

Barry Osborne

Barry is a 40-ish white male (he him/they their pronouns) who lives in the Mayfair Neighborhood of east Denver with his wife Hillary Barrett-Osborne, their 14-year-old daughter and ten-year-old son. Barry is a musician who plays with Distance Walk, which also includes FUSD member Yoni Fine. Barry works as the Associate Director of Marketing for Swallow Hill Music. He served on the FUSD church board through late summer 2020 and advised the church high school youth group. Hillary coordinates FUSD's efforts for Family Promise.

At the beginning of 2020 I was serving on the FUSD board of trustees and advising the youth group, and my wife Hillary was coordinating Family Promise, so I was aware of how much was happening and how many groups were meeting in the building every night. Rev. Mike says that Unitarians are few in number but are reliably the ones who show up. That felt true to me.

By the first of February, the international and national news informed us that a viral threat was mounting far away, and by mid-February it seemed likely that the church would be affected. Since I work for a music organization where people also gather face-to-face, I felt nervous about how an oncoming virus might affect us.

Early on, everyone was in a lot of denial. We couldn't wrap our heads around what an outbreak might mean. On February 29, I attended a packed house presentation of *Rearview Mirror* on stage in the church sanctuary. I remember talking about how glad we were to have gotten the performances in, since cities like Seattle were beginning to shut down. Later that night friends of mine threw a Leap Year dance party, and I went out at 10:30 p.m. I never go out that late anymore, but I did on this occasion because I thought I might not be able to do it again very soon. The next weekend my band played a show, and I hugged my friends as I have always done out of reflex, but we were nervously joking that we had to cut that out.

By the following Wednesday at the FUSD board meeting we knew that life was about to fundamentally shift, akin to tectonic plates slipping. On Friday March 13, Swallow Hill announced closure until April 1. We knew April 1 was an arbitrary date, that there was a good chance the closure would be extended much longer, but no one at the time projected it would be nearly a year. Very quickly, we all stopped seeing people. It was surreal, scary, goofy. No one had any real answers, and we had completely no faith in our federal government. Our fears and concerns were borne out in the coming months.

I felt fortunate, particularly working in the music industry, to have kept my job, to have a wonderful house, and be able to work from home. I rarely had to interact in scenarios that didn't feel safe. In Mayfair, we are surrounded by parkways that are great walking spaces. I live with anxiety and realized early on that I needed to stay active to stay mentally well. Every day I put on headphones and walked for 90 minutes. I called them my *(Keep Your) Distance Walks*. I still make sure I get out every day.

When you walk the same space day after day you notice little things. I saw how different trees blossom differently even within the same species. Someone in my neighborhood makes hobo medallions and pins them to trees and poles; I don't know how long they'd been doing that, but I noticed it for the first time on my walks. People chalked messages on sidewalks and left painted stones for others to find. All were reassuring reminders that we were all at arms-length even if we were not physically with each other.

Work was erratic -- some days the volume was more than you could handle, other days nothing. Now (in May 2021) things are just getting back to where they were at the end of February 2020. We are all so ingrained to be productive and to *Go!Go!Go!* The period from March through May 2020 required that you learn to sit with not doing things. Some people felt survivor's guilt. Particularly people who knew first responders, medical workers, or law enforcement sometimes felt their own work was meaningless by comparison. I am just old enough to recognize that life goes in waves. The best thing I could do in that moment was to be responsible and stay on the sidelines.

On April 7, the day John Prine died, a good college friend also died. His death was not related to COVID but brought on by a lot of personal struggles. The day before George Floyd was murdered, my friend Bran died of colon cancer. It was hard to wrap your head around people dying when you couldn't hop on a plane and go to a memorial service. It was hard to process *Gone* when you couldn't experience the loss with friends and families. These weren't COVID-related deaths. What must it have been like to experience those? We were all grieving the loss of our daily lives even if the old ways weren't so great. And then we had to grieve the deaths. I had my wife draw me a tattoo and got the band to record some songs I'd written. That's what Bran would have wanted so that's what we did. He would have said *Get your ass into the studio and record your songs.*

I try to be emotionally honest, but it was a confusing time. Some moments you were grieving and sad, other times happy and joyous, all against a backdrop of the world collapsing. It seemed especially important to be mindful of where others might be as we were all navigating minefields. It was such a vague space.

Things changed for me with George Floyd's murder on Memorial Day. I could not ignore the social pressure of the outside world. I spend a lot of time on social media and, for a while, we needed to rage, but I did not think that was effective in the long run. I am dubious of social media's capacity to change hearts and minds, though I suppose it can keep you bonded. In early June, some trusted friends and I went to a protest rally at Civic Center Park. I got to see the homeless camps that were on the news. One protestor, a Black man chained to the statue of a civil war soldier, became iconic in the local media and witnessing that in person was powerful.

I felt resolved in my support of Black Lives Matter and being part of that action felt like a right thing to do. I grew worried as the month wore on and some white people seemed to use the protest as a proxy to party. I wanted to make sure that when I did go, I represented myself responsibly, subdued and bearing witness and did not engage in a performative act. I was there to support, not lead anything.

In June, my wife and I went on a bicycle march through Denver, which felt a safer way to maintain distance. It started at City Park, ran through Five Points, and down the Platte River Trail to the Capitol. There we took a knee and went to pay respects at a George Floyd mural created by Detour and Hiero on East Colfax. I was conflicted, wanting to show support but there was so much we didn't know about the virus. It didn't feel safe. Even trying to stand solely in the mindset of supporting Black Lives the right action was rarely clear: knowing that minority communities are getting hit harder by the virus, does a bunch of white guys showing up help or not? You try to make the best-informed decision you can at the moment and live with the understanding that you might be wrong.

In July, a violin vigil was organized at the Aurora City Center for Elijah MacClain who had been killed by police the summer before. The vigil was powerful because Elijah was a gentle soul who played violin. I liked the concept of connecting the protest with the true person we were centering. The cops were

unable to come clean about killing this kid, kept trying to frame it as a medical intervention gone wrong. And then they felt afraid at being confronted by so many people who would not accept that fiction. The event got much bigger than anticipated. My friend and I arrived a little late and the string players were already closed off. Violinists were standing on the lawn playing instruments while the police pepper-sprayed them. My friend and I hung back and watched the musicians find another spot. Two violinists from Los Angeles and Atlanta respectively, performed on the back of a truck, and hundreds of people accompanied them with their strings. Thousands of people watched. The organizers included some planned pieces and asked instrumentalists to make a drone for a few minutes. That was powerful. The friend I went with is a musician I make music with, a woman in her mid-20s. I remember thinking, these problems are not going away. We need to show up. I wanted her to have a picture to identify herself at this vigil 50 years from now, to know she is part of a lineage of people showing up. Helicopters flew overhead, police and news choppers. It was surreal.

Pressure began mounting across the country for initiatives to defund the police. I am the son of a policeman. I believe reallocating some funds to put the money into hiring professionals and empowering services that can help, who can de-escalate, who will serve beyond policing. In Denver we've seen the need for people who can de-escalate a crisis. Some of our institutions take people and turn them into tools for maintaining order, and some police officers have bought into a system that doesn't value them. In that context I can have empathy for people who end up doing horrendous things. My dad thought he was contributing to society as a combat veteran. I grieve for the violence inflicted on my dad and how he became a tool of that violence. If all life is sacred and worthy, then we need to change or move on from institutions that do more damage than good. If you talk about social justice, you have to consider those lives as well, painful as it may be. I think of the Robbie Fulks' tune "America is a Hard Religion."

By mid-late July some of the protests seemed to drift away from messaging about BLM and it sometimes felt like it was becoming more about the white liberal community venting anger and touting socialism. Even if intentions were good, some of their actions seemed like performative hijacking.

The pandemic was hard on my kids in many of the ways that have been documented for children generally. I believe in giving kids space to figure things out, but there has been so much that requires lots of heavy adult involvement. I feel grateful that we can provide health care. Michael Stipe of REM recently took part in an online mental wellness forum and the interviewer asked him about creativity and resiliency over the past year. He said, "I can't imagine being 14 and going through this." I thought he was right on with that observation. I am proud of both of my kids for how they handled the year, but I recognize they'll be affected by this year long after I'm dead. My grandparents were adolescents during the depression and there were cliches about it. What did my 10-year-old son pick up this year that will influence what he does 50 years from now? What can we do to help him choose things that are sustaining?

I worry about the long-term health effects on kids. I am vaccinated and trust the vaccines based on our current understanding, but what effect might the virus have on people far into the future? What will we learn about the so-called long haulers and the variants? What are social side effects of having a vaccinated and unvaccinated divide? We went a long time without a pandemic, but the next one will come sooner, I think. Did we learn something from this, or will it be a whole new learning experience in 10 years? I wonder about ripple effects.

The pandemic created a need to be intentional about the people you held onto. Some friends floated away when our circles constricted. It was interesting to note which people you showed up for and who

showed up for you; to examine the nature of the relationships that kept you together even if you were not physically seeing each other.

I was reminded this year of the power of music. I could physically play it, share it among friends. There was something divine about it (said as an atheist). I drew strength from the basics: Family, friends, music, daily walks, storytelling. I doubled down on things I loved and found new depth. Since September, I have journaled every day as an artist's exercise to exorcise the detritus and free up mental space. My daughter has asked for these journals when I die and the idea that my reflections might be useful to her even after I'm gone appeals to me.

I passed time watching Netflix and reading.

Every Sunday I met on Zoom with FUSD high school kids. The point was to show up and be present, though they got into some heavy conversations especially around BLM. These kids are not naïve. They are passionate and care about things, and they have an idea they can tend to their immediate world and the ripples from that can do some good in the larger world. Some weeks, my kids and the high school kids were low energy and not engaged. A week or two later they were popping with ideas and excitement.

My music community includes quite a few friends in their 20s. These folks are ready to move on from the façade of the American capitalist dream. They are unapologetically socialists and pro-union. I find that exciting. A lot of my generation and I have focused on keeping our heads down, Gen-X being sandwiched between these two, much larger generations. I'm often the most left-leaning person in a conversation, but it is fun to be in conversations with these young folks where I'm outflanked. That has been a joy of my life in the last year. I've loved being in my 40s.

For my musical community, 2020 was a brutal year. Swallow Hill laid off roughly 2/3 of its staff and all the teachers. Mine was the only one of four positions in my department that continued. I can't overstate how awful that was. At the same time, some of my artist friends got through this better than the rest of the 9-5 world because their economic existence was already tenuous, and they had the skills at living on very little. Some of my best friends are truly creative people, world class musicians, but they know how to live in the gig economy. Nothing is beneath them. Some of those folks saw the rest of the world panic to lose what they had thought were stable jobs, and their response was "Hey, shit is getting weird, but I've been here all along." People who were melting down were those who imagined the ground beneath their feet was solid. For artists, the ground was always shifting, and they developed sea legs for it. These are tough people, though they don't exude toughness.

Our biggest loss to this pandemic was the illusion that this brutal capitalist system we live in is healthy for any of us. That recognition is necessary for change. The inequalities of our financial framework, the scale of layoffs, and health disparities could not be ignored unless you were deep in denial, or unless the inequity was working for you, and you're inclined to hoard your ill-gotten gains. The recognition was there before but the pandemic emphasized things. People aren't inclined to be polite anymore about the need for things to change.

I'm excited for things to open up again, but wary of going back to what was normal. My intention is to keep focused on core things and doing less. I'm not convinced I'll be able to do that because it seems

like a switch gets flipped and a kind of momentum takes hold. But I want to maintain some inner stillness as I move forward.

I won't be meeting with youth group any more as my daughter moves into high school. If people ask me to join committees, I'm telling everyone that I'm taking the summer off. I'll be around and engaged but I'm backing off for a bit. To reflect. To choose a path forward.