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### Giving Thanks for Every Breath

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# Giving Thanks for Every Breath

By Beverly Matiko

**WHILE AT WORK ON A JOB SITE ON LAKE MICHIGAN IN EARLY 2021, ELECTRICAL CONTRACTOR DON STARLIN KNEW HE WAS IN TROUBLE.** “I was carrying tools and ladders from the main house on the bluff down 88 steps to the lake house on the beach,” Don recalls. “I noticed I was short of breath. I said to myself, ‘This is not good. I need to do more cardio and start walking again.’”

Four months later, upon awakening one morning, the realization hit: “These are the symptoms my dad had.” After numerous medical tests and consultations with specialists, Don’s suspicions were confirmed. He had idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis (IPF)—the disease that had taken the life of his father and his uncle. Don knew there was no cure. A bilateral lung transplant was his only hope.

Don was hospitalized in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Medical students and residents who came to observe and learn about IPF listened to Don’s lungs through their stethoscopes. “His lungs sound like Velcro,” Don heard repeatedly.

Don was intubated and placed on a ventilator. With carbon dioxide levels rising, he was placed on extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO). A machine removed the CO<sub>2</sub> from his blood, added oxygen, and returned the blood to his body—in short, keeping Don alive.

Don remembers, “With 5/8” tubes coming out of my neck and going into the machine, being plugged into this thing for two weeks, I had a lot of time to think.” One sustaining thought was knowing that so many people around the world were praying for him.

Don also had time to reflect on his upbringing and how it had shaped him. He grew up in Berrien Springs, Michigan, and attended the Andrews University school system from kindergarten through college. He remembers as a youngster working with his father on construction sites. Spotting ten-year-old Don there one day, a builder who was also a Pioneer Memorial Church deacon remarked to Don’s father, “We need to

give the young people responsibility in the church.” With the builder’s help, Don soon found himself serving as a church deacon, his first church office.

Don’s parents co-directed Pathfinders, and Don enjoyed years of activities in that organization. When Don was a young teenager, a former roommate of his father invited the Starlins to come to Haiti on a Maranatha project. This missionary explained that electricians were needed to help with the expansion of the Adventist hospital there. Don’s entire family spent several weeks in Haiti, a time Don describes as “a real eye-opener.” Throughout all of these experiences, a passion for mission was born.

Don met his future wife, Trudi, at the 1989 Andrews University graduation weekend. Trudi, a Karen from Burma (a/k/a Myanmar), had an architecture degree. While on a mission trip herself, Trudi had acted as the project manager on the construction site. With shared interests in missions, Trudi’s architecture experience and Don’s background in electrical contracting, these two soon discovered they had even more in common.

After they married, Don helped found and became president of Adventist World Aviation. Trudi worked for Adventist Frontier Missions. About fifteen years ago, they learned about the plight of many refugees from the region surrounding the Burma–Thailand border. A church member in Rockford, Illinois, informed Trudi of refugees in his area who needed assistance from someone who could speak their language.

Trudi answered that call. Although she hadn’t actively used her native language for years, employing the use of Karen, Burmese and English languages, she was able to help. After Trudi’s first contact with the refugees by telephone, Don flew them over to Belvedere (Illinois) to meet the refugees. Don and Trudi learned of similar groups throughout the United States and began helping them as well, including facilitating some of the young people to come to Andrews University to study. The Starlins became surrogate parents for these students, welcoming them into their home, and supporting them



Victor Rayno

in every way that they could, all the while remembering the pleas of the students' parents, "Watch over our kids."

Now in 2021, being kept alive by modern medical technology, Don was the one in dire need of watchful care. From their ever-expanding work with refugees, Don and Trudi had a global network praying for them. "We had text messages, video and phone calls from not only across North America, but also Australia, Burma, Thailand and Norway," Don acknowledges. "All the local churches in the Berrien Springs area were praying, too. Literally thousands were praying for me."

One prayer stands out in Don's mind. Even before his hospitalization, the Karen believers called a special Zoom meeting when they discovered the seriousness of Don's condition. Don gave a devotional on the power of prayer at this meeting, drawing from the experiences of Peter and Paul as recorded in the New Testament. Many prayers were offered.

One participant was a Karen pastor from Des Moines, Iowa, whom Don was assisting with his seminary studies. "Lord Jesus," the pastor prayed, "we're coming to You this evening because we have a real problem that only You can solve. We're coming to You and through You to the Father. It concerns our brother, Don." Don remembers the pastor using the Karen word *thara*, meaning "teacher" or "pastor." The prayer continued, "Two hundred years ago You sent Adoniram Judson and, as foretold in our ancient prophecies, he brought back the Book of golden pages to our people. One hundred years ago, You sent Eric B. Hare to our people with the Advent message. One hundred years later, you sent Thara Don to us, and he brought us the Gospel of Grace. He hasn't finished the work You gave him. We know that he has more to share! And so, you can't take him now." Don

remembers sobs punctuating the pastor's prayer which ended with this plea: "You've got to call a meeting. Go into Your Father, call the Holy Spirit, shut the door, and work this thing out. Because Thara Don is not done with what You gave him to do."

Later, lying in the intensive care unit, Don often mentally replayed that prayer. Petitions on Dan's behalf continued. To these were added prayers of thanksgiving as Don became one of the fortunate ones on the transplant list chosen to receive new lungs. The surgery lasted over twelve hours. The surgeon later told Don, "Those lungs are a perfect fit. It's like they were made for you." Don thought to himself, "Wow, I think they were." While the surgeon couldn't share specific details with Don about the donor, he described the lungs as "pristine," and said they had come from someone younger than Don's 57 years. Prayers and more prayers were being answered.

As Don continues to adjust to life as a transplant recipient, he and Trudi and their mighty band of prayer partners continue to pray daily. They pray for many things, including guidance, continued health and strength, and the needs of others. They also express thanksgiving for that initial breath of life that God breathed into His creation, and for every breath following. "This experience has taught me many things," Don says. "We may not always see it in our little sphere of activity and influence. But on a grand scale, God's purposes will be accomplished. They will happen in His time, and in His way. We can trust completely in that." ■

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*Beverly Matiko, PhD, lives in Niles, Mich., and was associate professor of English and Communication and member of the Honors faculty at Andrews University from 1992 to 2021.*

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Watch a video interview with the Starlins at <https://www.nadadventist.org/ajdonandtrudistarlin>.