

Ellen Cahill

Ellen Cahill is in her 70s and lives in a four-generation multicultural household in the northeast Gateway neighborhood of Denver. Ellen is a retired public-school educator who has been a member of FUSD since 1977. She has served the congregation extensively on the Board of Trustees, with the RE Committee, and on the Faith in Action Council.

On March 7, 2020, Ellen Cahill's family hosted a 1-year birthday party for 50 people from their extended family. A week later, Colorado was shut down for COVID-19 and the family held their breath and hoped they had not exposed themselves or their guests to the frightening new virus.

The family embarked upon a journey where such worry would become familiar. Besides the baby, the four-generation multicultural household included two members in their late 20s, two people in their 50s, and Ellen in her late 70s. Each faced their own poorly understood risk in relation to COVID from within varying developmental imperatives. "Before March, we were focused on working out how to share baby Abigail with her father and his family. The virus introduced a whole new level of concern about how to make that happen safely, without bringing contagion to either household. We were numb and scared."

As Ellen and her family sought to protect themselves from a virus that was proving especially deadly to elders, actions like masking and requests for quarantine after travel were met with suspicions about other people's intentions. The family often saw its multicultural makeup (Filipino, White, Black) as adding strength and richness to their mix; now it provided opportunities for misinterpretation across cultural fractures and real anger. Heightened awareness of the anti-Asian sentiment within our culture left them alert for insults and prejudice, pulling on a disguising hat and shades for a simple trip to the market, feeling the need to protect each other around differences that had long seemed woven into the fabric of family.

There were lots of questions about what behavior was safe and not. Some members held up CDC guidelines as neutral authority on the evolving knowledge of the disease. Others felt that being asked to comply with the CDC meant they were judged unhealthy, riskier. As the family inside the household extended accordion-fashion into at least five outside households, one disagreement required court mediation. Another resulted in estrangement that is not yet (and Ellen fears may never be) resolved.

April and May brought the dawning realization that hunkering down would extend beyond a few weeks or months. This sparked intense reactions and some explosive conflicts as personality and cultural styles collided in a confined space. Drawing on her career of mediating classroom differences, Ellen says, "We sat down and made a covenant together about how we would fight in the inevitable moments of discontent."

The different developmental imperatives for people across such a wide age span also challenged the family especially during COVID.

In one's 20s and 30s, the major focus in life is connecting with prospective partners, falling in love, growing independence. The older members of the household understood those imperatives

completely, although it heightened the threat to their personal safety in their home. The challenge was how to meet and greet people safely without bringing home the virus. The young adults dated and worked, amplifying risk even as they tried to maintain distance. The older generations struggled to make visitors and partners feel welcome while staying masked and keeping distant. There was no getting away from the risk and associated tension.

Ellen herself spent most of the year in the house except for a twice-a-month grocery run. “My family didn’t want me outside. Their protectiveness made me feel safe and stifled. My world shrank to the size of a house and a back yard. I recall having a moment where I felt like I knew why prison is so stultifying. I could imagine how it would feel to search for purpose in a very small space. It felt like a preview of what it will be like in another decade when my life is shrunk because of health and age.”

Baby Abigail provided the family connection in an otherwise lonely time. “Living with this little person, brand new in her reactions to everything brought all of us tremendous joy and interest in living. She brought such a grace of playfulness. The interaction is amazing! We all have conversations about Abigail. She links us all together. That was a big surprise since we worried about having a baby right now. She has brought us real connection.”

Beyond the shifting family dynamics in 2020, Ellen found herself more politically aware of the ramifications of bad government, and the destructive forces of white nationalism and white privilege. That awareness put her much in touch with her anger around both. Anger seemed tied to increased empathy. “When you pull away all the distractions and listen intensely and experience other people’s indignity it is a short path to outrage.”

The last four years of lies and subterfuge raised questions about how she could continue to respect and relate to people who supported the former president. “Who are these people who can rationalize behavior like putting children in cages? Where is their moral center and can I in any way respect them while acknowledging what they have done, continue to do? Is their lack of capacity to empathize with others genetic? What kind of people are we together?”

Ellen remembers one of Mike Moran’s sermons about dealing with people with whom you disagree on core values and beliefs, whose actions you might find repulsive. He suggested framing discussions as: This is where I’m coming from and the reason I believe what I do. This is what my belief leads me to do. This is the kind of commitment I feel compelled to make. Ellen is striving to use this frame to keep communications open but finding it a hard slog.

On the other hand, Joe Biden’s election has been a balm. “I feel that in a very real way we are in a battle for our souls. The insurrection, the push-back by people who believe in the false prophet is still a substantial threat. But I am grateful for how Biden counters that force. I jokingly refer to him as St. Joseph. I perceive his Roman Catholic center as a place of sacrifice, love, and compassion that I can identify with. I feel such relief of his being in the position of president.

Ellen found herself changed by the COVID year: Grown more introspective. “All my feelings intensified. I am at once the saddest that I have ever been, filled with sorrow and regret and at the same time the most joyous, reaching for connection. I am just emotionally alive.”

She is amazed that “At 76, I finally feel that I have developed empathy. I’ve always had sincere sympathy for others, but I saw their situations as outside my own. Now I am empathic, feeling heartfelt weeping when people lose family members, jobs, good health.

“I struggle with self-care, mentally and physically, during this time of withdrawal. I lost my healthy routines. Even taking a shower became something I have to cajole myself to do. My self-talk goes to ‘You can meditate and exercise, you’ve got the time.’ But then it dribbles off. When I am on Zoom talking with people, I revel in the moment of connection and familiarity; then I get off and go into a deep dive.”

At FUSD, Ellen was on the Faith in Action Committee (FIAC) at the outset of 2020. Suddenly, the interactive ways our community participates in social justice were closed off by the need to stay distant. When we couldn’t shelter persons experiencing homelessness, host justice activities, how would we carry on our spiritual work? “That which made us a church community bonding around social justice action skidded to a halt. I was numb from that realization.”

Ellen struggled with a bleeding off of purpose over the past year. “Having a spiritual life is important to me in a way that cannot be filled with TV and solitaire games on the computer. Before COVID, I volunteered on social justice projects, tutored, was involved with my great grandchildren, and did things that make me feel bigger than my ego. Much of that evaporated. Our church community, particularly my core group, Sunday services and music, even coffee hour helped me cope. I was so touched to be at Eric Porter’s house recently as part of forming spiritual connection in support of him and Ingrid. This is what I want now. Empathy. Compassion. Right action.”

Given the protracted waiting game of COVID, Ellen worries about whether we/she can gather enough energy to reawaken and dig ourselves out of the ruts we occupy. She is trying to push herself to start doing things again. She has gotten involved with the circle that Rich McClintock is organizing around climate justice.

“I am worried I’ll have a hard time readjusting. I feel I’ve gotten agoraphobic at some level. The experience of this year has given me a chance to understand my father’s aging process, to see where his anger and sense of loss came from. When he was moving through it, I listened and was sympathetic, but now I know how he felt to be dealing with so much loss.”

With all the yucky stuff happening, Ellen is grateful to have inherited an innate optimism from her father. Joy and curiosity are part of her genetic makeup. “I can go to bed in a slump and the next day find something that brightens my day. That is core to my survival. I call it genetic because I don’t think it comes from my will. But it has proved a valuable legacy.”

When it comes to FUSD’s emergence from the separation of COVID: “I’m looking forward to gathering in our church community again, to physical connections and sitting across the table from someone other than my extended family. Embracing people. Getting involved again in coffee hour at that level of camaraderie and family. Inviting people to my home and going to other people’s homes. Getting physically and actively involved.

“I expect there will be a recommitment as we are all hungry for our place to stand up. Not only to be together in community but to reach out to the larger community. Climate justice could be a real impetus for spending our time together in justice action. We feel the urgency of threat to the climate already and we’ll need ways to forge community action in relation to that threat. The intersection with our long-standing commitments to racial justice, the tie-in to people who are being marginalized and otherwise disenfranchised is clear. And the opportunity to act together in a just cause will be good for our individual health, the wellbeing of our church, the larger community, and our world.