



## No one who knew him wasn't changed by him – Talk with Marla Moffet about Donald Dillbeck

The questions were asked by Ines Aubert, Switzerland, 2024

**Marla, can you tell us in short who you are?**

In the role of Managing Editor of the online newsletter for our nonprofit Unconditional Freedom ([unconditionalfreedom.org](http://unconditionalfreedom.org)), I first came across Don's work when he won a contest that we ran with our program participants on Death Row. His writing was so inspiring that the team wanted him to write a column for six months, which is exactly what he did.

**It's been one year now since Don was executed in Florida on February 23, 2023. What do you remember of the day we met for the first time and the sad circumstances?**

I remember that you wrote me over some combination of Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp two days after the execution. We were both feeling tender, and we didn't talk on the phone right away, but there was a magic to finding each other in the overlapping worlds Don touched. I remember feeling you were a kindred spirit living a parallel pain in a totally different reality. It touched me deeply to meet you and many others who were close to Don. People started finding each other through the devastating circumstances, which felt so human... at once so poignant and so heartbreaking.

**I might add to your answer that I saw you and other guests on the online vigil at the time of the execution of Abe Bonowitz [www.facebook.com/deathpenaltyaction](http://www.facebook.com/deathpenaltyaction). You spoke about Don in such a humble and moving way that I knew I wanted to get in touch with you.**

**How was your relationship with Donald Dillbeck?**

Our relationship totally changed my life. It was so short. I only corresponded with him for about a year, but once he was on death watch, I wrote him nearly every day—sometimes more than once a day. There's so much to tell each other when the sands of time are running out...

I spoke to him for the last time on February 1, 2023, the last day of my advanced yoga teacher training course at Sivananda Ashram in the Bahamas. He was fascinated that I was learning Sanskrit and said if he got pardoned, he wanted to learn it, too. His devoted heart, dedicated practice, and irreverent speech made him particularly dear to my heart. I've always appreciated swear words. There's something they bring that politeness can't touch. Don and I shared that. We could be talking about oneness, meditation, and selfless service while exchanging some choice words. I loved the down-to-earth verbiage. The contrast was interesting: him meditating four hours a day, beginning his day at

2:45a.m. so he could enjoy the peace, and the real talk and four-letter words he used to occasionally punctuate a sentence.

Thanks to Don, I now have a network of angels around the world who have been either penpals or ministers to him or both. He asked me to promise to call his friend and spiritual counselor Lou after he passed. She and I became great friends. We laugh and share stories about him and tell each other our secrets.

I think of Don nearly every day. He was a true prison monk. He got up at quarter to 3 every morning and sat in meditation 5 times a day. He did breathing practices in combination with his thousands of pushups. And he loved the men on his row very much.

I'll never forget sobbing after reading this story Don's dear friend on the row Kevin shared about him:

“Currently to live even just basically it takes about fifty dollars a month. And that is very basic. Some soap, toothpaste, and a few food items. And for a long time, Donny barely managed receiving even that small pittance. So, as I said he scraped by. Learning to do without or with less always conscious of being self-disciplined, carefully weighing whether he could afford to buy himself something. And yet during all that, every year that I have known him, he buys everybody on our wing a blueberry Danish for Christmas, which amounts to nearly half his entire budget for a month. And let's be clear: I used to do something similar but got jaded and said to hell with these people because nobody respected me, they merely expected. You know what I mean? Each year they thought that they were entitled to such gifts. And I quit. But not Donny. Even though he isn't a Christian, he respects the tradition and wants to do something kind for people, even though it cost him dearly, on his limited budget, he chose to do that every year as an act of kindness to the world and to those that probably didn't deserve the courtesy. In most cases, giving something to guys who receive far more money and never once reciprocated. Yet, it never changed his mind, and I asked him about it: Why keep doing something for these ungrateful b\*st\*rds?

His answer? That while outwardly it seems to be for their benefit, he really did it to keep kindness growing in his heart. To remind himself that it's not about rewards or other's opinions, it's all about how he chooses to be. A giver or a taker. After a lifetime of being hit by the system and society at large, he still only wants to be a peaceful productive person, one who cares selflessly for others.

That, Kevin said, of course, taught him much.

Don's practice inspires me every day. His kindness and compassion inspire me. His love lives on in those of us who knew him. No one who knew Don wasn't changed by him.

**I belong to those who were changed by knowing Don. Imagine someone on Death Row who was admittedly guilty of his crimes could become a person who touched people's hearts all over the world. What an accomplishment!**

**I have never spoken to Don but have only exchanged letters. How do you think it is possible that someone has such an impact only through writing?**

When someone is truly themselves, we feel it. We feel ourselves in them. We feel the common humanity, the love. There's no longer an us and a them. I think that's what Don offered all of us.

He knew he was the ocean and not the wave. He let us feel the ocean in us through his access to it. His writing reflected that unconditional, universal love. His was not an egoistic or a unique love.

When someone is such a clear channel, it doesn't matter the mode through which it comes—written, spoken, or even silence. We just feel more ourselves around them because we are them and they are us.

**In the evening before his execution, Don was recorded with a message to his friends and to the world. While the entire message of five minutes is worth listening to, one part stood out for me. Don spoke about the pain his friends would feel because of his death and how that would be a “deepening experience”.**

**“As much as I want to take everyone else’s pain away that they are feeling, because they love me, it’s not my place to do so, because for them this is one of their deepening experiences. All I can do is love them even more, which gives me greater empathy, which is perhaps the greatest healing balm we can share with anyone.”**

**I’m sure you are moved by his message also.**

Yes, I, too, am moved. Thank you for reminding me of his message. Don really understood that life is not about fixing people. It's not about changing anything outside ourselves. It's about cultivating more compassion and empathy on the inside.

As a man who spent decades behind bars – from a very young age – he could have said any number of things in the audio he recorded on the eve of his execution. The words he chose brought tears to my eyes then and still do today.

**It is very sad that Don found his spirituality only after taking two lives: the one of Deputy Dwight Lynn Hall and of Robbie Faye Vann.**

**I always think of the victims, also. I would love to talk to their family members if only I could.**

**How do you deal with the fact that Don left two people dead?**

That's beautiful that you want to talk with the victims' family members. I bet you would facilitate rich conversations. I hope you get that opportunity someday.

Some criticized Don for not being remorseful – for not making the video on the eve of his execution about the lives he took.

I've had the privilege of speaking with Don's spiritual counselor for hours and hours over the past year. She explained that Don spent a lot of time talking with her and trying to understand why and how he could have done something so horrible so that he would

never let it happen again. She also told me that he called around to many churches in the area asking for help and spiritual counseling and she was the only one who agreed to talk with him.

There's a lot the public doesn't know about Don - a lot they would prefer not to know, which is okay, too, I'm learning.

For those of us still here on Earth, it's very simple: we can choose to forgive, or we can choose anger, outrage, and fear. Whatever we choose will determine our respective experiences.

**After we perceived Don as a very spiritual person, he surprised us all with the vulgar ending of his last statement before he was given the lethal injection which I won't repeat here. What did you make out of it?**

On Dec 27, 2022, Don and I spoke on the phone for the first time. In fact, we talked several times that day, as the call kept dropping. I remember feeling shaky. My voice was higher than usual. It took me a while to settle and feel comfortable as it was my first time speaking on the phone with someone in prison, much less someone on Death Row.

Don was authentically himself right out of the gate. He didn't take himself nor me or our interview too seriously, although he was touched to be interviewed and mentioned it was his first time. Don spoke his mind at times, perhaps as some would say, at the wrong times. But who's to say what the right and wrong times or words even are? My desire is to love and not to judge.

Goodness knows I can have a temper. I have said hurtful things at horribly inappropriate times. I have had rage against people – the people I loved the most. I once sobbed after witnessing a baby deer get hit and killed by another car. My mom's had breast cancer for the past several years. If someone took her life, I would be beyond devastated. I'm not sure if I would ever be able to get over it.

Don's crimes were tragic. Epically and indisputably so.

My understanding from Lou, his spiritual counselor, was that he worked on himself until he could untie the knot inside himself that acted out violently. Once he understood it, he untied it and used the compassion it freed up to serve and love those around him.

Very simply, I think Don didn't approve of the direction Florida was moving in politically and I think he expressed that disapproval with vulgarity.

I don't think that vulgarity subtracts from our spirituality, but I do think it can prevent some people from being able to hear us.

**Thank you very much, Marla, for answering my questions. With many others, you and I won't forget Don and his message. I wish you all the best.**