EDITORIAL

Standing Upon the Shoulders of Many Others

Upon whose shoulders do you stand as a scholar, professor, and/or practitioner of religious education? What events in your life, in religious and educational institutions, and in the world, have exercised a determinative influence on the work that you do? Were there decisive turning points in your journey, perhaps times of encountering a certain idea or conceptual framework that gave shape to your subsequent practice? Has your mind changed in some important ways across your career? Are there regrets about a path not taken, a dream denied? What do you hope your legacy will be?

Last year I asked some members of this journal’s editorial board to suggest names of senior scholars of religious education whose responses to such questions they would like to hear (or, in this case, to read). This issue of Religious Education represents the result of that query. Nine senior scholars agreed to write about their lives and how their particular paths of scholarship took shape. Part memoir, part intellectual life map, these essays offer fascinating glimpses into the experiences, generative ideas, and careers of just a few of the people upon whose shoulders so many of us stand.

Each essay bears the distinctive marks of its author, not only in the life-events described, but in the diverse ways of going about the task of writing a retrospective piece involving self-disclosure, temporal perspective taking, and even some self- and career-assessment. To a person, the authors acknowledged finding this kind of writing to be challenging. At the same time, they also said things like: “It was a real privilege to write this paper.” “I found the exercise of writing this forum piece both difficult and exhilarating!” “Taking the time to think through these questions was a very integrative experience for me.” “This was a labor of love… Thanks for the opportunity.”

Such responses underscore yet again the importance of narrative in human lives, and the value in taking the time to construct and share our stories with others. Not only does it help authors make sense of their own journeys, but sharing stories of personal and professional paths with others also allows story tellers to be known in some new ways by those who receive their narrative gifts. The significance of this mutual narrative benefit is borne out in every place I have taught, as students continually express a desire to know their teachers as people, in a tacit recognition that who we are, where we come from, how we teach, and what we think about all are intimately tied together. In this vein, deeper understandings of a scholar’s teachings may find special support in greater knowledge of the story of the person who teaches.

Through the narratives offered here, we get a little more of the “back story” surrounding how these colleagues came to work on key issues defining their contributions to religious education. They name pivotal events and social forces, such as racism and the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, Vatican II, immigration, World War II, and struggles against gender inequality. Not surprisingly, each of the essay writers also makes a point of identifying the people and contributions of those on whose shoulders they stand. Most begin with families or early schooling experiences, telling stories of parents, teachers, and others who nurtured a certain consciousness toward the world. They go on to describe other religious educators and practical theologians who, later in their lives, become important contributors to their
stories. Mary Elizabeth Moore cites Maria Harris’s importance to her professional development especially in a time of fewer women professors in the academy. Charles Foster names Ethel Johnson and Joseph Crockett as decisive figures in his work on race and culture, along with Ellis Nelson who posed a critical question early in a graduate school course that continues to haunt him. Jack Seymour is among several of our essay writers for whom Lawrence Cremin’s focus on public education and education’s transformational power became central. Peter Gilmour cites Philip Phenix’s interplay between secular and sacred as crucial in his journey. Elizabeth Caldwell, practices initially modeled by her educator-mother found reinforcement and expansion in the teaching of Hulda Niebuhr. Hanan Alexander identifies multiple philosophical forbearers, culminating in Emmanuel Levinas, as grounding his notion of humanism in “dialogue within and among communities” rather than in either extreme of ideological uniformity or individualism. Thomas Groome names a quartet of influential figures in his graduate education that include Ellis Nelson, Beverly Harrison, Dwayne E. Huebner, and Philip Phenix. Anne Streaty Wimberly credits pastor and theologian Thomas Hoyt, Jr. with underscoring her emphasis on testimony, while also naming Jack Seymour and Donald Miller as influential in her liberationist directions. Wenh-In Ng speaks of Henry Simmons and Charles Foster, as well as the influences of Kwok Pui Lan, Chun Hyung Kyung, and Letty M. Russell among many others, on her work as an Asian North American scholar and teacher. In these pages, then, senior scholars write about themselves but none claim to be self-authored. The image coming to mind as I look at the webs of influence represented in their stories is something like “Ancestry.com” for religious education! It might be an interesting exercise for the rest of us to construct our intellectual genograms, mapping out these influences across three or more generations of scholarly influences!

In the Philippines, where I briefly lived and taught many years ago, there is an expression in Tagalog, utang na loob, which is often translated as a “debt of gratitude.” The phrase means more than simply being indebted to another and thankful for what they have done. It goes deeper, expressing the indelible bond that comes to exist between people when one has received the help, favor, or grace of another. Each author in this issue names scholars, teachers, and others with whom they have just such a bond. In turn, I owe a debt of gratitude to each of these writers, not only for the ways their many contributions to the field of religious education set in motion what we continue to do as a field, but also for responding to the invitation to share their stories. What amazing shoulders we all stand upon!

Note
1. Ancestry.com is a genealogy research website and company located in the United States.

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