

States of Grace

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

States of Grace is a labor of love that emerged from a desire to witness and document a friend's remarkable journey following a tragic, life-altering event. Dr. Grace Dammann, the primary subject of the film, is a dear, longtime friend. Our daughters, now young women, had been buddies as toddlers, and we maintained a close friendship during the years that followed.

We received the devastating news that Grace had been in a head-on collision on the Golden Gate Bridge while we were traveling overseas in May 2008. We returned home to the frenzy and panic at the trauma hospital, where Grace's large circle of friends and family kept vigil. Would Grace live? If she survived, would she have any brain function? What would her quality of life be like? How would she, along with her family and community, face the daunting unknowns that lay ahead? These questions consumed us all for the many weeks she was in a coma. We waited and fretted while the doctors performed surgery after surgery attempting to mend her shattered body.

The idea of making a film about Grace didn't surface until after she regained consciousness, nearly seven weeks after the accident. To everyone's shock, Grace awoke on the Fourth of July singing "You Are My Sunshine" and asking philosophical questions, indicating that her mental faculties were miraculously intact. Coincidentally, we had taken her daughter, Sabrina, to the Marin County Fair that day. As we walked around the dusty fairgrounds, Sabrina—who had been in the car with Grace and survived the accident with only minor injuries—brought up the idea of making a movie about her mom.

At that time, the trauma of the accident was still too painful and Grace's future still too uncertain for us to seriously contemplate filming. But as the weeks and months unfolded, Grace's recovery and spirit continually amazed and inspired us. We began to think that Sabrina's idea held real promise. As seasoned producers of social issue and educational documentaries, we were ready to dig into a more artistic project and eager to create a verité film that followed a deeply personal story over time. Mark was also itching to move out of the editing room and pick up his camera again, getting back to his love of cinematography.

In 2009, near the end of thirteen months in residential rehabilitation hospitals, Grace was released for an afternoon to celebrate Sabrina's sixteenth birthday at a nearby Chinese restaurant. We videotaped the party as a trial run and were completely captivated by the experience; in our bones, we knew her homecoming and recovery would be a remarkable journey to follow. When Grace left the hospital for good a week later, we were there with our camera to start shooting in

earnest, never imagining this film would become such a passionate, consuming project for us for the next five years.

Right from the start we wanted the filmmaking to be as unobtrusive and observational as possible, so the two of us comprised the entire production crew. We had a unique opportunity to capture the experience in an extremely personal and intimate way, given our history and closeness with Grace, Fu, and Sabrina. All three of them gave us uncensored access to their lives, and we showed up as often as possible to bear witness to their unfolding new reality.

Helen conducted the many interviews with the family, as well as Grace's friends, doctors, and therapists—sometimes using formal interview setups, sometimes organically as scenes unfolded. Mark, who managed both camera and sound, frequently shot on his own, showing up at countless doctor's appointments and physical therapy sessions—as well as sleeping on the living room couch in order to capture the family routine through the night or to document five a.m. trips to the hospital for Grace's surgeries. To film during times when we weren't around, we gave Fu a small digital camcorder; two of the more poignant scenes in the film come from her footage.

While we set out to focus on Grace's recovery, Fu proved to be a compelling character in her own right. It wasn't until we were well into the editing process that we came to understand how much this was a story about the entire family—and especially the complex roles and relationship between Fu and Grace as caregiver and care receiver.

Though it was difficult at times to straddle the line between filmmaker and friend, there was a kind of magic in the intensity, intimacy, and emotion of the experience for all of us—and our friendships deepened through the process. For Grace, the filmmaking became a way to process her own feelings and experiences as she was going through them. For us, it was both a privilege and an emotional challenge to witness her arduous healing and rehabilitation process; her struggle to come to terms with her profound limitations and dependency; and her determination to make meaning out of her radically altered life and identity. We were often astonished at Grace's resilience in the face of great struggle, and it was heartbreaking to share in the profound loss she had to endure.

Grace hoped that something positive could come out of the accident, and she sees the film as a way to contribute something to the world—just one more piece in her long legacy of being of service to others as a physician and a Buddhist. We share that aspiration, believing that her story and the many lessons embedded within it will have a profound effect on audiences and will prove to be a far-reaching educational resource.

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