

**Don Beisswenger, *Presente***

Andrew Krinks

*Don Beisswenger died November 26, 2018. This remembrance was shared at a memorial in his honor at Wightman Chapel, Scarritt Bennett Center, Nashville, TN, on December 16, 2018.*

When you hear the name of our dear family member and friend, I invite you to respond, “*jPresente!*”

Don Beisswenger. *jPresente!*

Don Beisswenger. *jPresente!*

For 88 full years in body and spirit, now in spirit alone: Don Beisswenger. *jPresente!*

It is difficult to come to terms with a world without Don Beisswenger in it. When my wife Lindsey and I began engaging issues of homelessness and affordable housing as college students back in 2007, Don was there. Indeed, our earliest memories of social movement and justice work in Nashville are of Don’s *presence* at what seemed like every last community meeting, direct action, and vigil that we ever went to. Even in retirement, Don showed up like no one else. His steady presence—his solidarity—was a reassurance, an affirmation, a blessing on each gathering he attended, on every effort he supported. One might not suspect it from that quiet, grinning demeanor, those sweater vests and cardigans, but Don bore witness for a living, and sometimes at great cost.

The path that Lindsey and I—and so many others—have been walking for so many years now? Don helped pave it—and, I suspect, in more ways than we’ll ever know. Our way into our work with unhoused neighbors in Nashville started with the Nashville Homeless Power Project, which emerged out of the sacred space of the Living Room, where Don invited unhoused and housed—“homeless” and “homies”—to share life together. And that’s only part of the story. From building citywide faith-based organizing coalitions, to supporting incarcerated and formerly incarcerated peoples; from disrupting white supremacy in Chicago, to building socially engaged theological education for generations of ministers and activists in the south; from accompanying industrial workers and exploited peoples, to tending flowers in his garden; from crossing lines and sitting in cages, to creating space for contemplative prayer, Don’s life work made ours possible in manifold ways. It is one of our life’s great honors to even try to follow in his footsteps.

In 2012, I interviewed Don for a cover story in *The Contributor* street newspaper where I used to work. We titled it “Listening to the Cry,” an apt description of Don’s lifelong witness. “I think listening is a form of love,” he told me. “And I think it is probably the key form of love. I think God is a big ear,” he said, making himself laugh, as he often did. Wherever serious theological wisdom meets equally serious wit, there’s Don.

Later that same year, as a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School, Don served as my Field Ed supervisor. I have come to realize that this was no small gift considering the fact that Don helped develop field education there as we know it before passing the torch to Viki, Trudy, and others. Every other week, I came to Don’s house where he greeted me with a smile, a hug, and a joke. After a good laugh, we shared silence. And after silence, he listened—to the challenges, the questions, the joys of my work with unhoused people—and I was heard.

I spent those afternoons with Don during a time when I didn’t know where my life would or should go next. His listening and affirming presence made for steady ground to stand on, and gave me the confidence to trust that whatever I do, so long as I am willing and open to the Spirit, I will find myself in good hands, and in the midst of good work. He hasn’t been wrong about that yet. The same is true for Lindsey: in addition to her street outreach and organizing, when she was first discerning her calling to street chaplaincy, Don was there to affirm it. He, too, had spent years as a minister accompanying people in the trenches of their lives beyond the parish walls. The “yes’s” Don gave to our questions and strivings pressed us ahead in ways we are still realizing. And it turns out we are not alone in that: countless others have experienced Don’s careful listening, wit, and wisdom as gifts of clarity that helped the road unfold ahead of us.

Seventy long years of listening to the cry of oppressed peoples, of accompanying people struggling for justice, of making room for weary people to find rest gave Don insights distilled into wisdom so clear and concise that it never failed to wake me up whenever I heard it. What is spirituality? Three words: “stop, look, listen.” What is the first question you ask in the face of injustice? “What’s going on?” Does God call us to be religious? No, God calls us to be human. Embrace your finitude, keep sabbath rest, laugh, love. Don’s attentive spirituality and his justice-making were two sides of the same way of being in the world. A world that will never be the same because of him, and that will never be the same without him.

When Lindsey and I visited Don and Judy in hospice in early November, though he was getting weak, he was still as Don as ever. He cracked jokes, talked about hot fudge sundaes and root beer floats, and asked *us* how *we* were doing: how’s the work on the streets, how are the guys at the prison? Lindsey asked him if he had heard about the passage of Amendment 1 in

Nashville. “They fought for community oversight and they won,” she said. “We’re going to have community oversight of the police!” Don perked up. “Is that right?” He pumped his fist in the air and held it there for a good 10 seconds. And we followed suit, as we have for a long time.

We were planning to visit Don again around the time he passed. But it turns out he had somewhere to be. We’ll catch up with you before long, dear friend. Until then, enjoy that deep rest you spent your life giving to others. We’ll try our best to keep the light you carried lit. And we’ll leave room for the Spirit to do the rest.

Thank you, Judy and the whole Beisswenger family, for sharing Don with me and Lindsey and the truly countless number of others who were blessed to share even a moment’s interaction with such a special man.

Once again, Don Beisswenger. *iPresente!*

Don Beisswenger. *iPresente!*

Then, now, and always: Don Beisswenger. *iPresente!*