

Letters to the editor

Standing on the shoulders of giants—Isaac Newton? Bernard of Chartres? Priscian!

We discovered quite recently *The Pharos*, surely a unique journal, and we particularly enjoyed the editorial in the Spring 2011 issue “On the Shoulders of Giants” (p. 1). The aphorism “on the shoulders of giants” (OTSOG) is known throughout the world: in the United Kingdom and the United States it is attributed to Newton, in Italy and in France to Bernard of Chartres. Robert K. Merton traced back the several misattributions of the aphorism (e.g., to Bernard of Chartres, to the mysterious Didascus Stella, to Lucan’s Pharsalia, to the Gospel of Luke, etc).¹ However, there is no doubt that Bernard of Chartres did indeed stand on the shoulders of Priscian, a Latin grammarian born in Cesarea in Mauritania, who taught Latin in Constantinople in the sixth century. OTSOG was well known in the Middle Ages. The stained glass of the south transept of the thirteenth-century Chartres Cathedral shows, indeed, the four major prophets of the Hebrew Bible (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel) as gigantic figures, with the four New Testament evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) as ordinary-size people sitting on their shoulders. The evangelists, though smaller, “see more” than the huge prophets (since they saw the Messiah about whom the prophets spoke). Apostles on the shoulders of the prophets

can be found also in the tenth-century church of Payerne in Vaud Canton in Switzerland.

The OTSOG aphorism has been used by poets including Coleridge, by writers such as Eco, by physicists including Hawking, by politicians such as Disraeli, Bukharin, and several United States presidents (Reagan used it in his 1981 Inaugural Address and in his 1987 State of Union Message).

This short tale suggests that to “be worthy to serve the suffering,” physicians should practice according to the standard of their profession, but never cease to verify the source of their knowledge.

References

1. Merton RK. On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean postscript. The Post-Italianate Edition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; 1993.

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Re Mentoring and coaching in medicine

I enjoyed your editorial on “Mentoring and Coaching in Medicine” in the Winter 2012 issue of *The Pharos* (pp. 1–3). This topic is of great relevance in helping health care

providers make it through the many stages of a medical career. As an activity, mentoring needs more participants and devoted effort. Your piece is especially helpful. After stating the importance of teaching, mentoring, and coaching, you giving a good list of tips for good mentoring and suggestions for working with a mentee are insightful. But also important are things the mentee can do in return to show appreciation and to keep the interaction appropriate.

I have an interest in mentoring, especially in trying to attract and assist medical trainees who might be considering a research component to their career, and who need help with beginning to apply for research support.^{1,2} I certainly benefited from this help in my own medical career.

In my piece that appeared in *The Pharos* in Summer 2007, a motive was to “encourage others who may have special expertise in mentoring to expand on my comments about the best ways . . .” You have done this and, hopefully, more colleagues will follow. Thanks.

References

1. Reynolds HY. Mentoring: Nurturing clinician and physician scientists in an academic career. *The Pharos* Summer 2007; 70: 26–28.
2. Reynolds HY. In choosing a research health career, mentoring is essential. *Lung* 2008; 186: 1–6.

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