

Erica Trisler

Erica is in their late 30s (She/They pronouns). They regularly bring their fabulous voice to our stage and has graced entertainment stages across Denver. Erica was Events Coordinator for FUSD at the onset of COVID, and now lives in Aurora with their partner.

At start of 2020, Erica was running fast in their own little groove. As Events Coordinator at First Unitarian Society of Denver (FUSD) they intersected the congregation's efforts with social justice, environmental justice, music programming, and grassroots community groups. For the previous six months, they were immersed in the church's original musical production *Rearview Mirror*, a creative outlet presented to great applause on Feb 28-29-Mar 1. They had completed their third semester of graduate school at Iliff Seminary where they were working on a Masters in Divinity. "I had finally found my tribe there." And they were covering financial bases with temporary gig work, including vocal performances on various stages around the city.

"I was peddling hard, but it was honestly too much. I was stressed out, run down, and not taking care of myself." As an alcoholic in recovery with a 13-year connection to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) Erica knew this was a recipe for disaster. But pushing toward the edge with people and projects one loves can be enticing, too.

Then the pandemic hit... abruptly everything came to a screeching halt. Immediately, Iliff shut down in-person classes. FUSD closed its building and with no events to coordinate, Erica's position was unneeded. Musical venues and performance were too risky for the novel respiratory virus.

"At first," Erica admits sheepishly, "It was kind of nice. I'd been overstretched and the shutdown hit me as a much-needed break I wouldn't have been able to afford or willing to take. It was respite, a time for rest and recovery, a chance to reconnect to the earth. I appreciated the quiet time."

But as it extended, the quiet took on a more ominous cast. "When all the distractions are gone, you're left with nothing but yourself. The moment highlighted a lot I wasn't making time for and had been unwilling to look at. It was uncomfortable."

And the losses began to compound:

"Without a job I lost my cute little house in South Denver and moved in with my partner in Aurora." While grateful for shelter, Erica deeply missed their community of neighbors and the energy of downtown. Their long-term AA community moved online with Zoom. "That was both a blessing and a curse. It is hard to form bonds and connections with a floating field of 50 tiny face tiles. That perpetuated the sense of isolation." For extroverted Erica, the loneliness of COVID fed depression and suffering. "I was really struggling."

Meanwhile, their partner (a mental health therapist) went totally virtual for the pandemic and their workload exploded into long workdays. When she fell into bed exhausted at night, Erica

fought off demons they had long held at bay. “I was by myself and alone, sleeping through the days and staying up all nights. I descended to a very dark place.” Erica attempted an online semester at Iliff and had to withdraw when they could not handle the online format. “That is not me. I generally do very well with school.”

The world outside pierced Erica’s isolation but only fed their desperation. “I was very affected by the racial injustice, the pain, protests and backlash, and how the Trump administration was handling it all. I’m a sensitive, creative, feeler type, an empath, and I couldn’t handle the hostility, the hateful, entitled, opinionated rhetoric, the angry cruel insults leaving no space for dialogue. I got rid of social media for nine months, even as I recognized that my ability to check out demonstrated my white person privilege.”

Erica attended protests downtown during the day, when there seemed to be less risk of threat from the police. “I witnessed instigation coming from law enforcement [later validated by a report from the Office of Independent Monitor]. I didn’t witness instigation from protestors.”

The political climate gave Erica even more incentive to withdraw into a personal bubble. “I didn’t respond to emails or texts and couldn’t remember what it would mean to be social. I became withdrawn and anxious at the prospect of going outside. I morphed into someone I didn’t recognize; someone I’d never met in 37 years of life.”

The losses crested with the death of Erica’s best friend in recovery, Melissa. She died in January 2021. That death was a huge motivator for Erica to get the help they needed to bring their own life back on the road.

They began making initial forays into being with other people. Being downtown in the city again, with the bustle and noise and activity was anxiety producing for a couple of weeks. “I’ve been grateful for how quickly I was able to adapt. Now it feels normal to be around people again. But I’m also more conscious, feel more gratitude. It is wonderful to be able to see people, exciting to think about creating again. I can’t wait to sing with and for people again! That brings a connection beyond performance. The energy transports me to a higher plane.”

“COVID hung a big black mirror in front of my face without the option of distraction. Being forced to look into it was my gift, from a perspective I had never encountered. I did not accept that gift with grace.”

“I’ve had to confront things that blocked my appreciation of the wonder and simplicity of the universe. It brought me humility, reminding me that I am not superwoman. I’m in the process of growing, moving through each day one day at a time.”

“I am currently doing a lot of work on myself. Sobriety demands as much. COVID invited my demons out to play and I invited them all to dance. Now I feel able to appreciate, love and respect each one. They highlighted things about myself I needed to look at and work on. The experience accelerated a period of personal development and ownership that might otherwise have taken years, though I am grateful to be on the end of this leg of discovery.”

Given the time to explore and reflect, Erica discovered that their gender identity is more fluid than she knew before. “I find that I don’t fit within a solely feminine identify. In this winter, I find that masks and winter clothes invite a lot of comments addressing “sir”, “he”, and “young man”. She/he/they pronouns are all okay with me.” But having not yet had an opportunity to come out in the larger society, they are still a little nervous about it.

Erica values the opportunities to reflect on individual experiences with intention, gathering them into meaningful strands of a collective experience. “I can’t tell if what I’m experiencing is just me or part of the collective experience of the year.” But they observe that personal accounts of life through past wars and disease have been valuable.

At the group level, “The polarization of our moral, political, and existential beliefs has been so extreme that we’ve forgotten how to have dialogue, how to listen, to allow space, to approach people who don’t share our beliefs with a measure of compassion and empathy. Our firm lines in the sand almost force people to become entrenched in their initial positions, reducing the opportunities to learn and change. I am NOT cosigning persecution, violence, hatred, or racism to negotiation. I’m not talking about standing down, backing off, or compromising the rights of others. But I do see the need to stay engaged in more compassionate dialogue. Can I take the time to understand where people who are more right-wing are coming from? Can I counter their positions rationally, logically, without taking them down as people?”

Moving forward, Erica hopes to refrain from responding to hate with hate, or meeting insult with insult. To keep personal baggage in check and do their own work before jumping into a fray. “If I don’t find the lesson, the meaning, the past year has been only suffering. I am determined to take this opportunity to grow and change and adapt.”

Erica hopes we can collectively tune into awe, wonder and gratitude as frames for viewing the world, intentionally creating a new normal rather than falling back into an old one. “The pandemic highlighted things we took for granted and never considered because there was no need to. I hope I can remember to stop and appreciate connection; hope I don’t forget what it was like to miss it.”