

Alton Dillard

Alton is a 50ish single straight Black male who lives in the Windsor neighborhood of east Denver. He has been at FUSD since 1966, brought by his grandmother Ruth Watson who was a long-time member of the church. Alton fervently eschews committees, but as one of the few Black members is frequently called for his perspective on a broad range of issues. Alton is a veteran professional communicator, high school basketball coach, and cyclist. He works as Communications Manager for the Denver County Clerk and Recorder which administers elections.

At the start of 2020, I was focused on tackling white supremacy in the context of the covenanting process at church. That work has been ongoing under the broader umbrella of anti-racism back to the days of Revs. Dick Henry and James Hobart. As a Black long-time member of the congregation, I am frequently a de facto member of many teams, so I was aware of the work being done on the covenant and asked for my perspective.

As an ISTJ type on the Myers Briggs personality inventory, I was built for 2020. I'm a lone wolf anyway, and I was able to keep my job and work remotely. I wasn't bothered to be working from home.

Because I had trained in emergency operations communications, I was deployed in April 2020 to the emergency homeless shelters that were set up at the Coliseum and the National Western Complex. The homeless shelters provided perspective on my own work-at-home situation, and particular perspective on women experiencing homelessness. A lot of the people who were homeless didn't care for congregate settings anyway, and COVID amplified the risk of being together. The setting raised anxieties and fears about homeless people being kept in cattle pens, so it was important to tour the media through the facilities to explain the setup, show them what was there, and dispel those imaginings. But the presence of the media was triggering for some women and people identifying as women, particularly those who had experienced domestic violence or harassment. I helped the media get their story while preserving anonymity for the residents.

While much of my work was from home, in 2020 Denver had its first presidential primary in 20 years. That meant elections staged in March, June, and November, and having to be downtown more to work them. My office is by Civic Center, so I witnessed skirmishes with law enforcement during the period of racial unrest. I was glad that the long-developed Spidey sense for that kind of danger moved me to clear out of that part of town before things got too serious.

I consider myself higher risk in general. Being a Black man in America is an extreme sport. That is why I'm not an adrenaline junky. I've done skiing, snow-boarding, and white water rafting because I live in Colorado and those are essential Colorado things, but I don't need to take chances. Black 101 is being taught how to interact with a traffic stop. Even my friend who is so White she is nearly translucent had to give her biracial child The Talk in an effort to keep him alive. I have a 27-year-old stepson who is Black, White, and Pakistani and who was in elementary school during 9/11, so I know it from the parent's end, too.

One thing I'm always keenly aware of is that I'm wired to recognize what's real vs. what's right. I don't participate in a lot of our congregational handwringing on concepts like concentration of wealth because I understand that has been in existence since the founding of the country so its not a surprise to me. I deal in a world of reality. And I guess it helps that many of the wealthy people I know are generous to other people in need.

In Colorado where there are so few Black people, everything has to be an alliance. No amount of organization is going to recreate the Montgomery bus boycott. We have to learn to play chess instead of checkers for either politics or protest movements. I'm not a group/organization person.

I felt no great shifts from the past year because of George Floyd's murder. In my world it is another in a long litany of events... Philando Castille, Ahmad Arbury, Elijah McClain... This is not anecdotal where I come from. It is normative. I've never understood people who were shocked about the fact that there more police shootings within 24 hours of the conviction of Chauvin. This is reality.

The Sunday after the 2016 presidential election, I watched the congregation recoil as though from tangible shock waves. I did a 360-degree look around and wondered why people were surprised at the outcome. How long have you lived in this country? A part of me is saying *Welcome to my world*. Where everything you're about and stand for is called into question, everything you've worked for can be ripped out from under you.

Fast forward to the current administration, I admit it is a relief to open my phone every day and not have to wonder what new atrocity is afoot. But I don't forget Biden's role in the 1994 crime bill that put generations of Blacks behind bars. Even though he's apologized and committed to make amends, I stay wary.

I've been a member of both major political parties and an unaffiliated voter most of my life. Certain issues I'm liberal on, like who wants to love whom. Others I lean more conservative: we need to bring home more of our hard-earned money. I skew to the center on law enforcement because we forget there are predatory knuckleheads on our streets. We forget the proliferation of mass shootings when we talk about defunding police. I am a big believer in second chances, but I'm not a believer in eighth chances. I understand that addiction is a disease; in the pre-Reagan era there was a lot more treatment and there should be again. No one should get a third strike over shoplifting bread to feed their family, but I get real conservative when people hurt people, especially children, elders, or spouses.

As far as participating in social justice actions during the pandemic, I worked on a lot of the cycling protests that occurred. I ride with the Major Taylor Cycling Club of Denver. (He was a world champion cyclist in 1899, the first African American world champion in any sport.) Because of that affiliation the cycling community here, which tends toward whiteness, reached out to us to lead a series of solidarity rides with young cycling activists. It was a chance to be outdoors, masked post-George Floyd in a timeframe when people were still washing their groceries because we were still unsure how the virus was transmitted. The cycling community participated across its breadth and depth, including Black Girls Do Bike, Bicycle Colorado, Bike Denver, the ragtag activist band, and the Skid Marks. The only negative responses I witnessed during the cycling protest were the *All Lives Matter* catcalls. The strongest verbal dissent we

heard was in the South Pearl retail district, [just a few blocks from the kitchen where we sat for this interview].

That *reality vs. right* wiring seems to help me see things coming that other people can't conceive. One of the things that led to the outcome of the 2016 election was the fact that Trump tapped into the disaffected Anglo base and dominated the rust belt. The Dems did a poor job of creating a compare-and-contrast. I recognize the primal, brain-stemmish way people are wired. There are people who think like the former president, and he lends them voice. Having worked for the US Senate and both political parties, it is clear to me that both parties have their extremes. Once, the difference was each party's ideas about the role of government in bringing about mutually desired ends. Now, politics have evolved into who can verbally flog the other side to your way of thinking. Civics lessons on the role and function of government and citizens aren't taught anymore. Discourse is out the window and may never return. The devolution of journalism to include anyone who holds a cellphone makes it harder to evaluate fact. And people mistake a google search for critical thinking and research. I love America. We're a young country. We have the ability to do democracy, but upcoming generations need skills in civics, evaluating information, and thinking critically if our democracy is going to live to be old.

I got my fill of electronic communication during the pandemic. Electronica has an adverse effect on communication. Sometimes we simply need to be able to look each other in the eye and talk in person. When friends and colleagues were comfortable sitting in a park or on the hatches of our respective vehicles, I did that. Not everyone is, and our situations are so individual you just have to respect what the other person's risk tolerance is. The first person who brought me a mask left it on hood of my car, fearful of taking the virus home to his new grandbaby.

I am big supporter of small business and restaurants. Particularly after the outbreak of xenophobia around Chinese people in relation to the virus, I made it a point to rotate among my three favorite Chinese restaurants: Golden Shanghai on Parker Road, Shanghai Kitchen in Greenwood Village, and Moongate Asian in Lowry.

I didn't crack socially under the shutdown until my birthday month of July. I do think those were related; for a Black man in America every birthday over 18 is one to celebrate. Since my mom and her husband are both in their 80s, I was careful to protect them, but not being able to hug my mom for a year was hard. In the end, I got to celebrate another birthday. In July, I started getting out and socializing more at a distance while I could be outside with summer. My mom lived to have her birthday in 2021.

I was a latch-key kid at seven or eight years old, and that built up a self-reliance that brought me strength through the pandemic. It helped me separate wants from needs.

Being a single man during COVID was challenging. Masked dates were awkward but tapped into that resilience. And there was a lot of communication around various risk tolerances. I learned to get good at the technology so that chatting online was doable, but I drew the line at online dance parties; they made me miss the real thing too much.

I don't see any lingering economic effects from COVID. Traffic is now back to pre-pandemic levels. Governments are flush with cash. Some small businesses were lost but others are coming back or coming on now.

One upside of the experience is that it teaches self-reliance to people who might not have thought they were self-reliant. And it should make us take personal interaction far less for granted. As the population readjusts to being back in the masses, we will need to check in with each other more and establish mutual boundaries within our different risk tolerances. As for church, I'm a hugger, but given the broad age demographic of our congregation, I'll ask now.ra