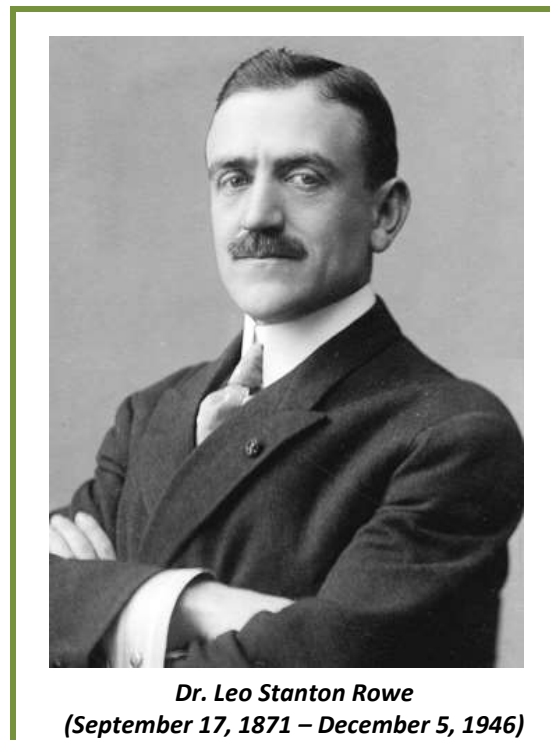


IS IT DESTINY OR COINCIDENCE?

Throughout time and across different cultures, whether we realize it or not, each one of us has experienced synchronicity. These are the experiences that reveal the secret order of events that appear to be coincidence but that work in the universe like invisible threads connecting events, people, or information that we can only glimpse momentarily and only if we pay enough attention.

During my first trip as an employee of the Organization of American States, the “OAS”, I had the great privilege to meet Dr. Gabriel Betancur Mejía. The Pan-American Association of Student Loan Programs (APICE) had summoned the nineteenth seminar titled “*Interchange and Cooperation with Canada*” which was held in Ontario in May of 2001. Two other representatives of the OAS attended the seminar, one of them was an Ambassador and President of the Rowe Fund Committee and the other was the Director of the Scholarship program.

I had recently begun to work for the OAS Rowe Fund program. The Fund was established in 1948 through the final will and testament of Dr. Leo Stanton Rowe¹, whose aim was to help finance studies or research at universities in the United States of students from Latin American and Caribbean OAS member states by granting interest-free loans. 2018 marks the Rowe Fund’s 70th year of proudly fulfilling Dr. Rowe’s vision to invest in highly qualified individuals, capable of applying the benefit of their training for the development of their countries!



The first day of the seminar I was introduced to Dr. Betancur who kindly paid me a compliment. Having recently turned 83, Dr. Betancur was a jovial and kind man, with a face that reflected great serenity and attentiveness. Almost immediately, Dr. Betancur said to me that he had known Dr. Leo Stanton Rowe. I became very curious given that little has been written about Dr. Rowe’s life². Despite being an important figure in the history of the United States with very

¹ The Fund was established in 1948 pursuant to a testamentary clause dated April 27, 1943, the same date of Dr. Betancur’s birthday anniversary.

² Besides a few articles published after Dr. Rowe’s death on December 5, 1946, little has been written about his life. He was the Director of the Pan-American Union for 26 years, member of the United States Inter-American delegation and

progressive ideas for the time, Dr. Rowe was a humble and reserved person. He served as Director General of the Pan-American Union (precursor to the OAS) from 1920 until his death in 1946 and contributed to the advancement of Pan-Americanism and the furthering of cooperation, solidarity, peace, and mutual assistance among the 21 countries that made up the Pan-American Union, always defending the principle of non-interventionism. Dr. Rowe always demonstrated special interest in youth education, which he helped during his life and became a great part of his legacy in his will.

Dr. Betancur also had a great sense of humor. When he found out that I was Antioqueña and had completed undergraduate studies at the Universidad de Antioquía he livened up and told me stories of his childhood, adding that “*we Antioqueños*” are very entrepreneurial. Although he was born in Bogotá, Dr. Betancur comes from an Antioqueña family. His father died in 1932, when he was only 14 years old, and he was sent to Medellín to live with his aunt and uncle. Dr. Betancur finished his secondary education and later he studied philosophy and liberal arts at the Universidad de Antioquia. His dream was to study abroad, which was – and to a lesser extent continues to be – a privilege of very few.



Dr. Gabriel Betancur Mejía
(April 27, 1918 - March 23, 2002)

Dr. Rowe graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and with a scholarship from the same university; he graduated as a Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Halle, Germany in 1893. Before becoming the Director General of the Pan-American Union, Dr. Rowe occupied various posts with the government of the United States related to Latin American affairs and he traveled – at the time by boat which took months – to various Latin American countries, receiving honors and recognition from universities across the continent.

Once named Director of the Pan-American Union, Dr. Rowe continued to live in his apartment and customarily walked to work, even though his position offered him a house with a chauffeur and more. At the same time, Dr. Rowe capped his salary to \$5,000 (about \$55,000 dollars in today’s money) in spite of the members of the council of the Pan-American Union wanting to raise his salary. In 1926, the members of the council agreed to considerably increase Dr. Rowe’s salary. The additional income would be held in a special account just for Dr. Rowe to use at his own discretion, without the need for the approval of the member States. From that moment on, Dr. Rowe used part of the money to give loans to Latin American youth that were studying in universities in the United States. At the same time, Dr. Rowe lent money to employees who had some type of emergency or who wanted to continue studying. Dr. Rowe was characterized by his sensibility, tolerance, and ability to recognize the achievements of his colleagues.

congresses for the advancement of science and professor at several universities in the United States, the University of Chile, and the National University of La Plata in Argentina.

After dinner, and in the company of Dr. Jorge Tellez, director of APICE³, Dr. Betancur told the story of how, once accepted at Syracuse University in New York, he requested a meeting with Don Cipriano Restrepo Jaramillo, manager of the Colombian Tobacco Company in order to finance his studies abroad. Dr. Betancur asked Don Cipriano to grant him \$1,000 -not as a gift but as a loan and as a guarantee Dr. Betancur would offer his future. This encounter gave rise to the creation of ICETEX (The Colombian Institute of Educational Credit and Technical Studies Abroad).

Dr. Betancur traveled to Syracuse in September 1942 and finished a Masters in Economics in 1944 and subsequently in Public Administration in 1945. His Graduate thesis was entitled “*Project for the Creation of the Colombian Institute for Advanced Training Abroad.*” In the preparation of the thesis, he traveled many times to Washington DC between 1944 and 1946. The young Betancur was around twenty-six years old at the time. Dr. Betancur received help from an advisor who guided him to search for materials and references in the Library of Congress⁴. Dr. Betancur’s inquisitive spirit and an ardent desire to fulfill the promise that he had made to Dean William D. Mosher, to put in practice his thesis upon returning to Colombia, led him to meet Dr. Leo S. Rowe, who at the time was around seventy five years old and working as a Director General of the Pan American Union. Dr. Betancur met with Dr. Rowe on several occasions and gave him a draft of his thesis receiving feedback from Dr. Rowe before presenting it to the School of Public Administration at Syracuse University in New York.

Mr. Betancur alluded that the exchange of ideas between him and Dr. Rowe was frequent and could have possibly influenced Dr. Rowe to refine his Will that eventually led to the creation of the Leo S. Rowe Pan-American Fund.

This encounter with Dr. Gabriel Betancur, considered the father of student loan programs, remains unforgettable in my memory. It is evident that both honorable men had a legitimate desire to help advance humanity, overcome the differences that separate countries, and strengthen the common good through education and research without borders.

This article was written by Lina Sevillano, employee of the Secretary General of the Organization of American States (GS/OAS) on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Rowe Fund program and the 100 birthday anniversary of Dr. Gabriel Betancur. The opinions expressed in this article are of the author and should not be attributed to the GS/OAS or the Organization of American States.

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³ The Pan-American Association of Student Loan Programs

⁴ Reyes, Carlos J. “*Gabriel Betancur Mejía, an educator with a world vision*” 2008. The book does not indicate who was the advisor helping Dr. Betancur find material and references at the Library of Congress.