

## **Dear Baba Community.**

You are all now no doubt aware that dear Don passed away at approx. 6.15 am on Tuesday 26th April and as I had the privilege of being with him and Rachel at this time I would like to share with you all my experience.

First please let me introduce myself and say that although I am consciously a relatively newcomer to Meher Baba this relationship has typically shaped and shaken my world since stepping into His in January 2009.

Undoubtedly, the greatest influence and grounding force since that time has been Don Stevens.

Don officially wheeled himself into my life on the first day of the Beads Pilgrimage 2010. I had just suffered another shake up after being tripped and relieved of all my money, credit cards and insurance at New Delhi railway station. In - as I grew to recognize - true Don spirit, he embraced me, a relative stranger, placated, calmed and personally loaned me the money to continue the pilgrimage. His reassuring words and presence not only dispelled my anxiety but they helped me prioritize and focus my attention on the real purpose for my being in India and a bead on this string.

Since returning and subsequently joining Don's Sunday meeting group my relationship towards him deepened significantly and I became aware of first subtle then quite tectonic shifts occurring within me, especially whilst in his company. So it was a very organic and instinctive wanting to help that culminated in me being on Don's care team in London and then at Rachel's house on the Tuesday morning when the hospital rang shortly after 5 o'clock to report a further decline in Don's condition.

For the purpose of clarity I will share my last nine days with Don in diary form.

### **Monday 18th April**

I received a message to telephone Rachel - she requested I come the following day (assuming Don to be in Berlin I'd spent the Sunday at the Buddhist Centre in Golders Green observing a 24 hour fast and purification practice and so had missed her call).

### **Tuesday 19th**

I arrived at Hammersmith Grove at 7.30 a.m. Sevn had stayed the night and told me that Don had been awake for much of it and was now sleeping. I left him undisturbed until 10.00 a.m. when he got up, ate a good breakfast and after his morning routine sat watching Dennis gardening through the front window whilst I manicured his nails. Don soon fell back to sleep so I took my time, gently creaming and massaging his hands, arms and feet. His skin was very delicate and tissue thin, his hands still bruised from the IV in Paris and I was deeply aware of this profound privilege to care for and become quietly yet intimately acquainted with, not Don the orator, philosopher, but Don the elderly and vulnerable human being.

After lunch he became more and more lethargic so seeking Rachel's opinion Dennis left to collect her.

As soon as her vital energy entered the room Don woke up and they fell into jokey banter. Don enjoyed his usual ice cream "temptation" but then drifted back to sleep.

We both sat in observation, weighing up all concerns and consequences, before telephoning the doctor. We then went into Don's bedroom and, standing in front of Baba's picture, prayed and asked for guidance.

In due course the doctor arrived and, suspecting a chest infection and dehydration, advised he be admitted to hospital. An ambulance was called and we both spent the evening with Don at Charing Cross Hospital where he was thoroughly assessed and diagnosed with dehydration and fluid on the lung. They administered antibiotics and intravenous fluids but throughout Don was his usual cheerful self. We kissed and left him some time after 2 a.m. after he'd been allocated a bed.

## **Wednesday 20th**

I visited Don in the morning and although he was still showing signs of confusion, when I reminded him of the random answers he'd given to the doctor's questioning he smiled and said that "he had to fabricate a bit".

Rachel stayed at Don's bedside each day and kept me informed each evening of his condition until I was free to visit again the following Monday 25th April.....

On route to the hospital Dennis and I stopped by a garden centre to buy flowers and shrubs for the front garden so that on return Don would have colour and beauty to view through his window.

On arrival at the hospital he was sleeping. Rachel had gotten him some ice cream earlier which he'd eaten and the nursing staff had reported him being awake for most of the night.

We tried feeding him his evening meal but he was not responsive above fluttering his eyes and moving his lips when moistened with water.

We stayed until 7.45 pm, just holding his hand and occasionally smoothing his hair, that he was always so fastidious about parting and patting, and I kissed him good bye 'til morning.

That evening we went to the Baba Centre. Paul was already there and we were later joined by Ajay.

If nothing else could be done medically we determined to bring Don home the following day.

Then we stood in front of Baba's picture, said the Universal Prayer and Prayer for Baba Lovers and asked that Baba guide our thoughts and actions with the wisdom to intuit and honour His wishes.

Of course this was taken out of our hands with the hospital call at 5 am the following morning.

## Tuesday 26th

We arrived at the hospital shortly after 5.30 a.m. Don's bed was screened from view by blue curtains and he was surrounded by medical staff and linked into an assortment of monitors. We were immediately ushered into a day room and asked to wait but confirming each other's reactions to what we had just witnessed Rachel returned to the ward and conveyed the family's request that Don not be subjected to any more stressful or unnecessary interference but left in peace. We were shortly joined by one of the female doctors who confirmed that there was indeed nothing more that could be medically done beyond sustaining Don's life artificially. The infection in Don's chest had apparently worsened, intensifying the carbon dioxide in his blood.

We waited for the medical staff to leave. Dennis then said his goodbyes and Rachel and I stood either side of him.

We took one hand in each of ours and, just as he had me in India, we reassured him that he was not and would not ever be alone, that Meher Baba was waiting.

I can't remember exactly what followed as words just surfaced and evaporated as was their want - but I do know beyond anything else that there was a phenomenal presence of love.

We then recited the Universal Prayer and the Prayer for Baba Lovers, and gently whispering Beloved Meher Baba's name near his ear our dearest Don slipped away from us. It was truly the most serene of passings and I was reminded of Don's appreciation and love of beauty in the significant beauty of this most precious of moments. We sang Amazing Grace, Morning has Broken and Welcome to my World and Rachel placed Don's photograph of Baba on his chest and I the small Don't Worry Be Happy booklet on his pillow.

A little time later a nurse came in and confirmed that Don had gone.

We stayed by his bed just holding his hand, first together and then allowing each other time alone with Don and my heart prompted me in the beautiful practice of taking and giving - simply breathing in any discomfort, pain or anxiety of another and breathing out love. I then thanked him once again for giving me his friendship - for however short in this life I felt such a knowing of him.

The registrar arrived at about 8.30 am and we then left at 9 a.m.

After leaving the hospital we went back to Don's flat to be with Claude - each of us separated in our own emotional bubbles yet held in a common sea of calm.

The day simply unravelled with practicalities determining its pace and I continued in this suspended state of calm but with the conviction that all was as it should synchronistically be and I returned home to St. Albans the following evening.

Then on the morning of Thursday 28th at 5 a.m. I suddenly woke up. My chest felt so expansive as if cleaved open and I was utterly immersed in love.

I just lay in bed repeating Meher Baba's name and thanking Him for allowing me entry into Don's life and for the circumstances that had culminated and climaxed in this present moment. And I will be forever grateful for being a part of his leaving.

Jai Meher Baba

*Jan Baker*

## **Memories of Don**

First of all, let me say that it has been a pleasure to care for dear Don over the past few months. It was with some trepidation that I first accepted the role Don offered me but I decided that if I was his choice that it was 'meant to be'. In preparation for which Anna de Poulney, Renate Moritz and I spent a day at Don's flat getting it spic and span prior to his arrival home after a very long absence. We measured doorways and the 'turns' between the rooms to ensure that Don's wheelchair could be accommodated and with no more than an inch to spare we were soon ready for Don's return.

With everything in order, my husband Dennis and I set off to St. Pancras station to meet Don from his unaccompanied journey back to London from Paris. As he was wheeled through the barrier the Don who greeted me looked tired and frail but was very excited to be going 'home'. We managed to get him, his wheelchair, his walking frame and his luggage into the car before setting off on the journey back to Hammersmith Grove. Once inside Don was glad to sit down and rest and immediately began to negotiate our 'contract' .... I told him it was something that would wait until another time. He then went on to tell Dennis and I that there had been a concerted effort made in France to put him into an 'Old People's Home' and he emphatically stated that he didn't want that to happen either in Paris or in London. Both Dennis and I reassured him that we wouldn't let that happen! By the time Dennis left and the excitement of being back home had subsided, it became apparent just how very fragile dear Don was. He mostly moved from his bed to the couch via the bathroom in his wheelchair but in the first instance every bump and jolt over an uneven floor would cause him to wince with pain. Nevertheless in true cavalier fashion Don was determined to do his best to improve.

Thus began a daily routine of breakfast, coffee, medicine, bathroom, exercises, a rest with the newspaper, classic FM on the radio, a protein drink and the ever present glass of water. By the time I'd had whizz round to make sure everything was clean and sweet smelling I'd make the most of Don's instruction to sit down and have a cup of tea and a cigarette. I used to say to him 'Don, I'll go outside to smoke' ....'No you won't' he said, if I can sit in board meetings behind closed doors and windows with 20 or more men smoking their Havana cigars, then I can definitely allow you to smoke. But he absolutely insisted that I stop doing whatever it was I was doing and he'd watch me. 'Was it a good one' he'd ask .... 'a nice relaxing one'? Then we'd chat about things he wanted to do or for me to do them for him ... or sometimes just sit quietly enjoying each others company.

Then I'd get Don his 'three drops' originally a whisky and water but later on it became a brandy and water. He'd happily sit with that for half an hour or so while I organized lunch. Always of course, this regime was frequently interrupted with visits from the doctor, the district nurses, the physiotherapists and the occupational therapists but Don would trust me to sort out his

diary in such a way that he never had too many things happening in any one day and I always made sure that I asked Don first so that he was kept 'in the loop'.

As the days went by Don and I settled into a routine that started at 8am when I arrived replete with his favourite paper the 'International Herald Tribune'. I would know if Don was up and out of bed that he was feeling pretty good and that if he was still in bed that he needed some extra care and attention. By the end of the day we would aim to have him feed and watered and back in bed by 8pm – but it would often be 9 or 10pm before I felt happy to leave him and it became apparent after the first 11 days that I needed a back up 'relief' team. It wasn't easy finding people willing to commit to a 12-14 hour 'shift' of personal care but Don resolutely refused to have more than one person in per day. Nevertheless, in true Baba style everything evolved naturally and organically; I got a day off every week or so and Don and I had lots of fun as he recounted the events of the previous day. For their support I must convey my deepest thanks to Alfred, Avril, Keith, Sally, Paul and Jan.

Dennis and I had two excursions with Don. One to Holland Park for some fresh air and a change of scenery which he loved ... he saw the Japanese Garden, the peacocks and the spring blossom on the trees ..... though as usual he thought it was cold! I never knew how difficult it was to push a wheelchair through a park! We take it for granted that we can walk along the paths without realizing that the smallest bump or crack in the asphalt causes discomfort to the person being wheeled around. Our second trip was to the dentist as he had complained of toothache and while I wanted a dentist I knew would be kind and gentle, the only suitable one I knew was on the first floor! How proud Don was when he managed to walk up the flight of stairs! Dennis had to get him down in his wheelchair of course.

As time went by, it became apparent that we needed to be able to get Don to have some sunshine and some fresh air. The first step was to have the hedge chopped down so that Don could see the sun, the sky and watch the people walking by. Then we hit a blip; the therapists wanted him to walk more and go outside more but the pavements were too bumpy for him to be safe. We put our heads together and decided the best place for Don to 'walk' was to the front garden. Then of course, Don being Don, he had to have a reason 'why' ..... here I take full responsibility for suggesting a bird table .... So that Don could walk out and feed the birds as well as sitting indoors and watching them. Well, once I'd mentioned it I didn't ever hear the end of it! 'When is the bird table coming?' was a regular question. Of course the bird table is still coming, but now it will say 'God alone exists. In loving memory of Don Stevens' around the border. It will certainly be done before Don's funeral and the hearse will pull up outside so Don will visit his garden and bird house once.

He took great pains to make sure that I had signed instructions from him to conclude his affair in London and wrote and signed an open letter to the UK Baba Association with what he hoped would be an accepted plan for the future.

One of the things that Don was deeply committed to was the Berlin Seminar and when he first told me about it I questioned whether it was sensible for him to consider it. He said that he would go on his own if necessary but that he was definitely going. However, as time went by it became apparent that Don was becoming forgetful, repetitive and sometimes confused. Nevertheless, his stature as a man of integrity and honesty always came shining through.

The following few days have become something of a whirlwind of recollections; Claude came for a few days but Don's retreat into himself had begun. He was sleeping most of the time, though he would still have his three drops and his temptation, the exercise regime had been abandoned and he didn't want to see anyone at all. Claude left on the Friday and on the Saturday and Sunday Don rallied somewhat, not over exerting himself but still reading his paper and talking. His chesty cough though would rattle his frail frame and all the antibiotics he was prescribed didn't make any difference. I'd coerce him to walk a little or let me wash him and occasionally I'd get a smile from him. He would sometimes have conversations with someone (Baba?) which were largely beyond comprehension.

At one point, with tears in his eyes. He said he felt that he'd let Baba down by not going to Berlin. I told him that in his absence he had received a standing ovation for the completion of the last book, 'Listen Humanity' into German which completed the translation of 'God Speaks', 'Discourses' and 'Listen Humanity' into French, German, Spanish and Italian.

By the Monday morning Don was still in bed when I arrived. I helped him get up, get washed and dressed and got his breakfast. By mid morning he had rallied and we talked and laughed together and had lunch. I noticed a steady decline after lunch and would wipe him down with a damp cloth always trying to weigh up the benefits and consequences of calling in the doctor. I was always mindful of the fact that Don had said he wanted to die at home and it was a fine line between hoping for another rally and preparing for the inevitable. At one point Don said 'I just can't bear the pain anymore' so I asked him where the pain was.... He said 'it's everywhere'. I sat with him and held him and told him that he had achieved everything that Baba had asked him to do and that Meher Baba loved him dearly. I also told him that if Baba was calling him to Him, that it was OK for him to leave us. It was very late before I left on that Monday night, I always waited until he was settled but that Monday evening seemed somehow timeless and precious.

The next day was a welcome day off with a lie in and a leisurely bath being the first order of the day. Jan was with Don and Dennis was doing the garden which Don was taking an active interest in. Just after lunch though, Jan phoned to say there had been a further deterioration in Don's condition. That was not uncommon in the early afternoon because it was always so hot in Don's flat and the sunshine now came pouring in. I said to give in an hour or two and call again if there was no change. Ten minutes later Dennis phoned to say that he had seen Don and he thought I should come immediately. So within 20 minutes I was at Don's and I talked and cajoled him and he perked up briefly then started to sleep again. Jan and I watched him and talked about whether or not to call the doctor in. We kept on watching him in the hope that there would be some indication that a recovery was in sight, but by 6pm we knew we had to phone. The doctor arrived within the hour, examined Don and said he had a chest infection and was dehydrated and would be best served in hospital. The ambulance arrived soon after and Don was safely strapped in with Jan and I at his side and taken to Charing Cross Hospital. It was about 2:30am before he was finally admitted with IV fluids plugged in and antibiotics, with a medical proposal to do an endoscopy as they suspected a blockage in the gut. The next few days went by in a blur. I had permission to go into the hospital early and would feed Don his meals there were no more three drops but I always bought an ice-cream and took it upstairs for him and would feed it to him, as well as grapes cut in half and as much water as I could get him to take.

By that Monday evening I had discussed the situation with Jan and had made the decision that Don would be discharged and taken home rather than stay in hospital to undergo invasive tests etc. We then went to the London Baba Centre where Paul Gregory ran a Monday meeting and after arti we prayed that Baba would guide us and direct us to make the best possible choices on Don's behalf. In His Infinite Compassion, at 5am on the Tuesday morning we got a phone call from the hospital to say please come immediately as there had been a further decline. When Dennis, Jan and I got to the ward the curtains were drawn around Don and six or seven medical personnel surrounded him. One of the doctors asked us to wait in the 'day room' which we did,

then I suddenly remembered the decision not to let them interfere too much in the natural process. I went and told the doctors that the family decision was that there should be no medical intervention, which was clearly the right choice as they were just going to put Don on a ventilator, after which time they tucked him up and took away all their monitors and stuff and Dennis, Jan and I were allowed back in. Dennis quickly paid his respects and left Jan and I holding Don's hands. I had asked the doctor 'how many hours' and she replied 'it'll be minutes'.

So, we very quietly sang Welcome to my World, Amazing Grace and Morning has Broken. Then we said the Masters Prayer and the Beloved God Prayer and then we started repeating Baba's name in Don's ear. After just a few minutes we realized that the oxygen mask was no longer moving .... Our Dearest Companion, Don Stevens, had once again been embraced by Baba and will remain with Him always.

It was a pleasure and a privilege to care for Don and there is no doubt that his legacy lives on. He was above and beyond everything else utterly devoted to serving his Beloved Master, Avatar Meher Baba.

*Rachel Dymond*