

Glenn Barrows

Glenn Barrows is in his 50s and lives with his spouse Ed Carroll in their Berkeley Neighborhood Denver bungalow. Glenn has been employed as administrator at First Unitarian since 2009.

In his position as FUSD Congregational Administrator, Glenn Barrows choreographs the essential and largely unseen details of a building, a website, personnel, communications, bill paying, scheduling, etc. He finds it hard to remember the *before time* in early 2020. Mostly, he recalls that the community was just finishing a multi-year major renovation and enjoying a post-renovation exhale. “We were finally home. The building worked. We anticipated having a year to prepare for our 150th anniversary celebration. But there was not a lot of energy to sustain any brand-new initiative in that moment.”

Glenn was immersed in reconfiguring staff and revising a few job descriptions. “All of that became completely unimportant. It was stunning how very quickly that happened.”

At the start of a staff meeting on Wednesday, March 11, shutdown seemed an unlikely possibility. By the last half hour, though, everyone’s text messages were blowing up with news of venues and institutions and activities that were closing. The next day, an epidemiologist working for the UUA held a nationwide webinar advising local congregations not to open their facilities given the lack of science or available contact tracing. Glenn remembers the advice felt a tad alarmist at the time, but the pandemic unfolded exactly as she warned it might.

Earlier, during the renovation, there was talk about offering virtual services, but the enterprise was not in any scope or budget and lacked a champion. Suddenly, with the pandemic, virtual services were front of mind and urgent. Staff went into rapid response mode to get the next Sunday service online, and the Congregation has yet to gather again in person. The initial service was a laptop and webcam pointed at the pulpit. Within a month, we learned to use Zoom, which would become the ubiquitous platform of the COVID era. Over time, staff would build skills in editing video and sound to make a service.

“The congregation flexed its adaptability muscles in the face of this pandemic,” Glenn says. Acting almost as a single autonomous unit in a way not so usual for independent-minded Unitarians. There was urgency: What is going to happen? Generosity: What do we need to do? How can I help? And lots of appreciation: I can’t believe you did that. That was so wonderful! “Gratitude is especially motivating in a time of crisis when you don’t get to see people in a three-dimensional way.”

At the start of 2020, Glenn was reevaluating his work, career, and job. His dad had died the year before, and that moment framed a lot of questions for his 54-year-old son about his own life. Glenn acknowledged that his long-time position with the church was really volume management and no longer challenging. Was it still a right place for him?

Other questions sprang from the racial justice work the congregation was engaging: “As a white male son of my white male father, I had learned and mastered a mania for perfection and control, but I was learning that position stands in a lot of white privilege that precludes broad inclusiveness and is not a good thing.”

Further, as the institution of the church changed and grew, it was getting too big for anyone to know all that was going on everywhere. The concept of the church administrator as the hub at the center of all spokes, the knowledgeable core of operations became less functional. Glenn was grappling with the questions: How much do I need to know to do my job effectively? To feel satisfied? The insistence on scheduling and planning that previously felt valuable and rewarding, began to chafe. The challenge became not the work itself but the discernment: Is this the best place to spend your energy and time?

Glenn was clear that the job he did for the past 10 years would not be the job that is required for the next 10; it is no longer what the institution needs. He felt confidence that as long as he continued to adapt to what the church needs, he would have work. But what about a time when he might not want to work as much? Personally, his definition of work had begun shifting away from doing what one has to do to live and more toward a search for meaning in activity. He was less clear about what retirement would mean for him. He did not want the retirement his father had; in any event, that paradigm does not exist anymore. So, Glenn was facing key questions: How do we engineer today to make tomorrow possible?

2020 offered a unique opportunity to work on all that stuff.

“Not being in a building gives you a certain distance. It can raise the possibility that maybe you are in the right place but not yet the right person. Maybe you need to change. Now I am willing to entertain that idea.” But there are hurdles to be cleared, fears: “Back of mind I think I was unsure of how the organization would react to my journey of personal re-evaluation. Whether I could screw up and have the community challenge me to do better the next time rather than casting me out. That had never been in doubt but also never been put to the test.”

“After my father died, I worked through the family baggage he represented. His death made clear the message, *you are the next up*. It feels really windy out here. I spent time processing with my mother who my parents were. We set up an agreement that we could ask each other anything and wanted honest responses. She had spent her whole life as a child, wife, and mother and never been an adult for herself before. She transitioned nicely and I’ve gotten to know this amazing woman who had childhood aspirations of writing. She joined the church virtually and now religiously watches the homilies on YouTube every Sunday and wants to talk about them. She did not come from a place where social justice or racial concerns were a thing and has little context for homelessness and poor people. Now she asks astute but preliminary questions about what it all means. We talk!”

“The isolation of COVID accelerated a different relationship with my mother. It gave us an opportunity to connect outside the orbit of my father. This year has broadened our relationship.”

Glenn experienced 2020 largely at home. During the first three months of isolation the running joke was that his house had never been cleaner. “I was driven by the need to control what I could. I finished remodeling the downstairs bathroom that had dribbled out over a year and refurbished a downstairs home office. Being at church only once or twice a week forced me to make the church run as virtually as possible.”

Bringing work home required rethinking disciplines Glenn had long subscribed to. “I can do all my work from here, but I learned how much I was a slave to the 8-5 mentality. When that is not possible or necessary, I struggle to see my work as valuable. Rev. Jeanne Shero and I have had long conversations about where value happens. This is not widget making. This last year taught me that I can get good valuable work done outside of the narrow structure of being in a building at a place between certain times. Instead, I am learning to value being responsive.”

Outside the building of the church, Glenn felt swept along with the current more than ever before. “I’m a news junkie anyway and was especially hyper-focused ahead of the election. I voted and influenced others to vote. I did as much activism as ever during this cycle, but otherwise, I felt kind of passive. All waking hours were spent in front of a screen; it became the only source of information, the only place to gather as a community. I had no other outlet, no safety valves. I recognized that my knowledge of events did not change them, but I was more witness to world events and everything washing over me still stressed me out. I feared for my mental state a couple of times in the fall and walked away from all screens except what I needed to get my work done. My life recentered on caring for Mom and Ed, and having people care for me.”

As an introvert, Glenn was not far out of his element at home. “I don’t need to interact with people, but I do need to be around them. Still, there’s no question that I didn’t suffer nearly as much in the past year as a lot of people.”

Not as much as his extroverted partner, Ed, for instance. “Limiting contacts and distancing, not traveling were quite challenging for him. It counters his essential nature. At the beginning of 2021 we set a compromise that if Ed would incorporate vaccination and masking, I would not say anything more about his choices of being in public. I would not *SAY* anything more, although I still worried. 2020 showed both of us a level of grace in our relationship that did not exist in the preceding 34 years. We have always had an underpinning of love and devotion, but this was more than that. We just let go of the need to be right and engaged each other far more cooperatively.”

“I’ve been extraordinarily lucky not to have lost anyone close to me to COVID. My greatest losses have been the vanishing as people get gravely ill or go away without a chance to say goodbye. It is as though their life force and energy evaporated. Eric Porter. Barb Pittman at First Universalist. Patty Provost, who died of cancer and chose not to tell anyone. There is no end in sight nor effective bridge to those lost people. They get mentioned in a Sunday service, a Facebook post, a text. I mourn that we can’t connect with each other at the end. Thinking back

to the last time I saw my father, he was on a huge ventilator so that you had to get really close to hear him. He started saying *'I'm really sorry for....'* and I couldn't hear the rest, but I forgave him. Whatever he believed he had to apologize for didn't matter at that moment, it still doesn't matter. How many people who were dying have not been able to do that this year? How many people could not do that for their dying loved ones? I anticipate that when we are back together again, we are in for a period of extended grief for all the people and time we've lost."

Reflecting on what helped him cope with the year, Glenn's response is quick: "Love. I've received extraordinary compassion from the people I work with. I've watched the congregation help each other. We seem to have just moved on from our previous outrages. People have been remarkably honest in their vulnerability. People in the congregation who live alone have said things they would normally never say aloud to anyone else. The Caring Committee has leaned into the challenge of this moment. I never felt alone through all of this."

Early on, Glenn remembers "I asked Mike [Morran] directly how to deal with the palpable feeling of panic I felt running through the congregation. He said, 'My job as minister is to be an un-anxious presence. You are better at that than you understand, but you are going to be challenged by the need.' That really helped me level-set. It doesn't mean I don't carry my own anxiety, but I try not to present that to others who are caught in their anxiety in a given moment."

"I am a better person for having gone through this year. The ground I've covered normally would have taken a lot more time. This last year accelerated growth and change on so many levels."