

Technically Speaking

Derek Schuurman

Remembering
Theo Plantinga

On a cold evening in late January, a group of people gathered in a warm classroom at Redeemer University College to celebrate the life and work of Theodore Plantinga, a professor who passed away in 2008. The evening included a book launch, a *Festschrift* of writings in Theo's honour. The project was launched by one of his former students. Members of his family, students, colleagues, friends and pastors were all in attendance.

Redeemer was a fitting place for the event to be held, to remember one of its founding faculty members and author of *Rationale for a Christian College*, a 1980 manifesto on the establishment of a Christian college in Ontario.

I began working full-time at Redeemer in 2003 and got to know Theo as a colleague. It became clear that we shared a common interest in computers, and so began a mutually beneficial relationship where he taught me some philosophy and I answered his questions on computers. In fact, Theo was among the first at Redeemer to adopt computer technology, and the first prof to put his lectures online. Some of his writings can still be found at plantinga.ca, which includes his writings on Reformational history (readers interested in technology may wish to read Theo's article entitled "Technology and Verzuiling" at plantinga.ca/m/MDL.HTM). His writings also included books, translations, and articles for a range of Reformed publications like *Christian Courier*, *Christian Renewal* and *The Outlook*.

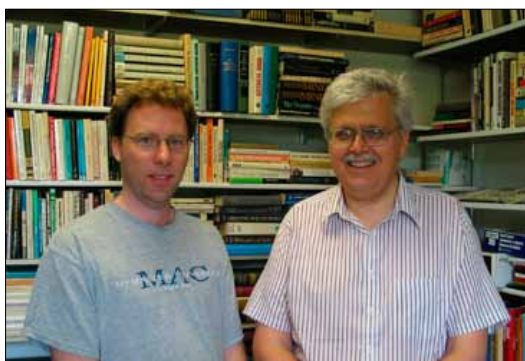
As I got to know Theo, I observed that he could sometimes be a "provocateur"; he would ask challenging questions that sometimes took you aback. He was also infamous for his loud ties, which I think were selected to evoke a similar response. Since his passing, Redeemer instituted a "Theo Tie Day" in which people playfully compete to wear the most outlandish tie. As a vegetarian he often teased me about not eating enough vegetables (something I still struggle with). I think he enjoyed throwing intellectual curve balls, and he could do it well because he was very well read and articulate. Not everyone appreciated his style, but I usually saw the twinkle in his eye. Ideas were his playground.

The unique 'yours truly'

I found Theo very encouraging and gracious. He always said hello in the halls and we would often chat together. I think he was an example of the best of inter-disciplinary interaction in a liberal arts and science college. He willingly came when invited to speak in my computer issues class and I returned the favour. Theo and I also collaborated on a few faculty colloquia, one of which was playfully titled "Free Software and the Free University: What Would Kuyper Say?" He often encouraged me to write and think more about the philosophy of technology and he generously read some of my initial attempts to write on this topic (while I was still "in my literary underwear," as he put it). He would give me books, send me occasional links to interesting articles, or suggest that I read something because "someone in your field should be familiar with this topic or with the writings of so-and-so." Although I didn't always agree with him on everything, Theo grew to be a mentor and a friend.

In time, Theo openly shared with me things about his life – and later about his struggles and declining health as he battled cancer. A few weeks before he died, I asked Theo whether the reality of facing one's mortality changes your academic view of things. He said yes; for example, he recalled how he used to lecture about how our society is afraid of pain and how it anesthetizes itself too much. His own experience of managing the pain brought on by cancer gave him a different perspective on this, and he confessed he would teach that topic differently now.

It's not quite the same at Redeemer without "yours truly" – a phrase Theo often used to refer to himself. I am thankful for the opportunity I had to know Theo, with all



Schuurman visiting Plantinga's book-filled office at Redeemer.

his idiosyncrasies and shortcomings. I learned many things from him, and many of us have benefited from the pioneering role he played in helping establish Redeemer University College. ✂

Editor's note: The next issue of Christian Courier will include more about January's Festschrift for Theo Plantinga, as well as a review of the book of essays in his honour.

Dr. Derek Schuurman (dschuur@csredeemer.ca) teaches computer science at Redeemer University College and was a colleague of the late Theodore Plantinga.