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## **“On the Shoulders of Giants” by Dr Nick Tate**

The twelfth-century St Bernard of Chartres is quoted as saying that men and women of the present day are like dwarves sitting on the shoulders of giants. Our ability to see and understand the world depends on the achievements of those who have gone before us.

St Bernard's saying has fascinated generations of thinkers. It can be found in the writings of people as diverse as St Thomas of Aquinas, Isaac Newton, Thomas Merton and Umberto Eco, to name but a few. It is, of course, a statement about education. At its most obvious it means that we are who we are because of all those who have gone before us: not just the great thinkers and creators – the Shakespeares, Racines, Spinozas, Einsteins and Rembrandts - but also all those who have developed to the highest level their practical skills or their sense of what it is to live a life that is honourable, just and fulfilled. The core of education therefore involves the transmission from one generation to another of a living tradition, a set of values, an inherited culture.

There is an ongoing tension, however, in modern education between the wish to transmit what the nineteenth-century English writer Matthew Arnold described as ‘the best that has been known and thought’ and the wish to allow young people to explore the world and create it afresh. If we veer too far one way we are liable to end up with what the great critic George Steiner calls, dismissively, ‘the planned amnesia’ of modern Western education in which students are so busy finding out for themselves and being encouraged to feel and to opine that they end up with views about everything and knowledge about nothing. If we veer too far the other way we end up with cramming inert facts down students’ throats that bear little or no relation to the reality of their everyday lives and that turn them off ‘high culture’ for life.

The metaphor of dwarves and giants of course helps one here. Even though we *are* dwarves, if we stay on the shoulders of the giants and don't get off (because if we did we would just be dwarves and see nothing), we have the ability to see further than those who have gone before us, to go beyond what our predecessors have accomplished, to challenge the world we have inherited. This of course is what we want an education to achieve: to encourage our young

people to be innovative, to reject the tired ways of thinking that they have inherited and that surround them, to study their Racines and Rembrandts but to turn into Kafkas and Picassos.

All this is very well, says Umberto Eco, the great contemporary Italian novelist, but what if the dwarves of the present day – that is you and me and our children - are sitting not on the shoulders of giants but on the shoulders of other dwarves? This is Umberto Eco's way of lambasting the mass media of our day which, he feels, promote the lowest common denominator in cultural taste, encourages a depressing cultural and moral relativism, and induces us to accept an unexamined lazy set of assumptions that are the antidote to all creative thought.

If Umberto Eco is right the first duty of educators therefore, whether teachers or parents, is to seek out the shoulders of giants and avoid the shoulders of dwarves. But before they can get young people to sit on the right shoulders teachers and parents need to sit on them themselves.

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