

## Colleen Bryan

*Colleen is a late-60ish white female who lives with her husband Ted in a multi-cultural family in the Platte Park neighborhood of southeast Denver. She is long retired from a career in government and health policy. At FUSD over 47 years, Colleen has been a director of Religious Exploration and a member of the board of trustees, steered redesign of our Faith in Action efforts, and co-led long-range planning. She prizes a "FUSD Cooks" apron received for culinary contributions to various church events.*

On 2/29/20, the Saturday before the pandemic closed Denver, my four-year-old grand-girl Luella and I had front-row seats to FUSD's *Rearview Mirror*, sitting next to Ruth Steiner. My girl danced in the aisles and left singing show tunes.

My daughter, Karmen, and I anticipated a mother-daughter trip to a Broadway play in New York City and the Smithsonian African American and Native American Museums in Washington D.C. in late March. Daughter Rachel, her household, and her dad planned to attend the biennial Celebration of their Haida/Tlingit tribes in Alaska in June. By mid-March, all these trips were cancelled in COVID shutdowns.

When the shutdown came, and even as the economy incrementally reopened throughout the year, I felt nervous to be among the group counseled to *stay safe at home*. It was a claustrophobic, tight-fitting existence. I couldn't help wondering whether people would remember we existed as they resumed the bustle of their lives.

I live inside a multi-cultural family with Native American (husband and daughters), African American (daughter), and white members (me). That experience requires me to feel the daily rub of cultures, to examine our white supremacy culture through eyes other than those I was born to, to attempt sharing privilege and to realize the limitations of sharing while the institutional constructs of dominant privilege remain.

My grand-daughter, Luella, was born into this cultural collage on the cusp of the 2016 election. She is a bit of a talisman for me, a focus for my commitment and my actions, a reason to move intentionally, deliberately forward. She has strong able parents, and we all try to share what we believe/hope will be important as she grows. Some of our connection is personal: I hold visceral memory of her jumping on my couch and sinking into a long snotty-nosed hug in early-March 2020. "Oh Granma, I love you so much...!" But beyond her personal survival, I want her to help others in her generation navigate a fraught and uncertain future.

Luella joined me intermittently on the porch around school closures and quarantines. It felt imperative to share the importance of an interconnected web in this confusing time when we were all being counseled that safety equated to separation. We toured Halloween costumes and held Christmas on the front lawn, wrote stories, and played with the dollhouse. She staged video adventures about escaping floods in desert canyons and sent instructive videos on Christmas colors. She poked her head in the door to look longingly into my living room and see what had

changed. The first day she was allowed to walk into the house in early May 2021, she proclaimed, "At least the kitchen is not ruined!" Mostly, the year was a cold, cold winter.

My older daughter (34-years-old) and her husband were furloughed through the spring, but both their jobs eventually held steady. He returned to on-site work in aeronautical navigation mid-summer, in an industry upended by the pandemic's effect on travel. Her position focuses on health equity for Native Americans. This year, of course, that job was all-COVID all the time, as she sought to support the efforts of Colorado's Native communities. Born into a tribe that experienced decimation from virus, COVID more than resonated with her; she worked feverishly to protect her dad and Native elders as cultural treasures. Lots of virtual meetings trying to secure resources (PPE, water, ambulances, money) for the reservations, negotiating for ventilators and deflecting offers to substitute a good deal on refrigerator trucks. I was glad for the persistence and negotiating skills she learned at school in India. Doing such serious work from home was tricky with a somewhat feral Luella weaving between in-person and remote learning. It sparked questions like "Granma, why do white people live so much longer than other people?"

I was grateful for the leadership of Colorado's Governor and that of some of his peers in the void of national leadership on COVID. I watched him try to balance our fierce Western independence and skepticism of government, while responding to the inexorable, fast-moving realities of a deadly pandemic and wildfires. I was deeply grateful for the commitment of public servants working to exhaustion in the same interest. And for all the essential personnel who took risks with their lives for those of us privileged to stay safely at home. I noted with empathy when a wobble set in for all these groups as the crises compounded. Human beings are wired for adrenalin-infused spurts of action to bridge crises, not to maintain that poisonous high-alert over months and years. The Jenga tower always topples.

Colorado's version of the pandemic in 2020 included a spring shutdown, summer thaw, an autumn bump, and virulent deadly resurgence over the winter holidays, on the cusp of a hoped-for vaccine. But the COVID calendar was not the only one in play:

Summer brought the country to the streets with demands to end the murder of Black and Brown people and deliver at last on the promise of racial equity. For the first time since young adulthood, I chose not to participate in these street actions. After lots of handwringing, indecision, and guilt, my daughter offered me a bit of grace. "Mom, I know you want to be there, but you would actually be a hindrance. The organizers of these protests don't have the luxury to accommodate people with disabilities and mobility problems. If the police charge in or throw tear gas, you on your cane can't run. And if you fall, what are you doing to people who might stop to help?" It felt like grand rationalization, but I switched to supporting more aggressively from a distance, trying to level the scales of justice. Contacting politicians and executives. Doubling payments to emergency service personnel. Sending more money out the door to BLM organizations, to bail out protestors swept up in police actions, to food banks and homeless shelters, to musicians and artists in the hope of protecting some creative force that we would all need to survive these punishing times.

The climate was on its own escalating timetable: From mid-summer, we saw record-breaking heat and expanding drought; record wildfires raged for 112 days – racing toward each other across the state and threatening to merge into one apocalyptic inferno. As an asthmatic, the distant fires and smoke-filled skies translated to weeks of dragging breath, hovering inside around HEPA filters, and sucking on inhalers. Rachel and Luella told of driving through mid-day smoke that blotted out the sky as the Cameron Peak Fire chased them out of a Labor Day campout at Red Feather Lakes.

Not to mention the distraction of the endless, surreal, and toxic political campaign that went on (for years, really), like a clown car one knows is loaded with explosives, running amuck in every direction, drawing energy and attention away from solutions to the real risks that threaten life and future. The pandemic arrived as I already felt battered by the long political struggles leading up to Trump's election. His administration fed intentional constant chaos to distract from their wholesale appropriation of public resources and shredding of institutional safeguards. Misogyny and racism, both central struggles of my lifetime, seemed to gain legs and resurge under his presidency. And his handling of the virus resulted in many more deaths.

The uncertainty of early months with the virus destabilized my medically-at-risk 29-year-old daughter who lives with disabilities, and all rockslides in her world pile up at our door. Still, she continues in her own apartment about four minutes from our house with increased support from her family. Denver Indian Health pulled her in for vaccines in March 2021. Now mid-July, after seven months of unemployment, she is starting another part-time job that we hope can accommodate her special needs.

Ted and I are grateful to have come through well, so far. Despite the *Stop! Drop! and Roll!* of pandemic and wildfire response, we managed to walk almost daily in a three-mile tree shaded radius of our house and to cover 1200 miles in a year. I got six weeks of swimming in between surges of the virus and went virtual with the weekly Tai Chi. Ted puzzled endlessly and met weekly with his friend Alex for a socially distanced session of their Old Lazy Guys of America (OLGA's) club. Ted worked his garden, drawing on decades of faithful composting. I canned for a solid month. FUSD shut down for in-person services in March and jumped immediately into Zoom with sustaining messaging and music programming. Many times, the music or the message brought me to tears.

Beyond that, Ted and I settled in and went nowhere. Only a handful of times in a year did anyone cross our threshold. We had groceries and medications delivered. I cooked dinner, kept house, and watched all the Scandinavian dramas. The noise in my head kept me from reading, though I listened to a lot of podcasts. I floundered for a sense of purpose shut off from the people or causes I care about. A stuffed bear, greeting cards, and Christmas tree alternated in my front window in a vague attempt to signal through the glass. When my neighbors clanged pans in support of emergency responders each evening at dusk, I joined them from the porch and howled until spring.

DNA-sparked genealogy got considerable use during 2020. In our family, it led to Ted being discovered by the progeny of an unknown brother (Michael, now deceased). Following a DNA lead on a baby adopted from his 20-year-old Haida mother in Nebraska in 1944, Michael's granddaughter found Ted. The circumstances surrounding this adoption and Ted's own parentage are shrouded in the history of WWII, cultural intersections across thousands of miles, and Native babies ending up in (surely better!) white homes. (Luella again: *How can you lose a baby?*) Ted experienced waves of grief, excitement, and outrage; thrills at the thought that he shared with his brother an avid love of reading and a goofy sense of humor; questions about his relationship to the man who reared him. It forced a foundational restructuring of the narrative of his life and those of his parents, which he is still working to transform to story. One of his sisters died in March and the other seems in her final days as of this writing, even as he seeks to redefine family. At age 75, it is a lot.

My front porch provided an unexpected opportunity for a semblance of circling round. A propane heater, table, and rocking chairs formed a small place of welcome. Luella and I held masked visits with separate snacks, books, and art projects to keep our relationship smoldering. Friends and family occasionally stopped for visits. I watched the birds build tiered homes in the two big maple trees. In January 2021, the idea for this congregational narrative took form and by March, fellow congregants began coming to tell their stories. Both the telling and the witnessing felt important.

Our family recognizes our privilege and our luck -- having homes and family and enough continuing income. The precautions worked; no one in our inner circle died of the virus. Many of our friends and neighbors across Denver lost jobs, homes, livelihoods, education, and the businesses that gave structure to our beloved city. Greed abounded, but so did generosity and kindness.

Altogether, my year was a story of uncertainty and angst, emotional (if not material) privation punctuated by unexpected grace. Post-vaccine, it is easier to see lights flickering in the darkness where, for long stretches of the past year, none were visible.

Going forward, may we remember how inextricably interwoven our lives are. May that awareness inform our efforts to distribute the common wealth. Now, breathing easier among other vaccinated folks, may we remember our children and immuno-compromised folks and people of other countries who cannot yet access vaccines, and act with urgency to protect everyone. Let us remember to cast a wide protective circle with respect to climate, racial and economic justice, recognizing that no life-in-a-bubble can hold us safely separate. Our well-being derives from assuring the health of the larger trembling web of life.