



HER LIFE'S WORK

Photograph Peter Brew-Bevan

In late January 2007, London-based Australian doctor Anna Donald was enjoying a skiing holiday in France with her husband, Michael, in the picturesque mountains around Mont Blanc. Once back in the grey damp of the British capital, she developed a persistent cough. Increasingly breathless, she went to her local GP, thinking she might have pneumonia. He ordered her straight to the nearest hospital. As her personal diary reveals, the news she received late that afternoon, barely a month after her return from the slopes, left her stunned.

Tuesday, February 27, 2007: Today, I learn that I am riddled with cancer. It's everywhere: lungs, bones, liver. Maybe brain. There is more cancer than me. How could this have happened so fast? And how did I not know about it?

"How did I not know?" It is a question that has tormented many. But Anna Donald's shock was compounded by a terrible irony. Just 40 at the time, she was not only a doctor, but an academic high-flier: a Rhodes scholar from Sydney who had studied at Oxford, won scholarships to Harvard, and garnered degrees in medicine, history and economics.

In Britain she had carved out a stellar career in the emerging field of evidence-based medicine. She had even turned it into a successful business, setting up a company, Bazian, which combed through thousands of pieces of medical research to advise other health professionals on which treatments worked, and which didn't. She and her team called it "evidology". They had clients as diverse as the British National Health Service, the German and Japanese health departments, the World Health Organisation and the Royal College of Nursing. Ruthlessly identifying the flaws others had missed was the essence of what Anna Donald did. How then could she – of all people – have failed to detect the enemy inside her own gate?

Admittedly, she had had breast cancer four years earlier. But the tumour had been small, and treatment had been deemed successful. Regular checkups had shown no hint of recurrence. Reassured, she married Michael Hall, an old flame rediscovered. Now here she was confronting a wholesale invasion:

Tuesday, February 27, 2007. Evening: I cried with my husband behind the curtain now wrapped around our hospital bed. Just then, my brother and business partner walked in, two tall men, pink-cheeked and cheery from walking the winter streets. We told them the news. My brother sank to his knees on the linoleum by my bed: no hope? No cure? No possibility at all? He couldn't take it in. He put his head in his hands. My business partner, a doctor, still in his coat, bundled me into his arms and wept. I felt so loved and so grief-stricken at that moment with three men in the world who mean so much to me. The registrar slipped away ... After a day of cacophony, all the noises in the room stopped, except for the sound of our sobbing.

But after that initial burst of intense grief, something entirely unexpected

When Dr Anna Donald was diagnosed with extensive cancer, her reaction was entirely unexpected. Here she tells Deborah Snow how confronting her own mortality has become her biggest ever adventure.

happened the next morning. "It was the weirdest experience," she recalls. "We had cried a lot, I'd gone to sleep, and next morning, I woke up and it was a beautiful spring morning, looking over Hampstead Heath, clear as anything. And all I could feel was, 'I'm going to die, and I'm totally loved and looked after, and this is completely fine.' Not only was I fine, but I knew that absolutely everyone else was too."

It was a moment of such extraordinary, inexplicable conviction that it sustained her through the next few months, when death seemed imminent. Her calm stemmed in part from a growing sense that living in the shadow of physical death had opened the door to profound intellectual and spiritual inquiry.

Thursday, March 22, 2007: A funny image came to me. I used to see drawing the "incurable" ball out of the bag ... as black. But now it appears translucent white. Facing death has brought a new life. That actually has a radiance.

As she later wrote to her old friend Dr Richard Smith, "It's SO INTERESTING. Honestly, it's the most interesting part of my life by a mile, so far." To other amazed friends and colleagues Donald communicated similar feelings. She was re-framing her cancer as an adventure, the most intensely absorbing "research" project of her life.

April 2008. Autumn sun pours through the windows of her high-rise Bondi Junction apartment, a panorama of tiled rooftops, emerald treetops and distant harbour spreading out like a vivid tapestry below. A year ago, she wrote in her journal: ...I sort of forgot about things like birthday cakes. It didn't seem necessary to have one. I don't feel as if this is my last birthday. If it is, it was a lovely one.

Since then there has been another birthday. She has reached 42, and today is dressed in a simple tunic and trousers, a short wig fitting her head so elegantly you would never guess at her permanent hair loss.

Yet she is not shy about it. Once, as we were taking our leave in the car park, she pulled the wig off in one swift movement to show me the delicate scalp beneath. A thin white line ran at an acute angle above her left ear, where a small tumour was removed in January.

Monday, March 2, 2007: Hair is hair. I know that the chemotherapy, the cancer and the steroids, not to mention the morphine when that starts, will make it impossible to retain any semblance of conventional beauty. Miraculously, I can already feel my concern about it sloughing off like an old skin. I'm ready for a new kind of beauty. My goal – difficult – will be to manifest beauty through who I can be, through love.

Donald had loved London, where she lived for 15 years. But if she was going to die, she wanted to be home, in Sydney. Her medical team gave her permission to return late last year, when chemotherapy looked

In search of Anna: an uncertain future has led to a journey of self-discovery for Anna Donald (opposite).

as though it was turning back the tide of cancer in her body.

Richard Smith visited from Britain soon afterwards. Moved and intrigued by the way Donald had turned her illness into an opportunity for experiment and observation, he urged her to write a blog for the *British Medical Journal*, of which he had previously been editor.

"She seemed just like one of those 19th-century scientists injecting themselves with mushrooms to see what would happen," Smith recalls.

"Most people would probably find absurd the idea that having an advanced and probably terminal disease is an experiment. And even if they didn't find the idea absurd, they wouldn't have the courage and strength to draw conclusions from their predicament. But Anna does."

She began the blog in April this year.

"Richard's questions were my starting point," she recalls. "He said, 'You are in an unusual situation of being a research doctor, and a policy maker. Now you are facing a life-threatening illness, what can you tell us from that perspective?' I didn't have a grand plan, but I feel in my gut there are things worth talking about.

"Firstly I want to show people that having a life-threatening illness is very bad, yet at the same time isn't very bad. The shadow of death can be a very creative space. You get to think about what matters."

She pauses, groping for the words. "Don't get me wrong. I don't want to sound like Pollyanna. It's not that I haven't been depressed sometimes and wish it all hadn't happened. But you don't have to be miserable. That focus which you are forced into ... I don't know, I just think it's a surprisingly positive thing, it makes you concentrate in a joyful sort of way on how to make every moment good."

The blog also allows her to communicate broadly to "doctors, other health workers and policy makers about what it's like to have a life-threatening disease; to be on the other side of the doctor-patient divide". It is frank, sometimes funny, and unflinching when it comes to describing the mental and physical effects of advanced cancer.

Blog entry, May 1, 2008: ... blobs of breast growing in my brain (what is my breast doing in my head!?) ... it sounds like something out of a sci-fi movie I'd rather not be in.

At other times her postings are unashamedly metaphysical, venturing into the terrain that lies between science and instinct, between knowledge and faith.

Blog entry, June 3, 2008: Cancer puts you in context. It reveals ... that you can be a speck of sand and yet a whole world at the same time – and that every other being on the planet is the same.

DOCTORS DEAL OFTEN WITH PATIENTS CLOSE to death," says Richard Smith. "But very few can give us the kind of full-frontal reports that Anna is offering, from a place where most lapse into silence."

"You are turning your experience into a gift to us," wrote one doctor. "What a contribution to our collective learning."

In the past 12 months the whole formidable arsenal of Western medicine has been turned on Donald's disease: chemotherapy, hormone therapy, surgery and radiotherapy. But she is also using herself as the test bed for non-conventional treatments. These include an hour and a half of vipasana meditation every day, which imposes the seemingly simple but challenging discipline of sitting and observing the physical sensations in



"Anna has never been afraid of an idea. Nor is she cynical. And that's allowed her to do a lot of things other people might decide couldn't be done ... She is way out there as an adventurer."



Milestones: (from top) Anna Donald at 22, as president of Sydney University's student union; receiving her first degree, a BA, aged 23; with husband Michael Hall on their wedding day in July 2006; aged about 18 months.



the body, while trying to keep the mind completely empty of thought.

She is also working on harnessing the power of dreams, and has become a firm advocate of Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), pioneered by an American pastor, Gary Craig, working with traumatised Vietnam veterans. Though it has its critics, EFT has gained strong momentum over the web, and involves a subtle mix of touch and talk to release old griefs and angers buried deep in the body's muscle memory. "I am trying it on all my medical friends," says Donald. "I usually get good responses, though I'm still a beginner."

She has gone back to spiritual texts, particularly the Bible, and prayer. Wary of how some of her professional colleagues might view all this, she insists it is a logical extension of scientific inquiry. "I cannot emphasise strongly enough that I do not believe in magic," she says. "But there are a lot of things we don't know the efficacy of, because no one has studied them properly, and we don't have a conceptual framework for how they work. Most of the best studies test things like drugs and medical gadgets, not reiki, or EFT."

Science, she argues, is a "slow turtle, bumbling along" that has no explanation for the powerful interactions between mind and body that have been documented in many studies. As an example, she cites one she worked on herself a decade ago.

Between 1996 and 1998 she was part of a team that helped with the famous Whitehall Study, conducted by Sir Michael Marmot, one of Britain's leading epidemiologists. That survey of 10,000 British civil servants proved beyond doubt that a person's perception of their social position, their place in a hierarchy, had a measurable effect on their health.

The correlation, she recalls, was "absolute": the lower on the pecking order, the greater the risk of death and disease. It did not matter that even the poorest of Marmot's subjects were far better off in material terms than the vast bulk of the world's population. If they perceived themselves as worse off than their colleagues, their health was worse.

"So social perception matters a lot, and intuitively that is not really so surprising," she says. "But why does it become a *physical* event? We can observe the steroids go up and down, we can observe lots of things biochemically ... But it still doesn't explain *how* what I am going to call the Shakespearean play on the TV (that is, the drama of our inner thoughts) affects the *TV box itself*. We just don't have a philosophical framework for that."

DONALD IS GREATLY INSPIRED BY IAN GAWLER, the Australian authority on mind/body medicine, who is now a friend and correspondent. He recovered from a cancer deemed totally incurable by his doctors nearly 30 years ago, relying heavily on meditation, diet and an encounter with an Indian spiritual healer.

"If it wasn't for his example, I would be much more inclined to say, 'Well, it's all very well, this stuff, but show me!' The fact is he actually demonstrated that it was possible. And you only need one example, one thing that you can't explain but can't refute, and you have to think, 'Well, how can *that* be?'"

She admits she cannot know at this stage what is working. "So far I'm defying the odds. I should have died last year, statistically. I am not disputing that the chemo, and radiation and hormone treatments are why I am alive. But I am also open to the *possibility* that they are not the *only* reason I am still alive."

The news is not always good. She resumed

chemotherapy in June after a disappointing scan. But she remains unfazed by the American study, published in the US journal *Cancer* last October, which concluded that a positive emotional state had no impact on cancer survival rates.

“What I say will be controversial but I will say it,” Donald responds. “I have looked at a lot of these studies. And my view is that it’s *fiendishly* difficult to get good enough data on people’s real inner selves. I agree that simple positive attitude isn’t enough. But that’s different from doing deep inner work. Those studies do not get to that at all. All the people who have recovered, all of them to my knowledge, have used meditation and done lots of things.”

Donald’s unusual reaction to advanced cancer has not surprised those closest to her. Her mother, Janet, says, “Anna has never been afraid of an idea. Nor is she cynical. And that’s allowed her to do a lot of things other people might decide couldn’t be done. Who knows about EFT and dream/body work? But her attitude is, ‘I’ll give it a go because it’s part of renewal. It’s part of what is out there and it’s intriguing and interesting.’ For her, these things present no threat. Anyone who has ever observed Anna would know that she is way out there as an adventurer. And will remain out there until her last moment.”

OUTSTANDING INTELLECTUAL ACHIEVEMENT WAS programmed into Anna Donald’s DNA. Her mother’s uncle won an early Nuffield scholarship to Oxford, and her paternal grandfather was a Rhodes scholar in the 1930s. She comes, in part, from Anglo-Chinese stock. Her mother’s early

forebears arrived on the NSW goldfields in the 1850s and began intermarrying with the locals almost immediately. Anna says her maternal grandmother, Lilian, and her great-grandmother, Mary Anne, whose maiden name was Dong, had a fierce attachment to education as the path to a better life.

When Mary Anne’s husband died in the Great War, she packed her six children into a cart and brought them to a tiny, dirt-floored house in Redfern, close to Sydney University. Using her status as a war widow, she then insisted that the government put those of her children not already working – sons *and* daughters – through university. Lilian, the youngest, first had to gain entrance to the fiercely competitive Sydney Girls High. It was a feat she remained proud of to the end of her life.

“Granny never had to raise her voice, but you just *knew* there was no *chance* you could fail an exam, you just wouldn’t. Education was just what you did and there was no question or negotiation about that ... When she was dying, she talked about her cousins being lynched in the dam. And I think there was probably a lot of violence against Chinese or mixed families in the aftermath of the gold rush. I don’t know for sure, she never talked about it until she was on her last legs, but I suspect she knew damn well from a tiny age that education was the way to survive, it was not just a social nicety. And I think my brother and I picked that up.”

Anna’s mother, Janet, was an honours student in classics at Sydney University when Anna was born. Her marriage to Anna’s father, Tony, was over less than two years later and the little girl went to



“Don’t get me wrong. I don’t want to sound like Pollyanna. It’s not that I haven’t been depressed sometimes and wish it all hadn’t happened. But you don’t have to be miserable.”

“I do not believe in magic”: Donald (left) insists that her investigation of non-conventional treatments is a logical extension of scientific inquiry.

live with her maternal grandparents for a year.

Tuesday, March 27, 2007: I dwelt last night on the quiet despair I think I have been capable of since I was very small ... I learned how to endure and persevere. Not bad life lessons in one sense, but perhaps they taught me how to endure too much.

Soon after, Janet got married again, to Bruce Donald, who later became a prominent lawyer (known among other things for his work for the ABC). “By the time I was 3½ I had had three sets of parents, all of whom doted on me in their own ways,” Anna says wryly.

She says she has maintained a loving relationship with Tony, her biological father, while it is Bruce who has been “Dad”.

“I am lucky to have two fathers,” Anna says now. “Tony bridges the arts and sciences: he is a doctor both in botany and literature, and has a way of infusing the everyday with the poetic and sacred while remaining every bit a scientist. I think I have at least a part of his brain. For Dad [Bruce], I was his first child. He brought me up and loved me as passionately as all his later children. He truly believed that I could do anything.”

Of Janet, Anna says: “I just admired Mum. She has a formidable mind and is also incredibly moral. She taught me to be unafraid of other people’s ideas and bluff.”

In 1971 the new family travelled to the US on a Harkness fellowship won by Bruce. It was an inspiration to Anna, who later went on to collect scholarships the way others might collect school sporting trophies. In addition to the coveted Rhodes (she was only the second woman from NSW to have earned that honour), she later picked up a Menzies scholarship, a Kennedy fellowship and a Caltex award which took her to Harvard after her stint at Oxford.

LOOKING AT THE GLITTERING CV NOW, IT’S hard to imagine that it all came perilously close to falling apart when she was in her mid-teens. It was a time, she says, when “I fell out of myself”.

In 1981 Bruce and Janet separated. Anna slipped into secret anorexia, becoming a repeat truant from her selective girls’ school in Sydney, despite continuing to top every year.

“Here I was, doing everything required of me academically, and I couldn’t even eat my breakfast or turn up at school. I remember thinking, ‘This is bananas – I can do calculus and can’t manage to eat my egg!’ It was that experience which first got me interested in questions about mind and body.”

In year 10 she went to school in France for several months. Depressed and disenchanted with her old school when she got back, she wound up moving to the then highly progressive Narrabundah College in Canberra.

It was a brave call for her family. At just 17, she was away from home, living on her own in student digs and cycling seven kilometres to classes every day. Amazingly, she thrived, sailing through her final school exams into Sydney University’s medical school.

Fellow student Bruce Meagher, now head of strategy for SBS Television, met her when she applied to join the uni debating club.

“She was dynamic and keen, a nice mix of idealism and pragmatism,” says Meagher, who recruited her to run with him for leadership of the University Union. They won, and two years later, at 22, Anna followed up with election to the University Senate.

“She took the initiative on lots of things,”

Meagher says. "But she would often get quite frustrated. I think that was both because she was incredibly bright, surrounded by people who were fairly bright but not as bright as her ... and also that, for Anna, detail could be a bit dull. She was after the next thing, move on, keep moving ... My observation is that she has become more patient and measured."

"I *am* much more patient, more aware of what's going on outside of me," Donald confirms. But actually *being* a patient is an experience she has found eye-opening, and occasionally harrowing. Only now, she says, does she fully apprehend the powerlessness, the "lack of agency" inflicted on many hospital patients, particularly those with chronic, long-lasting or life-threatening disease.

"I think so many of the mistakes, the quality-of-care stuff-ups in hospitals are related to the extreme passivity of the patient, who just sits there like a blob in hospital. It's so antiquated. We need a more engaged model, not 'Here's what you are going to do' but 'How are we going to get you better?'"

Communicating about cancer may be a way of "returning to my preferred role as healer".

Saturday, March 24, 2007: ... In this new life I can experiment and explore ways of staying well and developing deeply as a person and child of God. I need to feel my mortality keenly to be able to do this properly. It is all rather exciting.

"I don't want to be seen as a raving loony, a religious nut who has abandoned all scientific things," she tells GOOD WEEKEND. "But life and death are very mysterious. The more you look at them the more you realise that. Cancer forces you to do it. And then you start to see the sacred in everything. My scientific brain just observes it, and wonders how it all might work.

"Take vipassana ... You actually observe how you are in fact a constantly arising flame. You feel it. It's a really extraordinary thing. I don't care what you call that, whether it's spirit, or constantly arising flame, or energy field. But it is an awesome thing to experience."

She now believes that this energy, in some form, probably continues after it has passed out of our physical bodies.

"I have never met a doctor or scientist who works with people who are dying who does *not*

The surgeon's story

One year ago, GOOD WEEKEND profiled another high-achieving Australian doctor, well-known Sydney cancer surgeon Chris O'Brien. Professor O'Brien, formerly director of the Sydney Cancer Centre at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, was diagnosed in November 2006 with glioblastoma multiforme, the most aggressive of the primary brain tumours.

This June, he had his fourth craniotomy, following a routine scan that showed he had a recurrent nodule of tumour. Neurosurgeon Charlie Teo, who had performed two previous craniotomies on O'Brien, removed the nodule.

"I've recovered well, but I've gone back on chemotherapy," says O'Brien, who stopped the treatment last December, mainly because he found it so debilitating. (For the following six months, he'd been taking only herbal medicines.) "My oncologist doesn't want me to take natural therapies, and the naturopath doesn't want me to take chemotherapy," says O'Brien, who is now taking three conventional chemotherapy drugs: Temodal, the main anti-glioma drug; procarbazine; and thalidomide, which causes him terrible fatigue but which has anti-angiogenic qualities (angiogenesis is a physiological process involving the growth of new blood vessels that nourish tumours).

O'Brien still takes herbal medicines, practises transcendental meditation and has become a vegetarian – but drinks a little red wine with dinner. He can no longer drive because the left visual side in both eyes is dark.

Reflecting on his experience of being on the "other" side of the patient-doctor divide, he says, "I have a much easier run because I've got knowledge – and while I've still got the same doubts and fears, I know who to ask questions of. When I was fully part of the medical system, I wasn't aware that the pathway for patients was so tortuous. There are a lot of vagaries, a lot of uncertainty. It's not a patient-focused system."

O'Brien has used his experiences to ramp up his lobbying for a comprehensive cancer centre in Sydney, resulting in Kevin Rudd indicating the government is likely to put \$100 million towards the centre, on top of the tens of millions already raised. Rudd will also launch O'Brien's memoir, *Never Say Die* (HarperCollins, rrp \$33), due in bookstores in October.

As for the lessons O'Brien has learned, living daily with a particularly capricious cancer, he remarks, "My last operation was June 2007. I got to June 2008, disease free, and suddenly there was a recurrence. I have to go back to building up a series of clear scans. I'd got to the point where I had a fair amount of confidence about the future. The [June] scan was a wake-up call. It was saying, 'Don't get too confident, boy.' But I'm still very determined to be a survivor."

– NIKKI BARROWCLOUGH



have a strong sense of the afterlife. There's got to be *some* way of explaining it, it's just that we don't have the concepts or ways of thinking about it yet to explain it."

IN THE EARLY HOURS OF MAY 1 THIS YEAR, SIX young people died on a small boat in Sydney Harbour. The son of an old family friend was one of those killed. In a blog entry shortly afterwards, Donald wrote: *It brought home again how fickle life is ... I really don't know what's coming next. Tonight, I am alive while my young friend is dead. It made me reflect, again, how lucky I've been.*

"I don't know how much time I've got left," she tells GOOD WEEKEND. "But I've still got my head, my faculties, and some time now really to try to investigate this existence." Given enough time, she would write a book. She would love to see proper studies done of the kinds of alternative therapies she is experimenting with. And she wants to help "change the narratives around cancer".

"I think what really bugs me is that view of human beings as blobs of flesh, which is the dominant paradigm of materialist reductionism ... I thought I knew it all. I had lived everywhere, I'm a doctor. There I was, very logical, very scientific and all of that. I still think I am. What I've been tumbled into is realising that the whole jolly thing is a lot more mysterious ... We are not what our current stories tell us we are. We are much, much bigger than that. And that makes life much more exciting, and death much less scary."

Twilight comes rapidly in late autumn. We have talked for hours. There are no clear answers to the big questions, only intuitive ones. Sometimes, Donald says, she can picture herself in her mid-50s, her books in the background, projecting a time in the future when she has been writing for years.

In a few weeks she and Michael will move to a ground-floor apartment they have bought near the harbour. It is an affirmation of hope.

"I do want to live, I do not want to die. I'm 42!" she says in a voice that is half mock protest, half the real thing. "But when I thought I really was dying, it was fine. It was better than fine. It's a bloody adventure, it's unpredictable. But I've come to realise experientially, rather than intellectually, that the *only* time that exists is now. And trying to make 'now' as good as I can – that's a real achievable goal while I'm alive." **GW**

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