

A Portrait of William Stoddart

By Nuno Marques de Almeida

A friend was embarking on a trekking pilgrimage to the Nepalese Himalayas and he intended to pack light. The newly arrived package from World Wisdom's Book Club contained a set of short essays by a prominent living exponent of the perennial philosophy, William Stoddart, which had been put together under the title *"Remembering in a World of Forgetting—Thoughts on Tradition and Postmodernism"*. Stoddart's writings are well-known for their clarity, synthesis and directness, and this book, slightly over a hundred pages, seemed suitable reading for the trip. The beauty of the sacred mountains, so my friend enthusiastically reported upon returning, was enlivened by Stoddart's "light" book.

That same friend and I were autodidacts in the perennial philosophy. At that time, we used a blog to compile materials produced by the "perennialist school of thought", including translated extracts of writings by perennialist/traditional authors, short biographies of these authors and reviews of their books. And so it was that Stoddart's *"Remembering in a World of Forgetting"* was reviewed in that blog. One of the Brazilian editors of that book, Mateus Soares de Azevedo, sent a note of appreciation for the review, and shortly thereafter, he had the opportunity to visit Lisbon. We were glad to meet and talk to a Portuguese-speaking author of the perennialist school. That meeting in Lisbon marked the beginning of a fruitful interchange with the editor and the author of the "light" book. And it is now my great privilege to be counted amongst William Stoddart's many correspondents and regular visitors.

My first personal encounter with Stoddart was at the Windsor railway station in Ontario. Stoddart awaited my wife and me at the railway station,

greeting us with a firm welcome handshake combined with a gentle quality in his speech and manner. He drove us from the railway station in his multi-decade-old car into his newly-built prominent waterfront apartment. It offered beautiful views of a garden by the banks of the Detroit river that mark the international border between Canada and the United States. This attractive setting has since become a frequent destination of pilgrimage for my wife and me, and it is a meeting point for the various admirers of Stoddart's sharp insights and illuminating commentaries on various themes—insights and commentaries which uncompromisingly reflect the underlying perspective of the *philosophia perennis* or the *religio perennis*, as magisterially expressed by the metaphysician and spiritual mentor of Stoddart, Frithjof Schuon.

The true perennial philosopher fashions all aspects in life according to a sacred sensibility, including the dwelling-place, as my wife and I would realize upon entering Stoddart's apartment for the first time. It radiated the same simplicity and clarity that was evident in his own writings. Upon entering his home, one proceeded through a large corridor which Stoddart had dedicated to the world of the native "Red Indian". One could see a few small statues of Hindu deities in one area of the home, and in another a delicate flower arrangement and carefully selected Far Eastern artifacts, most of which formed a fascinating "Japanese corner". The beige carpet matched the light-colored wooden furniture and everything was enveloped in the peaceful perfume of Islamic art and of Shinto. A few paintings by perennialist artists were soberly mounted on white walls. And finally, crowning this harmonious equilibrium of traditional forms was an altar disclosing a magnificent Romanesque statue of the Blessed Virgin. It was glorified by the light flooding through the living room from wide windows. Something alchemical and profoundly transformative in that room offered the sense of a saving barque, as though one had been saved from the modern world of "forgetting"—a sinking ship with neither rudder nor compass—and had entered the traditional temple of "remembering" - where one was to find the Truth already inscribed in the sanctuary of one's heart.

Finally, our host was sitting before us in his wooden sofa, a mug of coffee at his side. Discussions were to commence, and I had a list of topics for debate and a myriad of questions. Enthusiastically, queries were put forward, one after another, barely leaving Stoddart time to

“recover” in between responses. Several hours magically passed, and I had not even given my gracious host the opportunity to drink his coffee, which he had to repeatedly reheat, so intent were my questions! Those first talks with Stoddart left a deep impression on me, not least for his gentle patience and generosity.

It was customary for Stoddart’s responses to begin with the phrase “*Frithjof Schuon says...*” or “*Schuon once told me...*” This was often accompanied by a quote or brief elaboration of an idea from Schuon’s writings. Those gemlike nuggets of wisdom could nourish the “spiritual imagination” of the attentive listener for months or years, and potentially sustain one during an entire lifespan.

The clarity and power of Stoddart’s elucidations would sometimes strike one’s soul like lightning from heaven, or like a lucid ray of Truth casting away the shadows of doubt or error. Stoddart’s formulations and quotations from Schuon were like seeds to be watered by our constant reading and prayer. Stoddart’s indebtedness to Schuon was evident from his frequent counsel to his friends: “*read and re-read the writings of Schuon*”; “*apart from prayer, there is no better activity*”. I quote from memory: “*all that I write or say which is good or is of any worth, comes from Schuon*”.

There are many, like me, who can testify to Stoddart’s talents as an educator. Adjacent to the wooden sofa where he was accustomed to sit was a small portable bookstand with various files of different colors. The files are truly an inexhaustible treasure, containing invaluable philosophical charts, metaphysical diagrams, definitions, correspondences and other admirable one-page summaries highlighting intellectual and spiritual realities—an aggregation of simplicity, intellectual density and spiritual depth. Whenever these would crop up to illustrate a certain point of interest, they would inevitably intensify and bring the ongoing debate to a higher pitch, or to a deeper lever.

Among the files, one can find not only metaphysical explanations and a comprehensive diversity of useful information, but also humorous teaching stories and wise sayings to nourish, sustain and entertain even the most tedious audience. One can also find the perennialist guidelines for homeschooling, a precious didactic tool initially developed with loving dedication for the children of Stoddart’s close friends, but which could be invaluable to detoxify the souls of adults or young adults overexposed

to non-traditional schooling and ‘modern’ university programs.

Despite his impeccably organized library located in one of the corridors of the apartment (and, for lack of further space, also on the top shelves of the kitchen and storage closets), Stoddart was never “bookish” in his approach. Instead, the point of departure for many conversations would come from his files or from his archives containing a remarkable selection of photographs, postcards and news cuttings pertaining to subjects ranging across world history, cultures, ethnicities, languages, religions, arts and even wildlife. The whole world seemed to be stowed in his luminous apartment!

Amongst the archives, one could for example find a didactic series of “Books of Animals”. Stoddart could convey the universal law of compassion by simply pointing to a photograph with a tiny dog standing happily next to a very large one, and saying something like: “*see, the weak need not always fear the strong*”. Or he could draw one’s attention to a charming photograph of a row of baby ducklings following their devoted mother and use that to refute Darwin’s theory of evolution: “*there you can see the fundamental ‘stability’ of species*”! Of Darwin, Marx, Freud, Jung, and Teilhard de Chardin, he would comment: “*only the insights of ‘perennialism’ are sufficient to serve as an antidote to such poisons*”.

Stoddart’s files and archives span the many decades of his close association with Schuon and reflect a lifetime’s experience of his interaction with serious seekers.

It is a true honor, and I am immensely grateful, to be counted among those who have been touched, and are still being inspired, by William Stoddart’s lifelong dedication to building intellectual and spiritual bridges to the realization of Truth, Prayer and Beauty, across generations, cultural backgrounds and upbringings.