

## **Words of Remembrance - Brother Don Geiger SM for January 9, 2021**

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These reflections on the life of Brother Don Geiger are woven from the thoughts of both Brother Charles Johnson, Director of the Siena Woods Marianist community where Don last resided and myself, Marianist Sister Leanne Jablonski, Director of MEEC – the Marianist Environmental Education Center that Don founded. Don impacted both of us over four decades. - Charlie as Marianist brother and community member beginning in the Novitiate and myself as Marianist sister & neighbor, UD student and UD/MEEC colleague.

Donald Raymond Geiger was born on February 27, 1933 in Dayton, Ohio to Raymond and Hedwig Geiger. Don was born at home and his father and the doctor celebrated the new birth with a few glasses of homemade beer made in the Geiger basement. Charlie writes: “When Don shared this story with me, I checked the dates and found that Prohibition was still the law and that Don was welcomed into this world with illegal beer. We both agreed not to mention this story to Federal Officials. Two days before he died, Don asked for a beer. With the nurse’s approval, we helped Don sip a quarter of a beer through a straw. He then told me to put the rest of the beer in the fridge for later. These two stories are not about the drinking habits of the Geiger family, but rather are two real bookends of Don’s life. What a life of 87 years he lived between those two beers.

Brother Don’s personnel file is large and since his death, many stories and remembrances have been sent to the University of Dayton, the Siena Woods Community and MEEC. Too many to tell. Reflect with us on your own experiences as we share highlights on three of the many hats Don wore: - Teacher-Scientist, Environmentalist and Brother.

Don attended St. Anthony School and graduated from Chaminade High in Dayton. He then entered Marianist religious formation, professing first vows in 1952 and perpetual vows on August 15, 1956. He received a BS in Biology from the University of Dayton in 1955, and taught for 5 years at Cathedral Latin in Cleveland. He then earned an M.S. in Botany in 1960 and PhD in Plant Physiology in 1964 both from Ohio State University.

Bro. Don next served as teacher and researcher at UD Biology from 1964 until his retirement in 2008 as Professor Emeritus. He was an outstanding plant physiologist, internationally recognized in photosynthesis, carbon allocation and phloem transport, all to increase food for the world's hungry. He earned numerous awards, and research grants. He has over 100 peer-reviewed publications and many articles written about him. He was invited to present at major conferences throughout the world. At Don's sixtieth jubilee he reflected: 'plant physiology provided a means to serve society while teaching gave me a means to pass on this message to students.'

Don loved to teach - his classroom was everywhere and non-stop! Novice brothers often joked that if you ate dinner at Don's table you could earn several academic credits for the meal. He enjoyed teaching any willing learner - from UD undergrads to the Life-long Learning Institute, Master Gardeners and Native Plant conference attendees. Five years ago, he could run circles around most of us. We'd be out of breath on the trail behind him. Like St. Francis - he would begin pointing and lecturing to the plants around him, until we humans caught up to hear a delightful nature tidbit.

To know Don was to work with him...drawn into his intimacy with the photosynthesis apparatus he designed, or his sacred relationship with the land. Six decades of students give consistent tributes ...a great role model, a challenging, brilliant teacher who was gentle and kind, a saintly man. He empowered women as scientists and environmental leaders - whether it was going to the basement shop to learn to solder and drill press to fix a part (skills only taught to boys of previous generations) - or in tender listening to our concerns. All were inspired by his tenacity, and outdoors true grit work ethic. Don's gym workouts were hiking trails, bending and stretching to plant and pull out weeds.

Don embodied Pope Francis' integral ecology long before *Laudato si*, as he applied his science intellect to respond to the cry of the earth and the poor. At UD, Geiger co-founded Strategies for Responsible Development in the mid-seventies. The agro-forestry methods he developed through Projet Tapis Vert (Green Carpet) in West Africa have been replicated, arresting the advance of the Sahara desert and saving thousands of villages from crop failure and starvation. At UD Don advocated for science-faith-justice integration. He developed a Biology & Social Issues course and was influential in the Rivers Institute. He told students many Dayton stories while paddling the rivers or teaching about the region's watersheds.

Don moved to Mount St. John in 1985 as the construction of I-675 was underway, and was distressed by the tree removal and gravel borrow pit left. A favorite quote of his: “when life gives you lemons, make lemonade”. So, he began learning ecological restoration and had grasses seeded to transform sandpit into prairie and nature trails put into the woodlands. Little did Don know in the early eighties when his lab was discovering how the herbicide glyphosate worked, that he would spend decades directly applying this ‘roundup’ to fervently eradicating honeysuckle and other woodland invasive plants. I think it was his ‘frustration therapy’.

Don was a prophetic visionary. Inspired by sabbatical time with Passionist Thomas Berry. Don gathered an advisory group to plan the Mount St. John prairie and woods as a Nature preserve, and called the front-32 acres an Outdoor Education area. They put forth a broad vision for a Marianist Environmental Education Center - inviting us to learn how to care for God’s creation, and to become part of the earth’s beauty. MEEC (with a c) was founded in 1992 and Don loved the play on words from the beatitudes - “Blessed are the meek (with a k), they shall inherit the earth”

Like Mary, Don embodied humility and gentle-strength in his persevering service of justice and conservation. He long-promoted a permanent conservation easement that was finalized in 2019. He generously shared his expertise beyond Marianist world – giving talks, serving on boards, consulting, as hands-on labor, or designing management plans with many organizations including Beaver Creek Wetlands, Calvary Cemetery, EPA, Fernald Nuclear Plant, Greene County Parks, Ohio Prairie Association and many other religious and environmental organizations.

Don loved working outdoors – these sacred encounters with the body of God were his simple prayer. His radiant smile that overtook his entire face after a joke reflected the sunlight that was his life’s work in understanding photosynthesis and ecosystem biodiversity. A perfect Saturday for Don might begin with reading 10 science journal articles before most of us are awake, then working outdoors - volunteering with friends doing wetlands restoration in the morning, out with a MEEC program in the afternoon, (with students along) or out in the vegetable garden - cultivating foods to supplement Mission of Mary’s urban initiatives, and then watching hundreds of chimney swifts return to their powerhouse chimney at sunset, and then sharing a beer and popcorn chat.

While Don officially mentored 25 grad students and thousands of other students of all ages, he did so as a loyal, caring “Brother”. Charlie writes: “Don was a brother to each one of us before we knew it. Once Don met you, he would be brother to you the rest of your life. Think of the impact and influence he had in the formal classroom, lab, field and the community. Don spent 24 years in the novitiate community. How many novices did he “brother” through the years? I am privileged to say I was one of them.” What impact did Brother Don Geiger have on you?

Before COVID quarantine, a current UD student that Don mentored visited for the last time. The student said: “He told me he didn’t remember my name, but remembered that he loved me . . . I began to cry. He asked - why the tears? I replied - “we usually talk about plants and not about emotions” Bro. Don told me, “we should always tell people we love them” (a very Marianist brother thing). We sat together smiling. I told him we would take a walk through the prairie again. While we couldn’t do this, every time I see a fringed gentian, or the hundreds of other plants he taught me, I will be reminded of his passion for nature and the importance of caring for our common home”

As we celebrate Don’s legacy - I sense he’s inviting us to continue learning, and to take time soon - to walk the land at Mount St. John, UD and our region; to appreciate rivers, our own yards; and to re-commit to the slow and steady ecological conversion needed - to be healers for our people, landscapes and waterways.

Brother Don - To a life well lived - We virtually raise our imaginary glass high with the beer you left us to share with you...we mix it with your prairie lemonade as we toast: er leben hoch...may you live high - we count on you guiding our vocations and cheering our work on from the heavenly communion of saints. Sie leben hoch - may we all live your high ideals... love of our sacred earth and people. Pray for us.

Don, today we lovingly welcome you back, our brother, scientist and teacher - to Mount St. John This land that you so loved into greater life as a gift for many generations. I am sure, the trees, grasses and fringed gentians of the Marianist Nature Preserve and Bro. Don Geiger Prairie are clapping their hands in gratitude for you (perhaps except for your nemesis honeysuckle)

Don, your live on in our hearts and minds...With you, we pledge our love for our common home through our daily actions. Rest in peace, dear Don, You are ever our Beloved Brother.