Reflection: Standing on the Shoulders of Others

When I was appointed editor of this journal in 1999, I little dreamed how fulfilling it would be personally and professionally. Over the years it has been my delight to work with scores of authors—many working earnestly to achieve their first scholarly publication and many others furthering their seasoned records as scholars. Throughout this time I have realized in deeply satisfying ways the key reason I accepted the appointment as editor—to work with other Christian scholars who were intentional in their efforts to promote, enhance, and extend the expression and practice of Christian scholarship. In addition, I have been privileged to work with dozens of wonderful associate editors and referees—those people who do the hard work of vetting and evaluating manuscripts. Perhaps most rewarding are the friendships I have forged with CSR publisher, David Hoekema at Calvin College, and CSR managing editor, Todd Steen at Hope College.

As I reflect back over my years as editor, I am reminded of an obvious yet nonetheless important truth—we all owe much to those who have gone before us. As the writer of Hebrews puts it, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Accordingly in this first of three reflections, I think back to those persons who have prodded, inspired, provoked, and pushed me to be where I am today. When I muse about my own cloud of witnesses, I picture them as the “giants” upon whose shoulders I now stand. The idea of standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before us comes from the twelfth century and the words of Bernard of Chartres. In 1159, John of Salisbury wrote that

Bernard of Chartres used to compare us to [puny] dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants. He pointed out that we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature.

For sixteen years Don W. King has served as the Editor of the Christian Scholar’s Review. In the first of three short reflections as he completes his service to CSR effective May 1, 2015, he muses on an obvious but nonetheless important truth—all of us owe much to those who have gone before us. Mr. King is Professor of English at Montreat College.
In the seventeenth century Isaac Newton restated this in a letter to a friend: “If I have seen further it is by standing on [the] shoulders of giants.” In yet another expression of this idea the English two-pound coin has “standing on the shoulders of giants” inscribed on the edge of the coin.

Our everyday language is filled with analogies and metaphors alluding to shoulders. People who are facing a hard challenge are told to “square their shoulders” or “shoulder the load” or “put their shoulders to the wheel.” People working on a common goal are told to “stand shoulder to shoulder” or “shoulder arms” or “lend a shoulder.” People who are trying to aid others are described as “lifting up others on their shoulders” or “offering a shoulder to cry on.” Friendly or gregarious people are ones who like to “rub shoulders” with others. Sarcastic or ironic people make “over the shoulder” remarks. Pushy, nosey people “shoulder in on others.” Uncertain people “shrug their shoulders.” Superstitious people “throw salt over their shoulders.” Insensitive people “turn a cold shoulder” to the cares of others. Proud or arrogant people have a “chip on their shoulders.” Intense or driven people “shoulder aside” anyone getting in their way. Blunt, honest people “shoot straight from the shoulders.” Drivers sometimes see roadside warning signs about “soft shoulders” or “low shoulders.” Surfers catching waves try to get to the “shoulder” of the wave so they can do their acrobatics. Sports heroes, after a tremendous victory or accomplishment, are “hoisted on the shoulders of their admirers” and paraded across the field or court. Admirable people “stand head and shoulders above” everyone else. Sympathetic people have “soft shoulders.” A bright young person is said to have “an old head on young shoulders.” Wise people “have a good head on their shoulders.” Someone who is incapable of bearing criticism is said to be “narrow in the shoulders.” And standing behind someone at an ATM and trying to steal their password or pin number is called “shoulder surfing.”

Why this incredible appearance of the word “shoulder” in so many everyday analogies? One clue might be that the shoulder is the most mobile joint in the human body. Think, for instance, of all the things we do every day made only possible by our shoulder joints. Perhaps we have all these sayings about shoulders because so much of our everyday experience relies on having strong, flexible, and steady shoulders. So the analogy of standing on the shoulders of the giants who have gone before us intuitively strikes us as familiar. Each of us can immediately call to mind those persons in our lives whose shoulders we stand on. For many

1Hebrews 12:1-2: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”


of us this includes parents, coaches, pastors, close friends, favorite teachers or professors, faculty mentors, department heads, deans, scholars, and writers. As we reflect back upon our lives, we know we would not be where we are today were it not for those “giants.” They hoisted us on their shoulders and opened our dwarfish visions to new vistas of promise, possibility, and potential. They have had much to do with who we are today.

In terms of my service as editor of CSR, my predecessors as editors have been giants upon whose shoulders I stand: George Brushaber (1970-79), Clifton Orlebeke (1979-85), William Hasker (1985-94), and Roger Olson (1994-99). I owe much to these scholars and believe my editorial experience has been deeply informed by the expertise and excellence that each brought to the table.

Regarding my personal life, like many others I count my mother as the greatest giant in my life. Not only did she birth me and raise me, she put up with a hard-headed, hell-bent-for-leather, insolent, arrogant, selfish, cocky, and insensitive teenage man-child. How many times I broke her heart I am ashamed to admit. Yet through all that she did one simple thing: she loved me unconditionally. And she loved many others unconditionally. I think the greatest example of this occurred when her sister-in-law, a strong healthy women in her fifties, developed early onset Alzheimer’s disease. For over ten years my mother faithfully helped her brother nurse my aunt through a very slow and extended diminishing of her physical health and eventual death. I do not know that I ever said anything to my mother about how my watching of her compassionate, unconditional love toward my aunt powerfully affected me, but in my mother’s love I saw what is still today for me the best example of the Gospel I have ever witnessed.

Concerning my life as a scholar, the most significant giant in my life is someone I never met, although I have spent a career teaching and writing about him: C. S. Lewis. In September 1970 I was a sophomore at Virginia Tech. The Beatles were still hot, my favorite band was the Doors, and the first great rock out, Woodstock, was still fresh in my mind (although I will not pretend that I am one of the ten million or so who claim to have been there). At the time I was not planning to become a teacher of literature nor was I a Christian. But later that fall I went through a conversion experience and, serendipitously, I shifted my major from civil engineering to literature (I realized I would never be willing to drive over a bridge I had engineered). I really liked my English professors. They were very bright, they were very good teachers, and it was obvious they loved literature. In fact, most of them tended to treat literature as something holy; literary studies for them verged on religious devotion. At the same time they divorced literary study from any sense of divine truth and meaning. Literature may have been holy, but for them it had no direct connection to God.

I found that quite frustrating because I longed for them to help me make connections between literary studies and my faith. On the one hand, there was my love of literature, including the beauty of the way words sound, the power of metaphor, the complexity and subtleties of language, the orderliness and beauty
of literary forms (poetry, drama, fiction), and especially the tender, poignant portrayal of the human condition, including the possibility of discovering truth and meaning, the redemptive nature of human love, and the destructive force of human selfishness, pride, and deception. On the other hand there was my embryonic faith and the things I was learning about Christianity, including the creation, the fall, my own patterns of sinful living and thinking, and redemption. My love for literature and my emerging love for Christ swirled together, and I longed to meld them into a coherent framework; regrettably—but not surprisingly since I was attending a large state-supported university—my literature professors could not help me think christianly about literature.

 Providentially, I began to encounter literary critics who helped me do this—chief among them was Lewis, a writer I had known previously only as the author of The Chronicles of Narnia. As a young believer and new English major, I was looking forward to a course on John Milton that featured an extended study of Paradise Lost. I had heard Paradise Lost was a distinctively “Christian” piece of literature, so I was looking forward to a rich literary experience, assuming that perhaps it would be informed by Milton’s Christian experience. In that I was not disappointed. Yet what equally excited me was that I found Lewis there before me. A required supplemental text in the course was Lewis’s little masterpiece, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*. I still marvel at Lewis’s insights throughout the book, including this one: “The Satan in Milton enables him to draw the character well just as the Satan in us enables us to receive it.”

There is a depth of literary and spiritual insight throughout Lewis’s *Preface* rarely equaled elsewhere. Moreover, Lewis’s scholarship modeled for me perhaps the best example of faith and learning integration that I have ever encountered (not that Lewis would have used such terms). And inevitably Lewis became the most important literary giant in my life.

I conclude this reflection with something of a challenge. As I have suggested, all of us stand on the shoulders of giants. We owe much to those who have gone before and led us personally, professionally, and intellectually. However, now we must recognize that we are the shoulders others are standing on. How will we go about living as giants for our own cloud of witnesses? I do not have a simple list of dos and don’ts. There are no seven steps to gianthood. Life has a way of throwing hundreds of wrenches into even the best of plans. But this I will say. We should be persons of faith. Our greatest giant is the Lord Jesus Christ. We stand on His shoulders, and we should be the shoulders of faith others want to stand on. We should be persons of integrity. We should do what we know we should do, in spite of what it might cost us. We should be the shoulders that all of those we interact with will want to stand upon because of our integrity. When all others are falling away, we should be the giant that stands firm. We should be persons of love and compassion. Love unconditionally. Love when it hurts. Love in spite of. Such love will be costly and inevitably will bring pain. I like the way Lewis puts it:

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[To love unconditionally] is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside of Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and [risks] of love is Hell.5

We should offer our own cloud of witnesses a soft shoulder, not a cold shoulder. We should rub shoulders with people, not shoulder them aside. We should lend a shoulder, square our shoulders, put our shoulder to the wheel, and offer a shoulder to cry on. If we can do these things, we will have run with perseverance the race marked out for us.