

Gibran was diagnosed with cancer in his late forties, he asked Juliet to visit him every day. He wept out his sadness and grief on her shoulder until he died at age 49.

Stanwood Cobb: "Un original"

But let me turn now to Stanwood Cobb (b. 1881), formerly of Chevy Chase, Maryland. Although Stanwood's books are no longer widely read in the Bahá'í community, he was a prolific writer, innovative teacher and international lecturer. He has well earned his place, if somewhat neglected, in the annals of Bahá'í history. I first came across Stanwood's name in our family library. There I discovered a few of his books, including *Islamic Contributions to Civilization* (1963), which gives a readable, economical overview of the contributions of Islam to world culture and civilization. [See [bahai-library.com/author/Stanwood Cobb.](http://bahai-library.com/author/Stanwood%20Cobb)]

Stanwood was a living illustration of what the French call "un original." With the possible exception of the flamboyant and dramatic Ali Kuli Khan, one of my aunt Ruth Halsted Kern's teachers, the personalities of the Middle-Eastern Bahá'ís seemed to fade into evanescence at the very mention of `Abdu'l-Bahá's name. By contrast, `Abdu'l-Bahá's effect on the early western believers was such that they generally stand out as individual personalities, a characteristic mark of their culture. There were not a few eccentrics among them. But if Stanwood Cobb was eccentric, he was not markedly so. I have since come to the conclusion, after having met some of these great souls in my younger days, that the perceived eccentricity of some of the early western friends meant rather that `Abdu'l-Bahá had been instrumental in helping them to discover, in Dr. Daniel Jordan's phrase, their `true self.' He changed them in indelible ways.

Although he was first and foremost a Bahá'í, Stanwood reached out to the non-Bahá'í world. He lived and moved in parallel universes. In 1919, he became one of the founders and later President of the Progressive Education Association, an organization devoted to the reform of elementary education in America. In 1940, an academic named Reuben R. Palm wrote an 8 page article called "The Origins of Progressive Education" which was reprinted in a recent issue of *The Elementary School Journal*, published at the University of Chicago Press. It mentioned Stanwood Cobb. Stanwood also founded other literary and philosophical associations including the Cosmos Club.

Stanwood studied at Dartmouth College where he had been chosen Valedictorian in 1905. He did post-graduate work at Harvard Divinity School, studying the history and philosophy of religion. He was preparing for ministry in the Unitarian Church when he became a confirmed Bahá'í in a matter of a few hours, under a tree at the Green Acre Fellowship, responding to the call of two other luminaries, Miss Sarah Farmer, the spiritual mother and creator of Green Acre (1894), a centre she established for the study of comparative religion and progressive ideas and movements, and Mary Lucas, "the woman in white," who had recently returned from `Abdu'l-Bahá's presence, who was then a prisoner in

Akká (Acco). Like so many other chosen ones of that age, Stanwood was in a state of spiritual readiness because he had come to the independent conclusion that for the creation of a new world order, someone with more than human authority must appear.

Meeting Stanwood Cobb

I first met Stanwood Cobb at Beaulac summer and winter school, a property north of Montreal in the beautiful Laurentian Hills, not far from Rowdon, Quebec. I was about 14 years old; Stanwood would have been about 72. (Circa 1959). When, years later, I paid him a visit at his cottage at the Green Acre Centre near Eliot, Maine in the summer of 1977, he had reached the advanced old age of 96, but he was to live on for a few more years. Although he was somewhat frail by 1977, Dr. Cobb was still in reasonably good health, a condition that had been produced, not only by robust genes, but also by his life-long regimen of good hygiene, a program that included deep-breathing, meditation, dietary practices and exercise.

Beaulac had once been owned by the National Spiritual of the Bahá'ís of Canada but it was subsequently sold. It consisted of a two-storey farm house, a barn that had been converted into a rustic lecture hall for larger meetings — it always retained the lingering odour of the cattle barn — cabins on both sides of the highway, a small lake, and acres of rolling hills. It was at lunch that I met Stanwood. He sat opposite. Time has not dimmed the memory of this colourful character. He was showing a faint growth of beard and, as I recall, unlike photos of his later years, he was not wearing glasses, perhaps because he was returning from his morning swim.

His first piece of advice was dietary: "You should never eat until you feel completely full," he said, speaking matter-of-factly. "If you feel full, you have eaten too much. Always leave a little room." Stanwood practiced what he preached. After donning his black swimming trunks, he would head down to the lake for a daily swim. One day I stood on the shore and watched him. I recall seeing the strong head visibly still above the surface of the water. As I recall, he did not swim vigorously but movement was the key to his exercise philosophy. His body was strong and solid, and even in his senior years, his muscles were toned.

Memories of `Abdu'l-Bahá: The Joy of Life

It was during his lectures in the barn that he first spoke of `Abdu'l-Bahá, whom he had met on five occasions: twice in Akká in 1909 and 1910, later in Boston (1912), then in Washington (1912) and finally in Paris (1913). It was later at Green Acre, in old age, that he would give me his more personal impressions. But during his barn lectures, Stanwood related some of the stories that were published in his memoir "Memories of `Abdu'l-Bahá." However, the following observation was not found there. "Abdu'l-Bahá," said Dr. Cobb, "was unlike the other spiritual leaders who came to Green Acre in this respect: He had a wonderful sense of humour and laughed out loud. It is this joy and zest for living that distinguished the Master from the other spiritual teachers

there. They were much too serious. `Abdu'l-Bahá fully embraced the joy of life and encouraged his followers to do the same."

It was at Beaulac that Stanwood told the story of how his father — "a venerable Boston artist 75 years of age," a devoutly religious man — much to Cobb's shock and horror, began to lecture the Master on the personal spiritual philosophy that was the fruitage of his mature years. There must have been something of the preacher in Mr. Cobb senior because Stanwood's memoir says that his father, for no less than half an hour, "proceeded to lay down the law to `Abdu'l-Bahá." But on this, as on other occasions, the younger Cobb witnessed `Abdu'l-Bahá's graciousness and silent wisdom. In an unforgettable lesson, informed by infinite courtesy and humility, the Master listened patiently to the preachment, smiling all the while, "enveloping us with His love." The unfailing wisdom of `Abdu'l-Bahá had correctly divined that Mr. Cobb Senior needed to empty his cup. Stanwood's father came away from his encounter with `Abdu'l-Bahá fully satisfied this wonderful interview!

The Divine Healing: Cured From Depression

The most gripping of Stanwood's anecdotes was the divine healing. But the printed version of his memoir differs slightly from his table talk at Beaulac. At Beaulac, Stanwood intimated that it was from a "suicidal depression" that he had been cured by `Abdu'l-Bahá. His memoir says that "I had been slowly recovering in previous years from a nervous depression due to overwork at Dartmouth." This depression was not just a case of "the blues"; it was clinical. He wrote: "At times I would feel so depressed that I should have been glad to have found a hole in the ground, crawled into it, and pulled the hole in after me. I understood at such times, the Hindu craving for extinction." Stanwood's table talk also revealed another factor that is not found in his memoir, although it is hinted at there. He told us that because he was a Bahá'í, his life had been threatened by some of the Muslim students whom he taught at Robert College in Istanbul. They must have been a fierce lot, not unlike the Muslim extremists of our time, for some of them were carrying "knives and revolvers." Returning to the school, where he was still employed, must have seemed a fearful prospect. In any case, this is the account of the healing taken from his memoir, an anecdote which he also told at Beaulac:

"`Abdu'l-Bahá came into my room one morning without His translator. He sat beside me and took one of my hands in both of His and held it for a minute or two. He had not at any time inquired as to my health. He knew. From that moment on I found myself permanently relieved of these depressive moods. No matter how hard the going, I have always since then been glad to be alive."

In his oral account at Beaulac, Stanwood related that `Abdu'l-Bahá had looked directly into his eyes. When after his Akká pilgrimage he returned to Robert College, the divine magic of `Abdu'l-Bahá had worked its wonders: "As for my disciplinary troubles at the college," he wrote, "they vanished like mist which the sunshine dispels." His pupils "loved me again and more than ever."

The Venerable Stanwood Shares His Latter View of `Abdu'l-Bahá

Some 18 years were to pass before I would meet Stanwood again. In 1977, when our children were small, we decided to attend the Green Acre Summer School. Forever blessed by the presence of `Abdu'l-Bahá, Green Acre is a veritable "who's who" of the Apostolic and early Formative Ages of the Bahá'í Faith. An impressive, vast company of teachers, scholars, writers, and Hands of the Cause have passed through; several have lived and taught there. When I heard that Stanwood was living in a cottage on the property, I determined to visit him, desiring the privilege of being in the company again of one who had known the unique "Mystery of God." One afternoon, I made my way down to the cottage. Stanwood was sitting on the porch; a young attendant sat nearby. We exchanged greetings. I sat down and the conversation was engaged. I recalled to him our first meeting at Beaulac. Then I came to my central question: "Stanwood," I inquired, "now that you have reached this ripe old age, and when you look down the long vista of the years, what is it that comes now to your mind about `Abdu'l-Bahá?" There was a brief moment of silence. Suddenly the atmosphere changed and the air became charged with emotion. "Well, if I told you what I really thought," he exclaimed, "you would find it reprehensible!"

I asked for a clarification. "Well," he replied, "if `Abdu'l-Bahá had not specifically denied being a prophet, as far as I was concerned, He was. He moved with the ease of a king, was as free as a bird, and did just as He pleased." He said that if `Abdu'l-Bahá wanted to visit a home in Eliot, He just rang the door-bell and waked in. I encapsulated Cobb's views about the Master in my book *Dimensions in Spirituality* (1994):

"But what Cobb perceived in `Abdu'l-Bahá was a kingly freedom and majestic power which indicated to him that `Abdu'l-Bahá was master of His fate in a way that no ordinary man was and possessed a freedom and a power that Cobb could only associate with what we might call a prophet."

Such was the lasting impression produced by `Abdu'l-Bahá. But it was no ordinary impression. It was a divine encounter that forever changed the soul.

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