

## Stories of Generosity from the Common Ground Community

*Interview by Pat Boland*

Katharine Malaga has done a variety of volunteer work over the years, including work as a volunteer courier for the National Marrow Donor Program, transporting life-saving bone marrow or stem cells to transplant patients around the world. Those trips ranged from a day-long trip to Chicago, to longer trips to Europe or Asia.

She also lived in Latin America for many years and has used her Spanish language skills as a volunteer with CLUES (Comunidades Latinas Unidas En Servicio), teaching literacy to Spanish speakers who could not read or write.

While she still does courier work when she is able, her main volunteer work for the last three years has been as a caregiver for her husband, Ross, who suffered a severe stroke three years ago, not long after retiring from his work as an engineer with Medtronic.

### Caregiving as Service Work

“This stroke has helped me appreciate where I am at now. If someone’s sick, then you open your heart to that situation and you ask, what is in this situation that is about growth. “



Ross needed Katharine’s nearly full-time care for a year following the stroke, and she felt she was as prepared as anybody to transform her life in order to care for her husband.

She had faced daunting life challenges before – she had a son that died of cancer. Her son’s death led her to nursing, and to working with the dying in cancer care, and hospice.

“I immediately saw it as an opportunity to view my husband’s stroke as a form of practice. I had a background in nursing, and a background in intensive care. I knew this was going to be a lifetime of physical difficulty. I knew right away, I will take this day-by-day, whatever it is. I will accept this, somehow. I had enough spiritual background that I could see it as a spiritual journey.”

Katharine describes Ross as “a born Buddhist” who has always had a mystical side. “My husband is the kind of person who watches the shadows on the balcony, and is fascinated by them.”

The stroke left Ross with aphasia, which means speech is lost or damaged, but intelligence is not, Katharine explained. An engineer with a master’s degree in pastoral care, Ross understands complex concepts as he always has, but has difficulty conveying thoughts through speech.

Katharine feels that others care deeply, but some may be afraid to look too closely. “Most people want black and white. I think this is so overwhelming to some people that they don’t really engage with him. He is a brilliant man; he has the most profound things to say, but his speech is difficult to understand. You have to take time with him, and listen closely.”

### Support and Refuge

Apart from Katharine’s involvement with Common Ground, she and Ross are members of the Saint Joan of Arc, Catholic Church community. They receive different kinds of support from both organizations; Katharine feels the most practical strategies for dealing with their situation have been from Buddhist teachings.

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On two courier trips to Taiwan Katharine stayed at a Buddhist center, and witnessed the generosity and humility of the Buddhist nuns who hosted her stay; behaviors that made an especially deep impression on her. “Being around the Buddhist nuns in Taiwan was a life-changing experience for me – they were so generous. I have never seen such an extraordinary example of giving. Whenever they would take you to the hotel, they would always say, ‘Thank you for letting us be of service.’ ”

As Ross improves, Katharine is slowly returning to short courier trips. She misses travel, and the excitement that it brought. “The benefit to me was the opportunity to travel the world, and to meet people from all over the world. I certainly have attachment to travel, to excitement.” She also pursues her love of language by taking French classes at the Alliance Française, and sees that time as a refuge.

When asked what she takes home with her from Common Ground, Katharine said, “It’s always the same message – this is the way it is now. You have to learn that every day. I think you can’t learn that enough.”