

## **Jillian Gleason**

*Jillian is in her 30s, a Colorado Native who has lived in Arvada for the past seven years. She is heavily involved with her large Colorado family, and works as a school counselor for Denver Public Schools. Jillian has been a member of First Unitarian Denver since 2015 and is on its board of trustees.*

In March 2020, in addition to my work, I was on the church board and our Faith in Action Council, the board of my home-owners association, and teaching a professional development class for school counselors. I was very busy. My early March birthday was among the last in-person parties I attended. I was looking forward to a spring break get-away to Turks and Caicos with a girlfriend whose children were finally old enough to be left for a week with their father.

The church board in that moment was asking questions: Do we have a budget? How do we attract young families? How do we live into our values? The community had sponsored an internship for Jen Simons without really knowing where the money would come from but committed to providing a place for new ministers of color to learn their craft. The community was delighted by Jen's vibrancy and energy. And the creatives in the church had just finished a successful play with lots of involvement and enthusiasm. I was particularly enjoying all the guest ministers and the fabulous concert series.

At a church board meeting on March 12, 2020 staff was recommending that we not meet for services the next Sunday. During the meeting, I received a text that DPS was closing schools after Friday. "I remember going to school that next day where a student showed up wearing gloves and a mask. I thought 'Well, that's kind of overdoing it.' Attendance was sketchy as many parents kept their students home. I sat in my office and wondered what we were facing.

At home, I consumed news endlessly. I felt scared and desperate to know more than any of us really knew at the time. When New Orleans became a national hot spot following Mardi Gras, a woman in my Peace Corps network named Natasha died of COVID and wasn't found until hours later when her boyfriend finally came around. As a single woman living alone, I was terrified. I walked out to Home Depot and got an extra garage door key and notified my family so they could check if they failed to hear from me.

Since we were only supposed to go outside for exercise, I walked around the park near my house and watched Spring spring in a way that I'd never taken time to do before. I watched some impressive snowstorms and marveled at the quiet with no one on the roads. As summer progressed, I went on hikes. The connection with Nature was important to me in getting through this year.

Tuning in for Sunday morning online church services just became part of my routine. I was so grateful for steep learning that church staff did to make that happen so quickly. And I appreciated keeping up with my Faith in Action and Board work over Zoom.

Mother's Day was the first time I stepped beyond COVID safety rules. I masked and dropped off presents outside for my grandmother and sister-in-law, then had dinner with my mom and

stepdad and spent the night at my mom's house. I was both nervous to be breaking the rules and so grateful to see family.

At school, our senior checkout consisted of an out-door exchange of computers for diplomas. We packed the traditional pancake breakfast for them in take-out boxes. That was the first time I'd seen my students or colleagues since we went remote in mid-March. On Memorial Day, we celebrated my grandparents' 65<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary with an in-car parade. People were doing that as a way to maintain social distancing while honoring big life events.

On Memorial Day, George Floyd was murdered, and the impact was gut wrenching and immediate. I watched and watched and watched the news. It created a dilemma: COVID was bad but I needed to go and be part of the protests. Three friends felt similarly so we went together the Saturday after Memorial Day weekend. The crowds were large and the energy palpable. So much anger and sadness. We marched and sat listening to speakers. As darkness fell, and the police began to fire tear gas north of where we were, we gathered to leave.

Back home, I consumed a lot of media. I started following on social media different people who seemed to have a perspective on the movement, like Tamika Mallory and the *Until Freedom* campaign. I sent my first federal stimulus check to organizations that were taking action and making a difference, with full awareness that this was not enough.

I paid for and attended conferences virtually throughout the summer, including a national school counselors' conference focused on Black excellence and how to show up as an antiracist school counselor. I devoured a lot of media and reading in my isolation, trying to learn through the lens of a white woman to see the day-to-day realities of Black people and be a more reliable and effective ally.

This racial justice action engulfed the summer and changed my practice when I returned to work with students. My involvement with the equity team at school seemed even more pressing. Our whole team started the school year with an understanding that we couldn't just pretend that the events of the summer were a one-off, that our society's long, awful history of our treatment of people of color didn't exist. We entered with a heightened priority on the need to stress Black excellence in our curriculum.

July and August brought a steep learning curve to figure out how to redo education virtually. I learned a lot; now I'm a tech resource! As part of the support team, I drove hot spots and laptops out to the homes of students who needed them. And food. There was a lot of need for food with schools closed. We established small pods of 10 people for students who needed a safe place to be, but even those had to close whenever a member tested positive. Students struggled with depression and loneliness, higher risk of suicide. The start date for in-person learning kept shifting in relation to worsening COVID statistics. August, September, October, November – then finally in December the school district announced that secondary classes would be remote-only until February 1.

The fall felt swamped with the constant changes and heavy needs from school. My hands were full, but there was no way to ignore the effect of the upcoming elections on the urgent work for

racial justice. I knew I could never forgive myself if I did not find a way to stand into the political campaign and volunteer ahead of the presidential election. So, I worked phone banks and did what I could.

COVID descended as a perfect storm in the fourth year of an autocratic presidency. He spent both of his campaigns and his whole term in office fearmongering, dehumanizing, otherizing people. That is the root of all violent inhumane acts. Such action makes you dissociate from the harm you are provoking and is a common tactic among people who want to be in or retain power. With COVID, that impulse went on overdrive.

The pandemic, racial unrest, and political climate were all related. Everyone clapping each night in appreciation of health care workers during the pandemic revealed the best parts of people. I want to see that overwhelmingly positive action as our collective response to what threatens us. But it is important to talk about the rise of insanity around the world as a response to fear and threat to power. While COVID was going on and I was scared, even people I love in my own family insisted it was just the flu, that masks were not necessary. Leaders at the highest levels perpetrated conspiracy theories. People were going nuts, losing their sense of critical thought, decency, and integrity. Denying the legitimacy of electoral outcomes without any substantial evidence of wrongdoing. I want to see more of what is beautiful about our humanity, but since the January insurrection at the Capitol, I worry that we aren't going in that direction.

These major events of my year will forever shape my life. Any future kids I have will know these interwoven stories.

I drew strength from being able to walk, to witness the springtime, snowstorms, the enveloping and immense quiet. I appreciated my health and Nature and the seasons. I began a practice of a daily gratitude journal, even during the hard days. I got over my pride and started counseling to help me deal with the experience.

I am worried about our kids. They are resilient but lonely. They are not really engaging each other while they sit on computers all day. I want them to know how to talk to each other. I want them to do a lot of social emotional learning. I want empathy back. I am optimistic that the district knows that social-emotional healing affects even the students' ability to retain information and will incorporate that understanding going forward.

Our kids need each other, empathy, an ability to express what they've been holding onto. They need trusting relationships with adults, space to process and heal, opportunities to play and be creative, to disconnect with computers and technology. I hope to be a conduit for supplying those needs. It will take a community. I am grateful to be part of it.

I want to emerge from this year more present and grateful, not taking anything for granted. I want to resist the easy jump back into business, consumerism, and comparison. I want to be whole-hearted. Or as Brene Brown's *Braving the Wilderness* might put it, striving to have a strong back, a soft front, and a wild heart.