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A teacher's life lives on not only in the words they left, but in the living example of their lives. In giving thanks for one teacher, we give thanks for all whose words and examples live on—in and through us.

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## Introduction to This Issue

# A Teacher's Life Lives On: Remembering Vitor Westhelle

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The day before his death from cancer on May 13, 2018, Vitor Westhelle was typing emails to his PhD advisees from his hospital bed. Although he was constantly writing and publishing, the labor of accompanying students through their examinations and dissertations, engaging with students in the classroom, and listening to students' struggles and hopes was at the heart of his theological calling. During the twenty-five years he served as professor of systematic theology at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (1993-2018), students from around the world came to Chicago to study with Vitor (as his colleagues and many of his students called him, at his invitation). Originally from Brazil, he spent significant time traveling, teaching, and lecturing in international contexts, especially at the Faculdades EST in São Leopoldo where he began his theological studies in 1977 and served as professor of systematic theology and ethics from 1989-1992.<sup>1</sup> He was keenly interested in the various global contexts that

shape theological inquiry and speech; helping students engage in theology that addresses their own contexts and struggles shaped his teaching and advising.

A world-renown scholar who wrote scholarly publications in several languages and published six major books in the decade between 2006-2016,<sup>2</sup> Vitor seemed happiest when he was celebrating his former *students'* publications. *Their* success was his aim as a teacher, and he rejoiced over every publication that his former students sent to him, with their gratitude for his influence on their work and guidance in helping them assert what *they* desired to express: theology in the key of their own *home contexts*.

A mark of the way Vitor inspired confidence as well as gratitude is the way that his students ventured into the publishing

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mark, and Brazil, as honorary professor of theology at the University of Aarhus and as professor of systematic theology and Chair of Luther Research at the Escola Superior de Teologia.

2. *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (2006), *Word in Words Musings on the Gospel* (2009), *The Church Event: Call and Challenge of a Church Protestant First Edition* (2010), *After Heresy: Colonial Practices and Post-Colonial Theologies* (2010), *Eschatology and Space: The Lost Dimension in Theology Past and Present* (2012), and *Transfiguring Luther: The Planetary Promise of Luther's Theology* (2016).

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1. Vitor Westhelle has served as visiting professor at the University of Natal, South Africa; the University of Aarhus, Denmark; the Gurukul Theological College and Research Institute, India; the Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos (UNISINOS), Brazil; ISEDET, Argentina. From 2010-16 he split the year between Chicago, Den-

world to express appreciation for their teacher. *Word in Words* came into being because two of Vítor's PhD students, Neal Anthony and Philip K. Mathai, together with a friend, Dagny Boland, compiled and edited the sermons (preached from 1983–2008) and offered them “as a token of our sincere gratitude for instilling in us the longing to study and preach the Word of God, and (in the hope that) the sermons [would] be a source of inspiration and encouragement to its readers as [they have] been for us.”<sup>3</sup> In 2013, in celebration of his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, Mary Philip and John Arthur Nunes invited nineteen colleagues to write essays in his honor, which became *Churrasco: A Theological Feast in Honor of Vítor Westhelle. Liberating Luther: A Lutheran Theology from Latin America*, Robert A. Butterfield's translation of Vítor's essays in Portuguese, is scheduled to be released in April. Ten representatives from each of the theological institutions at which Vítor studied and later served as a teaching theologian (The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and The Facultades EST in São Leopoldo, Brazil) are collaborating on a book in his honor to be released later in 2021.

Thus, when we planned this issue of *Currents* in thanksgiving for the life of Vítor Westhelle, we recognized how many scholars, from LSTC and around the world, have already contributed or are in process of contributing essays that express gratitude for and built on his theological work. What meaningful contribution to these efforts might *Currents* make? Many months ago, during a conversation with faculty colleagues about this question, an LSTC colleague offered a suggestion we found compelling: invite some current students, who are in the process of completing the work they began with Vítor, to submit essays for this memorial issue. We decided that nothing would please Vítor more.

The Westhelle Commemoration Section of this April issue of *Currents* contains six essays, written from a variety of cultural contexts and perspectives. The first four essays explore different ways that Vítor Westhelle influenced the theological work of PhD students who came to LSTC purposefully to study with Vítor and whose opportunity to complete their doctoral studies with him was cut painfully short by his death. The fifth essay was composed by a 2020 MDiv graduate of LSTC. The culminating essay in this section is both a deeply personal and deeply theological essay written by a colleague who explores his own journey with cancer in the light of Vítor's theology. Two additional essays, described below, are included in the Focus Essay Section of this issue.

### Westhelle Commemoration Section

“Hope in the Key of Chōra” is a modified excerpt, used with permission, from a forthcoming book by 2020 PhD graduate **Thomas R. Gaulke**: *An Unpromising Hope*, scheduled for release in 2021 by Wipf and Stock Publishers. Gaulke contends that to questions in search of a hope that does not rely on a motif of Christian promise,

Westhelle's apocalyptic hope offers a meaningful response. Shifting hope into a spatial realm, Westhelle conveys the expectant emotions evoked in the crossing. These emotions are evoked not by a promise, but by a proximity. In times of health crisis, and near Westhelle's own end, the body itself becomes such a space. The pastoral function of a choratic hope, as identified by Westhelle, is one of voicing. It gives voice to the experience of apocalyptic anticipation, illustrating and describing rather than dressing or prescribing a pastoral solution or consolation.

**Benjamin Taylor** develops the concept of the demon that Vítor Westhelle introduced in his book, *The Church Event*. Rather than seeing the demon as an element of superstition or a product of the past, Westhelle believed demons name the experience of “not having a voice.” In “On Having a Voice: A Political Reading of the Demon,” Taylor first develops Westhelle's concept of demons by looking at examples of the demon in the New Testament. Then, after foregrounding the concept of demons in the New Testament, Taylor expands the concept by looking at the political significance of demons.

In “Westhelle's Vision of Hybridity and the Cultural Hybrid Practice of the Batak Church (HKBP),” **Mangasa Saor Parlindungan** describes how hybridity is understood as a mixture of two different cultural elements that emphasizes unity but does not eliminate differences. Theologically, the practice of hybridity is carried out by the Batak Church (HKBP), which is one of the Lutheran churches in Indonesia and is also a member of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). The mixing of two theological traditions (Lutheran and Reformed) in the Batak church was influenced by one of the mission societies in Germany, the *Rhemische Mission-Gesellschaft* (RMG), which came to the Land of Batak to preach the gospel to the Batak people. Historically, the RMG has adhered to a “consensus union” that is, recognizing Lutheran and Reformed confessions. In the mission field, RMG gives freedom to the missionaries to develop the theological tradition that is followed by the missionaries. In the context of Batak Land, the RMG missionaries introduced and reformulated

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3. Book published by Christava Sahitya Samithy. Tiruvalla, Kerala State, India. Quote modified from LSTC press release, February 3, 2009.

Martin Luther's Small Catechism. After the RMG missionaries left the Batak Land, the practice of mixing the two theological traditions was continued by the theologians of the Batak church in the HKBP confession document, especially regarding the sign of the true church (article VIII). The author employs Westhelle's insights from postcolonial theory, including hybridity, to locate the situation of the Batak church.

The quote from Vítor Westhelle's, *Eschatology and Space* that introduces **Manoj K. Gunthoti's** contribution, "Image of God—Resident Alien," serves as a riddle, a technical usage characteristic of Westhelle's writing style in introducing a central teaching of faith that traditionally would be communicated in a clear and common-sense manner. How does the incoming Reign of God become an eschatological vision stated in a multilayered topological or longitudinal perspective? For Gunthoti, the answer may be acknowledged by using the controversial term of "resident alien," a term usually employed to demean the diversity of creation by some who expect this divine reign to take place in a univocal transcendental or longitudinal understanding of eschatology. To overcome the sinful propensity to see in the "other," or creation, an adverse "resident alien," we are called to see in "resident aliens" a more positive and transformative image of God taking place in the diverse topological eschatological semblance of creation.

Drawing on conversations with Vítor Westhelle, in "Westhelle and Vocation: Set Free to Cooperate in God's Liberating Labor," **Ole Schenk** interprets Westhelle's writings on vocation through unpacking each phrase of a liturgy for absolution: "By grace you are saved and set free to cooperate in God's liberating labor." The grace of God addresses troubled consciences and troubled social bodies. Salvation is found in Christ birthing a new life of faith replacing the power of consuming desires. The freedom of the Christian is lived in metabolic labor, seeking renewal of places of work and exchange, turned outward to the good of the neighbor in need.

"Gift and Death: Facing Cancer" explores the meaning of gift and death in the thought of Vítor Westhelle as a tribute to his life and theology. **Craig L. Nesson** discusses his own journey with prostate cancer, encouraging others to vigilance about this disease, and juxtaposes his experience alongside Westhelle's writings about cancer, the theology of the cross, and the practice of resurrection. Eschatology refers to the liminal spaces occupied by the marginalized, not to some future time. Justification, as God's gift, reorients us in relation to death as a gift. The witnesses to Christ's resurrection lend hope in the face of death.

## Focus Essays

"There are Other Worlds than These: Exploring Stephen King's *The Gunslinger* and the Theology of Paul Tillich," by **Brach S. Jennings**, is a practical teaching case study connecting the literary world of Stephen King's *The Gunslinger*, the first novel in King's sci-fi/fantasy *Dark Tower* series, to key elements of Paul Tillich's theology. The study interweaves previously unexplored connections between King and Tillich with practical reflections from teaching this topic to a class of seminary students. This article aims to show that *The Gunslinger* has theological-existential themes that are worth exploring in relation to Tillich's theology, in order to show the intersection of popular literature and systematic theology to seminary students.

"Rationale for a Social Statement on Child Abuse and Child Protection," edited by **Craig L. Nesson**, presents a biblical, theological, ethical, pastoral, and scientific rationale for the development of social policy by faith communities to prevent child abuse and promote child protection. Based on the research and collaboration of ethics students at Wartburg Theological Seminary, the article has three major sections: 1) definition of child abuse, the meaning of trauma, and the need for child protection; 2) the goals of child protection, including strategies for preventing child abuse, training, developing robust policies, and pastoral care; and 3) theological perspectives on children and child abuse, including uses and misuses of scripture, problematic theologies, and children as a means of grace. This rationale for a proposed social statement in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America can provide impetus to other faith communities.

In the focus essays we also glimpse the influence of Vítor Westhelle in his former PhD student, Brach Jennings', attention to theology and contemporary culture (Vítor made much use of film, poetry, and theater in his courses and writings). Beholding, respecting, and advocating for the most vulnerable was a lifelong commitment, and his love for children (particularly his precious granddaughters) was abundantly evident.

Shortly after Vítor's death, MAM student Joanne Hickey sent a poem to a couple of his grieving colleagues, with this note:

Today I was re-reading a poetry journal of mine when I could have been packing it, and I ran across a poem I wrote in January 2017 at my poet's circle. At our meetings, we draw prompts out of a bowlful of ideas and write what comes to mind. That day I wrote from the prompt: Keep on Singing. I had just finished taking History and Theology I with Dr. Westhelle. I see his words about God breathing spirit into the first human being echoing in my poem. But also, reading this poem several weeks after attending his memorial service when we sang together, celebrating his life in the midst of our grief, I can't help but look at this poem as a description of that day.

***“Spirit Breath”***

Expiring  
Inspiring  
Co-spiring.

Spirit respiration  
We breathe together.  
Let the Spirit  
warm our vocal chords.

Vibrating together  
we sing.  
We sing out.

Expiring  
Inspiring

Co-spiring.

Spirits sing together.<sup>4</sup>

“A Teacher's Life Lives On.” Yes. It lives on in the way students and colleagues remember, labor, and continue to sing; in the interweaving of grief and gratitude that characterizes our memories of those who have deeply touched our lives with what they have taught us: not only in the words they left, but in the living example of their lives. In giving thanks for one teacher, we give thanks for all whose words and examples live on—in and through us.

Kathleen D. Billman

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4. Joanne C. Hickey, “Spirit Breath,” January 2017. Used with permission.

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