

# For Better or Worse: Remaining Together When Life is Difficult

by Chris Garner

The “new normal” – a term surely to become cliché in this generation’s cultures wars, but for Don and Peggy Marquard, it is a term that has come to symbolize the 48 years of their marriage and their life together. Life often takes unexpected turns, but for Don and Peggy, *normal* dramatically changed throughout their lives together. It began the day Peggy met Don on June 24, 1962. Don had an underdeveloped right arm caused by nerve damage as the result of the use of forceps during delivery. *Normal* changed when Peggy couldn’t conceive and they adopted, first Jody and then Troy into their lives. And again when Peggy became very ill; fighting 7 bouts with pneumonia in 11 months and in the process being diagnosed with Myasthenia Gravis, a life-threatening disease causing debilitating weakness of the skeletal muscles. Normal changed again when, unexpectedly, Peggy became pregnant at age 39 and then again at 42. Cancer diagnoses in 2006 and October, 2010 again changed *normal* for Don and Peggy as they looked to the twilight of their years together. Perhaps deviation from the expectations of *normal* might negatively affect many couples, but for Don and Peggy, unexpected life changes and difficulties are a part of who they are. Our hope is that you might be encouraged as you read this short account of their lives and marriage and perhaps that you might be challenged to persevere and work *with* your spouse through the difficulties you will experience in life.

It is possible that *normal* as many people experience normal was never a part of Don Marquard and Peggy Ulmer’s lives. Don grew up without any special treatment or allowances even though nerve damage at birth left his right arm with limited use. Peggy grew up as an exceptional athlete; horseback riding, playing baseball, and a star tennis player; even playing tennis on a men’s tennis team. Don was raised with the view that his physical problem was not a handicap and interestingly, Peggy had a roommate in college with the same difficulty (and raised in a similar manner), so when they met at their college Sunday school class, she also did not view Don as “handicapped.” They canoed and skied together; leading very active lives through their courtship, and when they married on June 27, 1964, Don and Peggy Marquard looked forward to a bright and promising future of ministering and working together.



The young couple decided to begin a family in the spring of 1966, but were not able to conceive. Dejected with this first setback in their marriage, they pursued adoption. Daughter Jody entered the Marquard home in November, 1967 and in the following year, the young family packed up and moved from Michigan to Texas for seminary. They found it difficult for *northerners* to connect in the southern culture, but eventually the walls came down as the couple built friendships working in churches and part time jobs to pay the bills and the cost of a seminary education. Fond remembrances of neighborhood volleyball games remind them of the great relationships they developed while in Texas. Adopting second child, Troy, in 1969, they thought they would remain in Texas after seminary and continue ministry there, but still more change was on the horizon.

Don received a call to be a worship pastor at a large Milwaukee, WI church in 1970 and enthusiastically entered into music ministry, developing an overall music program that included choirs for every age group and highlighted by a youth choir that travelled throughout the Midwest to minister musically in churches. The climate in Milwaukee didn't agree with Peggy and colds became pneumonia resulting in 7 bouts with pneumonia in 11 months. The pneumonia and increasing physical weakness led to hospitalization and a diagnosis of Myasthenia Gravis. Peggy's thymus gland, normally quite small in a mature adult, had grown to cover most of her chest and the required surgery removed a good portion of the growth, but revealed the gravity of her illness. Peggy's disease necessitated a move to the dryer climate of Arizona and while Don loved the ministry he was doing, there was never any thought or hesitation about remaining in Wisconsin; he knew it was something they had to do for his wife's health.

Peggy's health did not improve with the move to Arizona in 1971; in fact, for the next four years, she was constantly in and out of hospitals as doctors experimented with new medications attempting to help her, and the young family lived in fear that *any* illness, no matter how seemingly insignificant, might take Peggy's life. At one point in October 1972, doctors told Don that his wife would die, that there was nothing else they could do for her. She had been in the hospital for over two months and on life support for much of that time. Don prayed that the Lord would heal her or take her, but God told him that it was the wrong prayer, that he needed to pray that the Lord would help him to persevere through it all. Peggy went home from the hospital 17 days later and they both have persevered since.

Don and Peggy both agreed that only their faith in God and Peggy's great determination along with her prior excellent health and physical strength got them through a literal *Valley of the Shadow of Death*. During an interview at the time, Don told the Arizona Republic newspaper that they had learned to adjust and live with the serious circumstances they experienced. Peggy's parents moved to Arizona so her mother, Vera could assist with Peggy's care, the children and their home while Don worked in music ministry and aided as he was able. Vera was an important aspect of Peggy making it through that terrible season, although Don came to feel like a third party in the arrangement. There was no time for complaints because Peggy's life at that time was "a nightmare of physical defeats, but she refused to give up hope that she could have a normal life again." She learned from her tennis days that when life serves you a fast, hard serve, you hit it back.

Peggy's Myasthenia Gravis was so serious that she was admitted to the National Institute of Health in Bethesda, MD under a federal research program in 1975. Physicians removed the rest of her thymus growth and gradually, she began to recover. Although she still required the daily use of a pulmonary machine to help clear her lungs, by 1980, the Arizona Republic announced that Peggy had "won" the uphill fight against her illness. Life seemed to take on some sense of "normalcy," yet, their lives were to drastically change again when in late 1979 Peggy discovered that she was pregnant at age 39. Doctors advised her to abort the baby, but she refused and on June 7, 1980 delivered healthy son, Joel. Three years later, a healthy Noel came into the world bringing much joy to the Marquard home.

Life assumed some normalcy during the 1980s and 1990s; raising children, growing in their ministry and Peggy well enough to develop successful pet photography and breeding businesses. Yet, the

sense of normalcy was not to continue as Peggy's disease flared up again in 1995 and 1996 putting her on life support for 17 days in one stretch. Don stated in an interview that the biggest challenge in their relationship was the continual change of *normal*. They were never really able to flow with the changes couples usually see in marriage, but had to readjust many times to the enormous challenges entering their lives.

Another change struck in 2006 when Peggy was diagnosed with thymus cancer. Surgery removed the affected tissue and she declined radiation since doctors were sure they caught all of the cancer. The thymus cancer returned in 2010 in her liver. This time she endured chemotherapy and the cancer went into partial remission. Her doctor told them that 'her life was in God's hands' and most-likely, she wouldn't live another year. Yet, a year later, she was doing well, but thirteen months after partial remission, the cancer returned. As they considered whether she should endure another round of chemotherapy, Don and Peggy prayed for guidance. Don wasn't sure she would go through with it, but as Peggy said, 'I'm a fighter, always have been, always will be. I have to fight this cancer, it is in my nature.' This has been the reality in 41 of their 48 years of marriage. She has been in hospital numerous times, endured pneumonia 50 times, has used a pulmonary machine daily for over 40 years, has been on steroids for 40 years and near death more times than they care to remember. Peggy has fought through it all and Don has persevered through it with her.

What has kept them together through all of this pain and suffering? Peggy said that a weekend Marriage Encounter in the early 1980s saved their marriage. At the retreat, they learned about the fears they each had (there were many), they were able to empathize with each other and began working together better. Don said that divorce simply was not an option. Had he thought about quitting? Sure the thought had crossed his mind, but his parents, older brothers and extended family as well as Peggy's brother and family had modeled marriage as a commitment. Don and Peggy were committed in sickness and health, no matter what.

Don and Peggy Marquard are an inspiration and a testimony of what Biblical marriage should look like. They are quick to point out that their marriage is not perfect, but it is not about the broken dreams or what they didn't get or get to do in life. Life together is about what they have and it may not be a lot by the world's standards, but they have each other, their family and a faith that there is more to life than what we see. They have learned to consider what is truly worth arguing about and dropping the rest, they learned to take an interest in the other's pursuits and to grow beyond their individual interests. They are still growing in their marriage, even after 48 years! Life has not been easy for this couple, but through tremendous obstacles encountered and the enormous effort required for Peggy to remain alive, they have raised four children and ministered to a multitude of people, touching lives and demonstrating the love of Jesus Christ. God answered Don's prayer for perseverance and one can feel the peace and the joy this couple enjoys together today. They have remained together through life's difficulties and demonstrated what it means to love one another – for better or worse.

