

Old Men and those who Love them

Hello. For those of you whom I have yet to meet, I am Allan, Sherrill's brother, and therefore potentially occupying the painful role of "brother-in-law" in Don's life. But whatever he thought of me, I always regarded him with a bit of awe, from our first meeting some 58 years ago, and undiminished by my growing affection and respect for him over the years since. I have been privileged to be part of his family, and even more privileged to have him part of mine.

While I don't remember the precise date, our introduction was a real-life case of "Guess who's coming to dinner." Sometime in 1964, I was glad to learn that Sherrill was seriously dating a fellow graduate student. I was a little dismayed that he was 10 years older, but impressed that he would shortly receive his Doctorate. As an addendum, she mentioned that he was black. I know it probably sounds stunningly naive, but as a child of George and Ruth Green, my initial assessment of her choice was one of approval: a guy with a Phd just might be able to keep up with her. Our first meeting was when she brought him to Wappingers Falls for a visit – we think during the September 1964 semester break. Don confirmed my assessment. During dinner I came up with what I thought would be the perfect comment to embarrass my big sister in front of her new boyfriend. Something like, "Well, Don, here's some advice: if you two ever have an argument, don't let Sherrill write her replies", meant to be a back-handed complement to her literary prowess and (usually) concise logic, but also a subtle reminder of the fate of all her prior suitors. Don glanced at Sherrill, and then fixed me with that amused look. I don't know if any of you can relate to this, but I had the feeling that he understood completely what I was trying to do. With that twinkle in his eye he said, "Allan, eat your meal". Suffice it to say: A game of One-upmanship with Don Meeks was a losing proposition.

Don Meeks was by all measures a remarkable man. I found this written to introduce an article describing his recovery from his stroke in 2008:

"Dr. Donald Meeks dedicated his life to helping people with addictions, building a distinguished reputation as a Professor at the University of Toronto and the Associate Director of the Clinical Institute at the Centre for Mental Health and Addiction (CAMH). His work took him around the world as a special consultant to the United Nations and the World Health Organization. In 2006, he received one of his country's highest awards – the Order of Canada – for his outstanding contribution to the Addiction field in Canada."



Quite a resume! But it doesn't begin to tell the full story – it fails to mention his lively and daunting intellect, wry sense of humor, passion for justice, social conscience, generosity of spirit, his acute perception, the breadth of his compassion. But for me, his wife's annoying younger brother, his signature accomplishment was marrying Sherrill. To be sure, over the years I came to both respect and seek out his opinions, but mainly, he was the man who loved my adored sister these 58 years and who has been loved back by her, the father of my cherished nieces and their families, an example in courage and perseverance, a brother and a friend. I have even bragged about him from time to time, as if there were some status to being his brother-in-law.

For the last several years, Don lived at Westpark Health Center in the harvest of love he and Sherrill sowed in their family and his caregivers. In November 2019, pre-COVID, Chris and I flew up to Toronto and spent a wonderful 2 days with Don and his family. It was a little sad to see that he was losing ground. He had never been garrulous, but I missed his usual participation in our conversations. During our visit he preferred to sit, and watch, and smile, and listen to the ebb and flow of ideas around him. From time to time he would ask for clarification on something, so I knew he was listening. But his main pleasure, it seemed to me during those two days was seeing all of us loving each other, and him. For all his honors and acclaim, this is the man I am remembering this morning [afternoon]. He has walked the path I will walk all too soon, in dignity, in grace, and to all appearances, in peace. He is much loved. My hope is that the same can be said of me when I go home.

June 2, 2023