, and in many ways, circus performances are kind of doing that. We're all like acrobats, in a way, or clowns, or whatever we are; we're all important characters in this great orchestration of what life is about.

RW: This grand circus.

SG: Grand circus, right. In a way, Patmos was like that, too, with the towering monastery in the island's center, and all the participants—monks, fishermen, farmers, shopkeepers—all circling the sun, or the Son.

Lax's first great poem is Circus of the Sun, published in 1959 by Journeyman Press, a fine example of his pre-minimalist contemplative style. Everything is revolving around the sun, or higher consciousness, and we're all called to participate. There's also Mogador's Book, which is based on an acrobat he met in his circus days, a wise, beautiful man.

Bob writes of how when circus performers do their acts—just like when poets write poetry, or musicians play music—the important thing is, as he wrote in Circus of the Sun, "It is like a wind that surrounds me, a dark cloud, and I am in it, and it belongs to me, and gives me the power to do these things." And that's the magic spirit-space that people can feel with heart-feeling, through acts of love, really, which makes everything go in the first place.

I'm teaching world religions over at SF City College, and we arrange the chairs in a circle. One of my students brings bagels in for everybody and it's perfect because the most important part of a bagel is what? That mystical nothing in the center. It gives definition to what we can tangibly move toward—that mysterious emptiness that holds up everything.

RW: That gets back to Lax's poem about the emptiness that can be like a fountain.

SG: It is, if you are truly awake, receptive.

RW: It sounds like a negative thing, "empty," but I think something like this is in all the mystical traditions.

SG: Exactly. They say in the East that what is empty is actually full, because it is on the "empty space" that everything depends. It's like what Lax writes in one of his Circus poems. He's saying we subtract and subtract until nothing is left that we can subtract from. That's the foundation of all things; it is the fountain.

In one poem he's talking to his friend Mogador, the circus performer, about talking. "It was good," Mogador said, "to talk thus. Whatever is withheld is lost. Whatever we give away, whatever we throw away, what we disburden ourselves of, is profit to us. We keep giving things away, throwing them out like old chairs out of a house. Keep destroying, until we can destroy no more, because what is left is indestructible."

In our busy society, nobody is pointing to this, and people can go mad from its lack because they find no space in which to live or dream.

RW: I think people are not aware of what they're despairing the lack of and I suspect there's a lot of hidden despair.

SG: Indeed.

RW: But if something of that deeper possibility is glimpsed one recognizes instantly, "This is what I want."

SG: Right.

RW: It's interesting to think about what you might have missed if you'd Googled Robert Lax before you met him.

SG: Yes. The way it happened—I just had to go back and talk to him more because, Why did I feel these things? Why was the room resonating? Here was a man eighty years old and yet it felt like he was a child with the open smile and bright eyes, the laugh and a grace beyond what you can prepare for.

Merton used to say, “become like a chip on the water and the waters take you where you go.” There’s a whole art in getting that chip to float down the river. Nobody can make that happen; it happens because you trust in something greater, you put yourself in concert with a bigger symphony and give it your all. Increasingly, wherever Lax went as he got older, he simply said, in effect, “God will provide. Let go, let God.”

When the young Lax was in Marseilles the first time, he saw that the area around the docks where he was living was full of bums. It wasn’t like Paris. But years later, he decided to return to Marseilles to face his earlier uneasiness and fears. He got a place in a down and out area and invited street people to live with him in a very cramped space. So he was walking his talk.

RW: What a gift that you met Lax. And you felt something that compelled you to see him more often.

SG: Yes, I came back to Patmos numerous summers to be with him.

RW: Switching gears a little, I’d like to ask you to talk about your Augustine book. Was that your first book?

SG: Actually, it was based on my M.A. thesis; I developed it into a book.

RW: Okay. What was the idea there?

SG: Well, I was drawn to Augustine from reading his Confessions. I was moved because of his eloquence and yet down-to-earth descriptions of a struggling soul. Of course, his being a playboy before becoming a man of God was also interesting.

I saw, as I was reading, how there’s a journey of light in the book that drew from both pagan and Christian traditions—his father was pagan, his mother, Christian. Early on there were Greek philosophical and Neoplatonic influences. And there were many biblical images of light, symbolic of the divine. So I tried to follow Augustine’s growth in terms of light, particularly light in a dark age, when the late Roman Empire was in decline. It was called an “Age of Anxiety.” Things were falling apart and in metaphysical fashion he was trying to liberate himself from that. That’s what I remember from that book just now; it’s been a while.

And in terms of the Christian perspective, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world.” There’s something resurrecting about that. I mean, I’ve had many a dark night of the soul, and then, when the light comes—even just ordinary sunlight—you really feel that there’s a way out.

RW: Some time ago I was thinking about the earth as it was before there was life on the planet, and the sun out there 93 million miles away radiating light across that vast distance. And now here we are with trees, plants, animals, insects—life on earth. It was the sun’s radiation across empty space that created life. Suddenly I felt something of the mystery of that, and it just blew my mind.

SG: It sounds like when things are in sync, everything is traveling at the speed of spiritual photosynthesis.

RW: I like the sound of that!

SG: Yes, everything is called to spiritually photosynthesize. Things are called to wake up and see the light, and to work with it together, because nothing, nobody can do it alone.

In his journals, Lax liked to talk about going to the ocean, to the shoreline where he

would think about his friends. Essentially, something higher was generated there, something created together. We have to go back to that place, that unknown space, and give honor to each other, he would say.

In one of his poetic reflections, he writes, "I remember the people I loved who have died, or have just disappeared, remember their traits as though it were a sacred duty. What possible use for all those memories unless we are somehow to meet again?"

We really don't know why things happen in life or how it's all come together. I think one of our great challenges is to work our way through the dark nights, and wake up to the spiritual energy which is around us. When we let unnecessary things go, meaning our egos, inhibitions and fears, when we just wake up, once we're there, we'll consciously participate in something greater.

Lax used to tell me, "All that metaphysical stuff is cool, but when you end up getting into a dark night, what do you do then? You go out and you give a bowl of soup to somebody. Forget about the other stuff. Just go out and give someone a bowl of soup."