

Love From One Degree

Hello. For those of you whom I have yet to meet, I am Allan, Sherrill's brother, and therefore I had the potentially 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 had 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) laser-like logic, but also a subtle reminder of the fate of all 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.

The remainder of my comments will be a little out of the ordinary. Most of you here were Don's students, co-workers, colleagues, nuclear family members, and friends related by what I believe is called 0 degrees of separation. My experience with Don was mostly one degree of separation. For me, Don's profound impact in my life resulted from his choosing my beloved sister to be his wife, and being chosen by her to be her lifetime partner. They raised two amazing women whom I also love without limit, and most of what I know of Don I learned through them. That doesn't diminish who he was to me in the least; if anything, his passions, honesty, humor, intelligence, and compassion were amplified through my sister and my nieces. In effect, he loved me from one degree away. Let me give you some examples.

I'm sure I have written this before, but I am a real fan of big sisters, Sherrill has changed my life in innumerable ways, but I'll give you two examples. When Sherrill was in first grade I was 4 and in pre-school. Having nothing better to do with her afternoons in those days, she decided to teach me to read, and do 1st grade math. She succeeded so well that the following year, when we moved to a new school system without a kindergarten, my mother was able to enroll me in 1st grade at the age of 5. Being a year ahead had its pros and cons, but the most important result to me was that I arrived at the U of R as a freshman in 1961 instead of 1962 in time to meet Chris. And, given an opportunity to talk to the most beautiful woman I had ever met, I wasn't tongue-tied, because in middle school, Sherrill taught me to dance, which gave me enough confidence to spare me the middle school smart kid social desert – and dare to talk to Chris when I did meet her way back in 1961. Since then, my appreciation for her elder-sister role has only increased. Sherrill's influence has been continuous, mostly by prying me loose from political and social rigidity. Over the years we have debated the need for labor unions, social safety nets, mental health care, racism, gun control, economic priorities, abortion, affirmative action and many others. I will freely admit my views have evolved towards her far more than vice-versa.

Don's daughter Heather changed my life. I am, and have been for almost 50 years, a committed Christian (whatever that means), but there was a time in my life when doctrinal orthodoxy was much more important to me than it is now. At some long-ago family gathering ago Heather and I were discussing whether a gay or lesbian person should or could pastor a Christian church. I may have made the statement that if my own church were to make this choice, I would probably find another church. Heather has never been reticent about her opinions, so on this occasion she told me about a dear friend in a relationship with another woman, who as a result was dismissed from her church and estranged from her family. I don't remember the exact details, but I do remember Heather's tears: she loved her friend. She shared her friend's sorrow, the loss of church and family, and the conflicts within her faith. For Heather, doctrine was irrelevant: she simply loved her friend, and since I love Heather, loving her friend came with the package. In that moment my heart was changed. If Heather had brought her friend in from another room, I would have taken her into my arms and welcomed her into our family. Heather changed my life. I am a better man for it, and I believe, am closer to the heart of God.

Don's daughter Melanie has changed my life. As with the rest of her family, describing her secular accomplishments and successes would be a lengthy task, but I treasure her because she is my sister's daughter, and she has her father's heart. She is a wise and loving woman, and I am very glad she is on the other end of the line, so to speak. If you didn't know it before, Melanie has largely assumed the role of family historian and archivist, a daunting responsibility in our large and diverse family. Chris and I are trying to organize as much of our repository of documents and photos for an orderly transfer to her while we still can. In deciding what to keep and what to discard, I ask myself "Will Melanie value this?" And, as many of you know, from time to time I write about things important to me and send them to the family email list. I can always count on a reply and a comment from Melanie. Perhaps over the years this has nudged her in my mind into being my amanuensis – she is the person in my mind when writing to you all. I picture her reading my letter thoughtfully and lovingly, and I try to invoke her interest, her understanding, her amusement, perhaps her forgiveness, trusting that she will preserve whatever is of lasting value in what I have to say, if it should be so. If, in my mind's eye, I see her frown or cringe, I re-examine what I have written, and try again.

So, please forgive me for spending all my time talking, not about Don, but about three women we both loved and still love. Frankly, I think Don will approve, for he loves them even more than I. Thank you Don, for all your gifts that live in the ones you loved, taught, treasured, and kept safe. I am, like everyone here today, richer for it.

*For that I will refer you to "[In Memoriam: Professor Emeritus Donald E. Meeks](#)", U of Toronto School of Social work.

*Less well-known is "Old Men and Those who Love them" at <http://greenacresfarm.com/portfolio>.