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 saddled 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?

Regular checkups had shown no hint of recurrence. Reassured, she wrote in her journal: “How could this have happened so fast? And how did I not know about it?”

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?

Wednesday, February 28, 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 older 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...
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.

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.

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 vipassana meditation every day, which imposes the seemingly simple but challenging discipline of sitting and observing the physical sensations in 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 grief 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, an adventurer.
Rhodes scholar in the 1930s. She comes, in part, her mother's uncle won an early Nuffield scholarship programed into Anna Donald's DNA. Her remain out there until her last moment. “she is way out there as an adventurer. And will who has ever observed Anna would know that is out there and it's intriguing and interesting. ’

dream/body work? But her attitude is, 'I'll give it couldn't be done. Who knows about EFT and do a lot of things other people might decide er, Janet, says, " Anna has never been afraid of an her marriage to Anna's father, T ony, was over less classics at Sydney University when Anna was born. just a social nicety. And I think my brother and I that education was the way to survive, it was not but I suspect she knew damn well from a tiny age and wish it happened. She taught me to be unafraid of other '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 after-math 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 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 Anna 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 relation- ship 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 brought up in botany, 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 bluffs.”

In 1971 the new family travelled to the US on a Harvard fellowship won by Bruce. It was an in- spiration 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 the only second woman from NSW to have earned that honour), she later picked up a Menzies scholarship, a Kennedy fel lowship 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 break- fast 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 sev- eral 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 stu- dent 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 ap- plied to join the uni debating club.

“She was dynamic and keen, a nice mix of ide- alism and pragmatism,” says Meagher, who re- cruited 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,”

"I do not believe in magic": Donald (left) insists that her investigation of non-conventional treatments is a logical extension of scientific inquiry.
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 it, the bigger than that. And that makes life much more exciting, and death much less scary."

"I do want to live, I do not want to die. I'm 42!"

"I'm a doctor. There I was, very logical, very scientific. I'm a doctor who stared at people's bloated faces and thought 'Change the narratives around cancer.'"

"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 tells me, 'I 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-30s, 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 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."