

Stories of Generosity from the Common Ground Community

Interview by Robin Lackner

Bob Seng thinks of his volunteer work as stewardship; it is the various ways that he practices caring.

Bob is a lawyer who has worked at a large law firm and now works at a major corporation in Minneapolis. Growing up in an alcoholic family with limited resources, there was not time or energy to volunteer. At the same time, his Catholic religion and family culture encouraged “doing good” and Bob felt guilty that he wasn’t doing more.

Involvement with Common Ground and learning about Buddhism has given him a different perspective and insights on what it means to do good. He is more accepting now of different ways to give of oneself and the different motivations that come into play.

As an adult, Bob has tried volunteer work at soup kitchens and homeless shelters because he had been told that these were things one should do. However, Bob came to realize that for him those types of experiences were uncomfortable, scary and exhausting. Therefore he has chosen to give of himself in other ways to which he feels better suited.

However, he has not given up on the things that make him uncomfortable or scared.



Currently Bob is involved in several activities which he considers stewardship, some of which are more informal and one more formal volunteer position.

Volunteerism = Stewardship

On weekend mornings, Bob takes his Australian lab puppy Newman for walks in areas where homeless and other marginalized people congregate. He finds that people connect with Newman and end up getting quite emotional and sharing stories of their pasts.

Bob thinks that the unconditional acceptance dogs offer facilitates personal connections and provides a bit of comfort. Additionally, along with Newman, Bob hangs out with two young nephews who have special needs.

In a way, Bob is like a “Big Brother” to these boys; he enjoys taking them on outings and feels like they benefit from this extra attention.

As someone who is thoughtful and has gone through good times and bad at work, he often receives requests from coworkers to act as an informal mentor. Bob accepts these requests, spending about 2-3 hours per week in this way.

These employees talk to him about issues they are having at work, at home, or in life in general. Mostly, he “just” listens. He tries not to dispense too much advice, believing that no one has the corner on wisdom (an insight that has come over time). Bob says that he learns from seeing how others face difficult times. Additionally, at times, a mentee might sense that Bob is having a challenging moment or day and reach out to offer help to him.

MAP for Nonprofits

For the last 3 years, Bob has been a volunteer board member at MAP for Nonprofits (“MAP”).

MAP, itself a nonprofit, provides training, support and services to small nonprofits.

While in many ways he is using the types of skills he uses as a corporate lawyer, in this board member role he is using these skills to further a mission he believes in and which ultimately he believes helps people who receive services from MAP’s member organizations.



In addition to feeling good about his contributions to the organization as a strategic thinker, Bob enjoys the board work because of the social contact with other board members.

He notes that the board runs relatively smoothly, harmoniously and transparently. Bob wants to continue on the board for another term. For him, it is fun, personally rewarding, and adds a positive dimension to his life.

Over the years as a lawyer for corporations, Bob has struggled with the question of whether he has been doing enough “good” in the world.

While his thinking on this is always evolving, he is satisfied that his current efforts are helping others and provide richness in his own life.