

Stories of Generosity from the Common Ground Community

Interview by Kate Graham

A member of the Common Ground Meditation Center community for over a decade, Karen Duncan has spent the past four years working with rescued horses through the Minnesota Hooved Animal Rescue Foundation (MHARF) in Zimmerman, Minnesota. The mission of the organization is to rescue horses and other hooved animals in distress, treating each animal with compassion and respect, and to educate the public on the welfare of these animals.

Karen was drawn to this organization because, as a child, the horses she grew up with were not treated with compassion. “We weren’t really taught kindness toward animals, we were taught mastery.” Volunteering was never part of her life growing up, but in her 50s, Karen felt a spiritual need to give back to the world that she had never felt before.

Previously, Karen felt she continually needed to feed herself, and lacked the time and resources to volunteer. But, with maturity and spiritual growth, Karen finally “felt fed.”

Now, she strives to follow her ideal of generous giving: “We each give what we have to help those who come after us.” Karen makes financial gifts to the organization, cleans the bridles and saddles, helps with fundraising events, and acts as a “special person” to a few horses, grooming, walking, and riding them.

Karen views volunteering as a natural outgrowth of her Buddhist practices.



She feels less self-centered, and she sees many similarities between the values of non-harming practiced at Common Ground and at MHARF.

Her spiritual life and her work with horses are helping her understand the appropriate relationship between animals and humans.

“What about the fact that humans use animals in so many ways? What’s in their best interest, and what isn’t?” Karen is still seeking answers to these difficult and important questions.

“Being around horses requires you to really be in the moment as mindfulness does. When your mind wanders, you can get hurt, or they can get hurt.”

For Karen, it is an honor to be around such powerful animals, many of whom have gone through painful experiences that are palpable. Sharing the presence of horses is very much like meditation for Karen.

Based on her experiences volunteering, Karen feels that finding a good fit between the organization and the volunteer is important.

*“It would not be right
action to stay
somewhere where the fit
doesn’t feel right, or
where your life feels
really out of balance.”*

Giving is only spiritually satisfying if it is given freely, and that capacity may not always be present in everyone all the time.

To know how much to give, you just have to “know when it feels right.” Karen approaches volunteering in the same way she approaches the Dana bowl at Common Ground, without feeling any obligation.

“I give when I can, and when I can’t, I don’t feel bad about it. It takes away the power of money.” Even if you can only give a little, that can be enough.

Karen also feels that it is okay if the benefits of volunteering are returned to the volunteer.

“I don’t know what’s served by selflessness that harms oneself. Giving does not have to be selfless to be of value.”

That Karen feels spiritually fed through her work with horses is merely an extra gift, to be accepted in the same spirit of giving and receiving freely.