

In over my head: Learning from Lance Armstrong

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [September 6, 2005](#) issue

Here is Lance Armstrong, reflecting on the day he learned he had testicular cancer: “Athletes don’t tend to think of themselves as human. They’re too busy cultivating the aura of invincibility to admit to being fearful, weak, defenseless, vulnerable or fallible; and for that reason, neither are they especially kind, considerate, merciful, benign, lenient or forgiving to themselves or anyone around them. But as I sat in my house alone on that first night, it was humbling to be scared. More than that, it was humanizing.”

When I was six and seven, I pictured myself as an invincible pitcher on his way to the major leagues. In the zone marked by chalk on our front stoop, I threw hundreds of perfect strikes, just the way my hero Bobby Feller would have. But then there would be a pick-up game like all the others: I’d be posted in right field where there were fewer fly balls for me to drop. I quickly learned to admit, “I am in over my head.”

In college I mastered every tennis stroke in practice and sometimes won a first-round match against another incompetent. That meant advancing to the next round and competing against a varsity player, who would end our match mercifully quickly by serving only aces. At divinity school faculty retreats, the theologian Langdon Gilkey, ex-Harvard varsity player, quickly took care of us fearful, weak, defenseless opponents. As his first serve ached by, my mental response, now almost a mantra, was, “I am in over my head.”

Langdon rescued me after the first graduate class I ever taught, at age 35. I could not answer when a student (later a colleague—Anthony Yu) asked about the difference between a Jacobin and a Jacobite. Both terms were in the textbook. I blushed and thought: “I am in over my head!”

As for athletics, I have not lost my interest in participating from the sidelines, and this fall I’ll be speaking at the International Conference on Sport and Religion at St.

Olaf College. Fortunately for the conferees and unfortunately for my nerves, I realize that conceptually and rhetorically in this company and on this topic, "I am in over my head."

It was consoling to read Armstrong's advice on how to be humanized. Having heard many of the great preachers of our day as well as some who are thought of as great because they exude "the aura of invincibility," I preach this: "Don't trust any preacher who does not give evidence that, during preparation or delivery, the thought came to him or her, 'I am in over my head.'" The good sermonizer will deliver a message that reflects what Armstrong learned and confessed: "It was humbling to be scared. More than that, it was humanizing."

People used to send this column church bulletins with typographical errors. Sometimes the error involved the inversion of *a* and *c* so that *sacred* appeared as *scared*. The two still belong together.