

Learning to Re-Lax

Jennifer Harford

On one of my first few days in Patmos (in June of 1995), I accompanied Lax on one of his errands. I think he had already picked up fresh fish for the cats – they would jump from his roof down to his kitchen window at all hours of the day and night. We went together to a very small, general-goods shop – a one room shop with shelves stocked with lots of little bits of everything: steel wool, bleach, ammonia, canned food, maybe even olives in barrels. It was more of a closet than a market. Two or three customers, along with the gray-haired couple who owned and managed the store, made positively a crowd.

Lax, sensitive as he was to crowds and to any sort of hustle and bustle, pointed out to me that there were some people in the shop, and so we should wait outside. I had never done anything like this before. We waited outside the shop, away from the window so as not to call attention to ourselves, for every customer to leave. I feel that I should add that it was clear that we waited outside not because Lax avoided crowds, which he largely did, but out of kindness and respect to others and particularly to the shop owners. They were a kind couple, they could not possibly serve everyone at once, and why rush and put our needs in front of them when they couldn't help us anyway? What possible good would be accomplished by our rushing? Lax got all this across to me without words.

After what seemed to me to be an interminably long time, we slowly (Lax always moved slowly, and maybe others would disagree with me, but I would say he moved with a gentle hesitant intentionality, as if he had time to ponder where he was going and this is where it seemed to him that he was meant to go next) entered the shop and were instantly greeted by tender smiles. We picked some items, bought them, and then Lax took out of his bag some clean, empty plastic containers. The wife of the husband-wife shop-owner-team then placed some filled plastic containers in Lax's bag. People loved to give Lax food. And off we went, in a slow, hesitant yet intentional style, up a few narrow alleys to Lax's home.

The next part of this story is not so much a story of Lax but a story of Lax's impact on me. I was lucky enough to have five weeks on Patmos. I had no real agenda, so I certainly had no reason to rush. I thought I would try to behave like Lax for at least an hour to see if I could pull it off. Now I love feta cheese and hard salami and there was a store that Lax told me had the best in town. It was a large store, as close to an American market as any on Patmos, having shopping carts and aisles as well as a separate counter for salami and cheese in the rear. I couldn't wait for everyone to leave the market, but I could walk hesitantly to the counter, as Bob would have done. No service people were there, so I just waited. They were busy serving other customers, stocking shelves, or just weren't nearby. I waited for 5 minutes, or so it seemed, and no one noticed me. Eventually a woman came in; she was French, and she waited a minute or two, and then shouted for assistance. (If she were from the United States, she probably wouldn't have waited a minute or two.) She was promptly served. Then a man walked in, who didn't notice me, and was served. Then I was served.

The next day, I did the same thing. I slowly walked to the cheese and salami counter and waited. Eventually another customer came to the counter, drew attention to himself and was waited on. Then I was served. I found it was fun to shop daily, just pick up what I needed that particular afternoon and evening. So the next day, I again went to the store, waited by the counter, and, when I finally was noticed, I was served.

The fourth day, I found that as I walked into the store, one of the employees or owners of the store immediately saw me, walked to the cheese and salami counter before I even got there, and served me right away. On the fifth and sixth day, it was pretty much exactly the same. I was greeted with a warm “yasoo” and served very quickly. I felt that as I showed Lax’s patience – goodness knows I didn’t think I could claim it as my own – I was rewarded with a kind of love. When I would see the shopkeepers on the street (sometimes they would be on motorcycles, of which Lax did not approve, but that’s another story) they would always wave and shout sounds of cheer. (I didn’t know Greek, so I had to figure out the meaning by their happy inflections.)

I am sorry to confess that I did not manage to keep up this patient style when I returned to the States. But just recently, after Lax’s funeral, I was in a Kinko’s. Here is a place where everyone is in a rush to use a computer, get photocopies of large documents in time for a deadline, etc. I decided to wait on the side for the hustle and bustle to clear. I was a little worried that no one would ever notice me. But eventually a very harried gentleman smiled at me and said that he wished all customers were like me and he helped me right away.

Jennifer Harford, a fundraiser for The Agnes Irwin School in Rosemont, PA, knew Robert Lax from her childhood. She is coordinating a project to gather recollections of Lax and can be contacted at Laxstoryproject@aol.com.