

Charlotte Braud Kern

Charlotte is in her 50s and forms a multi-racial family with her husband Stefan and her away-to-college child Annie in the Park Hill neighborhood of Denver. Charlotte is regularly featured for her beautiful singing voice in FUSD services and stage productions. Charlotte has attended FUSD for 20 years. She teaches art and music to Denver Public Schools elementary students.

At the beginning of 2020 I was doing the *Rearview Mirror* production at the church. Over the six months of rehearsing and finally performing in the show, I made deeper connections with people at church than I'd made over 20 years previous. It was nice.

On the introvert/extrovert scale I occupy the middle. I'm a musician, usually making music with other people. That was immediately over with the pandemic shutdown. I suffered from not being able to make music. It hurt like homesickness. Viscerally. Sometimes I broke down crying. I missed church, but most of all the music-making.

My husband is an extreme introvert. He was in heaven throughout the pandemic. (He is now suffering at the prospect of emergence.) His unflappability brought me strength, calming and helping me see the bright side of our predicament. Amid my own stress, I haven't had to hear his. Still, the duality of our two responses was hard.

I live far from my family and am used to being away from them, but as the imposed isolation went on, I missed them more and more. I did see them in June for one day but since then, only on Facetime. I didn't see Annie as much as usual, though I did see them a couple of times. I miss my family. I missed a year in the life of my 80-year-old parents and we haven't many years left. I talk to my mother every morning now at 7:30. Now that I'm vaccinated, I am looking forward to leaving the day after school is out and driving to stay with my parents for a few days.

Throughout the pandemic, I just kept thinking that life as would return to something more normal in a few weeks. Through the spring of 2020, I did not see classes at all, but left lessons (mostly artwork) that students were supposed to do on their own.

I was surprised to find that I really missed my work. On the day they let us go into the building to pick up materials, I cried. There were still materials out on tables from when we had left in a hurry in March, and I didn't know when we'd be back. I knew that I would not see the 5th graders who were leaving the school again. I was so sad and tearful.

I took the time off from school and tried to enjoy it. We had a great garden. Long walks. House projects. I enjoyed being with my husband. In many ways, it was a nice summer. I made 25 quilts, resurrecting a skill I had rarely used since my child was born. I quilted all summer until Thanksgiving without a break. I would listen to music.

The choir met most weeks during the pandemic. I had most of the choir members record themselves singing individually and we made a video for Brian [Stone, FUSD Choir Director] to

express our appreciation for him. But singing together in the same place is something you just cannot do in COVID and that has been a great loss. I also sing with the Colorado Symphony Chorus and came to dread those rehearsals because seeing 150 faces singing and not hearing them is not very uplifting. I will be so *VERY* happy when we can all get back together to sing.

Lia [Davis, the FUSD music director] was my savior. What would I have done without her? Even when we couldn't sing in proximity, Lia arranged socially distanced opportunities for us to make music. Sometimes at her house on her front porch or in her back yard, with her playing the piano while we sang at safe distance. It was a lifesaver.

Generally, the music in Sunday services has been a comfort during this time of isolation. Even Stefan was whistling during the 3/28/21 bird service. It was particularly perfect.

The racial justice protests were the major world events piercing my pandemic bubble last year. I must say that at first, I was not incited by the George Floyd killing. That's terrible, but that's also how it is. It reminded me of five years ago with the Michael Brown killing, an awful thing that happens to my people periodically. But as the litany of stories built, Philando Castile (5/17), Elijah MacLaine (8/19), Breonna Taylor (3/20), Rayshard Brooks (6/20), and so many others coupled with the looping video of George Floyd (5/20) being crushed for those long 9 minutes, it was outrageous.

I was glad to see the protests start. It felt like there was finally traction. I was highly conflicted about joining them because of the risk posed by COVID. Annie was home, and they and I went down to one protest but turned back because of a storm. Later, when I got paid for working with the Denver Children's Choir, I just gave the money to the support the expenses of protesters. I find myself collecting change from my wallet and car and sending it their way.

In my own home, the summer of protest surfaced some conflict and forced us to discuss things we hadn't. Early in our relationship I tended to have a lot of forgiveness when my husband spoke in ignorance. (He immigrated from Germany, adores his family, and can't imagine himself responsible for America's original sin.) He begs teasing because he knows he's not racist. But he's been here long enough now. There was change in our home last summer in how we responded when his casual jokes were hurtful. We had lots of discussion as a family about racism. There were changes. We're all growing, expecting more of each other, and that's better.

I also spoke from the FUSD pulpit during a Sunday service about my experience being a person of color in our predominantly white church. That also generated lots of thought and discussion.

I joined The Mountaintop, a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) UU group online. That has been an experience. Most of my circles are white, but this feels both weird and good. There are a lot of queer and black members in the group. I'm not a very spiritual person and they are. But still, it is nice to see all those brown faces and differently shaped eyes in people who still know the UU songs.

In some ways, though, associating with The Mountaintop has made even more real to me the tragedy that communities of color live with day to day. A lot of the BIPOC people in the group

live in Boulder. I attended a meeting after the mass murder of 10 people in a Boulder King Soopers grocery. The Boulder UU church is near the store, and many of the members knew people who were killed. Half the group is Asian, including a new friend from Virginia who joins us weekly. They were all reeling from the mass murder that seemed to target Asian people at a massage parlor in Georgia a week earlier in March 2021. It brought the hate crimes and deaths from gun violence close. There was no possibility of intellectual distancing.

We started teaching in person off and on from the beginning of the school year in August 2020. We started remote, then waves of kids returned in October. COVID resurfaced and we went back to remote through the new year. Since February, everyone who wants to be in person is, and all who want to learn remotely do. I teach a hybrid model, as does my husband. As a teacher, I only see my group of kids. Classes have been combined and the classroom extended into the hall to allow for social distancing.

I've enjoyed teaching art and music during this time. I've tried to make the activities a lot of fun for the kids this year, and focus on enriching experiences, but I didn't teach a lot of content. I am making videos with my students featuring them dancing, singing, and making music. We do some of our lessons in the auditorium, spread out in the art room, or go outside. We do a lot of dancing and music appreciation. We did BIPoC music and art all semester, starting with African American, then Latino, now Indigenous Native American. As I moved outside my own culture, I've thought, "Now I feel as clueless as white people are."

I like to keep busy, and I have with singing, gardening, and quilting. I haven't been able to read, which I love to do but can't now. I don't want to watch movies. My hands need to move. When I quit quilting in November, I took up crocheting and beading. I seem to have processed the pandemic through my fingers.

COVID reached my extended circle this year: My uncle had cancer got COVID, and succumbed to it. My nephew got sick at the end of last summer and is still hospitalized, has been sick ever since. My cousin's son got it. Half of my family got somewhat sick, almost all of them younger ones. Miraculously, Annie stayed well although they had to quarantine for 10 days. Like their father, they loved it.

I'm looking forward to opening up, though I'm not going out for dinner or to movies, mostly out of solidarity with people who can't yet get the vaccine. I'm wondering about how people will cope with the protracted loss of physical touch. I was never a big hugger, but now I'm struggling with the thought that I don't want to be in close proximity of others. I don't know how long it will take for that to resolve. I want to sing in house concerts, but the thought of having a group of people come together, or of going to the movies, does make me a bit anxious.

Maybe COVID opened people's eyes to the inequities of our systems. The election did the same thing. They only allowed mail-in ballots to accommodate COVID but doing so finally made the voting process fair. Maybe it takes something this *BIG* for people to see how unfair things have been for so many people in this country for so long. It is sad. Look at how deeply uncomfortable we all had to get.

The people whose job it was to lead did not. But teachers and health care workers did the daily job and carried the burden. As we emerge from the pandemic year, I hope we will keep our eyes open. It is too easy to relax and forget.