

IN MEMORIAM

Donald E. Capps (1939–2015)

On the evening of August 26, 2015, Donald Capps died from injuries sustained earlier that day in an automobile accident in Princeton, New Jersey. By strange coincidence, the day of Don's death was my sixtieth birthday. In the days that followed a phrase from the liturgy used for many Christian funerals continually came to mind: "O God, the generations rise and pass away before you. You are the strength of those who labor. You are the rest of the blessed dead." As I ponder my own rising and eventual passing, I am deeply thankful for those who have strengthened me for my labors. Don Capps, blessed and now at rest friend, mentor, and colleague, is on my short list (and that of many others, to be sure) of those who helped me rise and gave me strength. Others worked more closely with him than I did and doubtless knew him better. Yet to know him at all was to experience what Joseph Sittler, one of Don's mentors, called a "grace note." It is an honor to offer these reflections.

At the time of his death, Donald E. Capps was the William Harte Felmeth Professor Emeritus of Pastoral Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. Don was still a vigorously generative teacher and writer even after his retirement in 2009; his career spanned almost half a century. He began teaching in the Department of Religious Studies at Oregon State University in 1969, continued at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago (from which he received his PhD in 1970), and then shifted to the University of North Carolina at Charlotte before being called to the Graduate Seminary of Phillips University in Enid, Oklahoma. In the fall of 1981 Don came to the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary, where he spent the remainder of his career.

My first encounter with Don remains my most lasting impression of him. In the fall of 1981 we were both new to the Princeton Seminary campus, I as a graduate student and he as a faculty member. My mother had just died after an intense bout with cancer, and somehow Don knew this. After the opening worship service of the term, at which he was installed, he sought me out and said, “I understand your mother died recently. I’m very sorry. My mother died this past year too, so I think we have something in common.” This was the personal side of Don—sensitive, thoughtful, exquisitely alert to the needs of others—that those who knew him only through his writings might not have been privileged to encounter.

And write he did. Don authored or co-authored over thirty books and had a hand in editing another dozen. He published more than 150 articles and chapters in books. Yet, impressive as this scholarly production is, even more impressive is the diversity of his interests and contributions. He engaged psychobiography¹ and pastoral psychology,² poetics³ and hermeneutics,⁴ human development⁵ and human frailty,⁶ hope and humor⁷, sins, the soul,⁹ and the self.¹⁰ His particular genius was his capacity to bring the thoughts of others into sharper focus and then to critique, expand, and connect them. To read any of Don’s work, or to converse with him about anything that mattered, was always to be introduced to other brilliant minds. When he retired from the seminary, his colleague and former student Robert Dykstra observed: “Though one always to deflect the spotlight from himself even in this era of self-promotion, Don is quite simply the most published and influential pastoral theologian in the history of the discipline.”¹¹

By his own admission, Don was not a scintillating lecturer or a compelling presence at a podium, describing himself rather as a “low-grade” or “subthreshold” social phobic.¹² Self-promotion was not part of his makeup. But as a conversationalist who actually listened and did not merely wait for his turn to talk, who offered insight in ways that did not inhibit but instead elicited the insights of others, he was

unsurpassed. Countless times I witnessed Don in the seminary dining hall, among the last to leave, leaning forward over his cup of coffee and offering care and counsel to any who sought him out.

In 2003 the school where I teach, Trinity Lutheran Seminary, presented Don with the Joseph A. Sittler Award for Theological Leadership, which is awarded to persons who have given “unusual stimulus and theological leadership to the church in the important Christian task of thinking through the faith.” The citation that accompanied Don’s award noted:

Joseph Sittler himself once wrote that “theology is something that the church *does*, not only something that it *has*.” In this regard Donald Capps not only has a pastoral theology, he lives out the theology of compassion, kindness and sincerity that is the mark of all faithful pastors and the greatest blessing any student of theology could hope for in a professor. As surely as theological leadership is about intellect, it is also about heart. In the person of Donald Capps God has gifted us with a magnificent blend of both.

Don was the “agent of hope” that he wished all pastors to be. What he wrote about Jesus was also true of him: “Persons came to him in their depleted condition, and they left with every reason in the world to be hopeful for the foreseeable—and unforeseeable—future.”¹³

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NOTES

1. Donald E. Capps, *Jesus: A Psychological Biography* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000).
2. Donald E. Capps, *Agents of Hope: A Pastoral Psychology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).
3. Donald E. Capps, *The Poet’s Gift: Toward the Renewal of Pastoral Care* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).
4. Donald E. Capps, *Pastoral Care and Hermeneutics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1987).

5. Donald E. Capps, *The Decades of Life: A Guide to Human Development* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).
6. Donald E. Capps, *Fragile Connections: Memoirs of Mental Illness for Pastoral Care Professionals* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2005).
7. Donald E. Capps, *Men and their Religion: Honor, Hope, and Humor* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002); Donald E. Capps, *A Time to Laugh: The Religion of Humor* (New York: Continuum Press, 2005).
8. Donald E. Capps, *Deadly Sins and Saving Virtues* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987).
9. Donald E. Capps, "The Soul as the 'Coreness' of the Self," in Brian H. Childs and David W. Waanders, eds., *The Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Explorations in Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994). 82–104..
10. Donald E. Capps, *The Depleted Self: Sin in a Narcissistic Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).
11. C. Dykstra, "A Judicious Frame of Mind: A Tribute to Donald Capps," *Pastoral Psychology* 58 (2009): 448.
12. Donald E. Capps, *Social Phobia: Alleviating Anxiety in an Age of Self-Promotion* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001).
13. Capps, *Agents of Hope*, 7.