

Erin Dougherty Kenworthy

Erin is a 40-ish white female mother of two who works as the Religious Education Director at FUSD. She lives with her husband, Jason and two young sons Owen (8) and Bryce (5) in Lakewood, a southern suburb of Denver.

At the beginning of March 2020, Erin had just completed a performance with her son, Owen, in the church's SoUUStage production of *Rearview Mirror*. Erin's parents came to town for the play and stayed with the grandkids while Erin and Jason left for respective work trainings. Her office-turned-dressing room at the church was still strewn with the detritus of props and costumes. Erin had just completed a program for Democratic women planning to run for office and was looking toward her first introduction to Lakewood party members in mid-March, chasing a childhood dream of running for political office.

When Erin and Jason returned home on March 7, they almost immediately started hearing about COVID in Colorado. "We still had no idea what was going to happen. The worst-case scenario we could imagine was to shut down for a month until it all went away."

On Friday the 13th, the school gave the kids Chromebooks (laptops) and sent them home. The next day, Erin went to her political meeting intending to introduce herself to local politics. Thirty people were there, but the air was distracted, breathless, consumed. "That was the last public gathering I attended before going into quarantine. I was just starting to put my foot into politics and hit a wall. It was surreal."

"We pulled Bryce out of day care. Jason was home from work. It is hard now to access those memories because I was so overwhelmed. We were all home all the time."

Erin's father celebrated his 70th birthday on April 7 and her mom wanted the family in Arizona for a surprise. Weighing the risk of COVID against celebrating her father made for uncomfortable navigation. Erin decided it was not time to travel.

Erin went to the grocery store and spent \$550 on groceries. "Never before in my life have I done that. The cart was towering, heavy, hard to push. I was concerned that this was the topple of our civilization, our food supply might be cut off. I was not sure how long it would be before we had access to food again. I went directly to quite a dystopian place. Inside the store I felt terrified. I wore a mask, but others weren't yet. I felt an urgency to get everything I needed for a month as quickly as possible and get out of there. I was especially intentional about getting enough snacks for two small kids."

It took about two months for the supply chain to settle somewhat, and for Erin to develop workarounds for the disruptions.

"The kids got stir crazy once we'd watched all possible movies. Slowly, we started to build closer relationships with our immediate neighbors and to navigate boundaries to allow our kids to play together. Masks and outside play were how we survived April through November. It was neat to see older kids looking out for younger ones. But the collaborative approach had

limitations, too: When a new family moved in whose parents were lax about COVID precautions, it was hard to integrate them into the group. They had intriguing offerings, a trampoline and chickens, but the neighbors had no confidence in their COVID protocols. Small differences made us wary about how to build relationship given the stakes.”

“I experienced this time as overwhelming and hard. A lot of my personal resiliency disappeared in the face of other people’s constant needs. My space evaporated. I was used to having six hours each day to myself to work or take care of myself. Without it, I wore out. Jason and I both struggled with our mental health and patience. Fear and concern were constants. Our kid in online school was frustrated and didn’t know how to use the tools they provided. Jason and I tried to juggle work and parenting. Our younger son needed constant attention that we just didn’t have to give him.”

Compounding the situation, Erin’s dad’s health fell apart. A recurring cancer dictated surgery rather than a surprise party on his birthday. The family was conflicted about how to move forward with treatment protocols and Erin couldn’t be there, which she found upsetting.

In May, one of Jason’s close coworkers died, and much of his energy and attention was absorbed coordinating health updates, running a meal train, and helping the family figure out insurance.” The first time he left the house was to pile the Kenworthy family into a car and drive to the hospital for a vigil, but they no sooner arrived than a call came that his colleague had died.

“How do you grieve somebody when you can’t be with others who are also grieving? It was our first drive-through funeral. Her husband and family set up pictures on the edge of a park and cars lined up, stopped for a moment to pay respects. We made condolence signs and hung them on our car, rolled windows down, and expressed our sympathies at social distance. It was deeply inadequate.”

Erin’s work life, meanwhile, was pushed to pivot to online church. “Years before I had attended the Church of the Larger Fellowship and remembered what their services were like. I also had learned how to use the Zoom platform for meetings with RE colleagues across the country. I had ideas about how remote services could look and suggested a webinar format with chat monitors to minimize the small tile phenomenon and to give more control over content. Staff worked to figure out what elements of our in-person services to hang onto, and which to create anew for online service.”

As Erin’s job morphed outside her RE job description, she also stressed about whether she was doing enough for her job while keeping the household together, fed and clean, and participating in the kids’ education and care. “Every time I thought I was totally burned out, something else would drop. My father’s health. Jason’s response to losing his coworker. Questions about what to do with the kids over summer while we both worked full-time jobs. Whether it was safe to send our youngest back to day care for a few hours a day and trust them to follow protocols.”

“I wrestled with my body to be able to have children and that was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. So being unable to show up as the parent I wanted was bitterly disappointing. The high need for care and attention came at a time when I didn’t have anything to give. That made it

seem as if the kids were a burden and inconvenience. I don't want them to grow up thinking they are either of those things. It was not my best parenting moment. It's been a sad time."

The loss of access to her family, friends and normal community was painful. Visits with masks and distancing felt both like a dangerous luxury and oh, so inadequate. It was very unsatisfying.

In lieu of people, Erin drifted into heavy consumption of social media and news. As the global pandemic intersected the presidential campaign, that combination was infuriating. The pandemic provided a sharper lens for seeing deep inequities and dehumanization. The nation was already exhausted by the Administration's daily atrocities, undeterred by the dire circumstances so many were facing. "At the same time as I was afraid to go to the grocery store, other people had to go out to work to keep their homes in place. People were losing jobs or having to leave the safety of their houses to meet essential needs."

Before the pandemic, Erin was involved in UUs for Racial Justice, a group of religious professionals around the Front Range. The urgency of their work was magnified by the pandemic shutdown as everyone watched the murder of George Floyd, and the protestors in the streets amplified the names of Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, and Amad Arbery.

Erin was frustrated to find herself unable to step into the streets on this cause she feels strongly about. "I did a lot of reflection. Going to the protest would jeopardize my body and health at a time when Jason and I could barely manage the mental and physical challenges we already faced. It felt tenuous in a way that would have ended any positive work I attempted. I knew I was standing in my privilege, but decided not to go to the protests and risk bringing COVID home. My UURJ group was starting a speakers series hosting racial justice conversations, so I became the tech support for a community of people of color. That became my way of showing up. I was definitely uncomfortable, but that is the continuing nature of the work. I also adopted a daily personal practice of reflecting on my social location and ability to make these choices."

Her biggest loss in the year, Erin observes, was the capacity to respond to a host of situations in the way she would have wanted. Whether regarding her father, political candidacy, her children, or the summer protests, "Fighting my basic instinct to rush in and give care, pushing away love and physical connection in the service of logic and caution has been hard to swallow. I'm carrying a lot of pent-up frustration."

"Food helped me cope. I did a lot of baking and eating and played a lot of mindless pointless timewasting games on my phone. They drew my attention to a small enough space to shut out the needs and demands of other people. I watched a lot of TV and movies, where I seemed to crave stories where there was hope after a struggle. I needed something to laugh at."

Strength during this dark period came from largely from outside the family: "Knowing I was still needed at work, that people were relying on me to show up and offer something of benefit for others. Relationships with my neighbors, particularly the two women in adjacent houses. We were honest and able to vent with each other and support each other in ways we hadn't before the pandemic."

Blessedly, the two boys decided they needed to see each other at night and decided they wanted to share a bedroom. That choice freed up space for a calm-down room, an intentional sanctuary in the household. “I think I will never again choose to live in a house without one. The room articulates that we all need such a space in our home; it names our lived experience. It helps people step out of chaos.”

As she completes her vaccinations and prepares to fly to Arizona to see her father, Erin is elated. “On May 3 I’ll give him the hug I’ve wanted to give since last April!” She has concerns about the lingering effects of this pandemic year: about the mental health and mental capacity of the adults, about her relationship following the stress the couple has endured. She is concerned about how her kids will recover, although she knows they are resilient.

Emerging from the pandemic, Erin is eager to make up for lost time for travel and seeing family. She wants to be intentional about how and where she spends her energy. “I really want to get involved in local politics and have an impact on my larger community by making policy.”

For our FUSD community, Erin hopes we have a protracted period of real gratitude in being together now that we have experienced being apart. May we take less for granted. She looks forward to the ability to show up on Sunday mornings and share passing glances or hellos. Just to have all our people gathered in one place. She is already imagining those first few Sundays...