

## Kimberly Urish

*Kimberly is a Gen X woman of German heritage, raised in central Illinois, who has lived in the Cole Neighborhood of north Denver for 21 years. She resides with her partner, Enrique, and their two black cats acquired during the pandemic. She's been a member of First Unitarian for ten years and active in Chalice Singers as well as a current member of the Endowment Committee and past chair/participant in the Abundance Committee turned Development Council. She works as a professional fundraiser for the American Indian College Fund.*

At the beginning of the year we will never forget, I was really sick. So much so I posted, "What third ring of hell is this?? 12 days of headache, stuffed nose/ears, seared throat and lungs, unending coughing, fever, no sleep and now nausea. Somebody knock me out." It would go on for another week or so. I did get better. I didn't think it was COVID — that was happening far away in Asia. But 80 comments on that post showed that dozens of my friends had the same flu... Flu B... we proposed... the opposite flu to the flu shot we got.

R posted: *One way of looking at this is as a negotiation.*

*Virus: "We live here now."*

*You: "No you don't."*

*Virus: "It's not really up to you, consciousness. This is between us and the immune system."*

*Immune System: "If they're not in the database, we're at war."*

*Ribosomes: "Yeah, that's what they said when we first showed up."*

That war on the immune system was familiar, as traveling for my job exposed me to every microbe and bacteria causing regular illnesses. The immune system won that war. And life continued with work and travel, concern about the democratic primaries after the Iowa debacle, and looking forward to spring.

Six weeks later I was reading stories from recovered COVID patients. One said he was dehydrated but too exhausted to walk a few feet for a drink of water. Another talked about clothes and sheets sopping wet with fever sweat. Coughing and struggling to breathe before choking or throwing up. It felt like flashbacks.

I posted to the same thread, "For anyone paying attention... I believe now this was coronavirus. I know lots of people with weird long-lasting flus this winter. What do you think?"

R posted that same night, sending late night counsel to my worried mind, "In January? That seems statistically highly unlikely. I'd get an antibody test."

The next day, I texted a friend and asked if R's Facebook was hacked because there were all these weird posts on his page. She called immediately and said that R died the night before. What? Did he have COVID? He was only 50. How did he die? She didn't have answers. She was crying. Like so many relationships these days, R was someone I met once, a closer friend to this crying friend of mine. But he was so wonderfully weird, thoughtful, wise and fall out of your

chair funny, I kept him as a Facebook friend for over a decade. And now he was gone. Was the comment on my page his last connection to someone?

It was this loss that brought me my first Zoom funeral. It was good... sort of magical as friends in tutus and wild hair from burning man collided in Brady Bunch boxes with presumably conservative, dressed in black, sitting up straight, family members from the south. I was glad to "attend" and hear so many stories about his life and learn he died of a heart attack. But my mind kept saying, "What am I looking at right now? What IS this?"

I will always think of R as my first loss from COVID, even though he didn't die of COVID. In my already alarmed and "Oh my god, I cannot believe this is happening," state, it was one more thing that I couldn't quite comprehend.

Next would be two second cousins of my father. One lived far away and died suddenly, and the other passed away a few weeks later after struggling with MS most of his life. For the latter, I watched the gravesite burial service via Facebook live, and thought is this what we do now? For the former, there were very few plans, so a cousin had to put together the funeral and handle the affairs. This started a campaign to get my parents to get their wills together. But estate attorneys were booked solid.

Then John Prine died of COVID. I sat on the front porch singing "Hello in There" and "Paradise" and cried on my boyfriend's shoulder. How many icons would we lose? How much creative life did they have left, and would we lose as well? At this point, we were still howling at 8 pm every night and I had cut out hearts and taped them into my living room window.

A month later, George Floyd. His death would always be wound up in the disaster of 2020. Not an outlier (black deaths at the hands of police a regular occurrence now being filmed) but a catalyst. His death coalesced with quarantine, unemployment, absence of national leadership, confusion and fear over a plague and health to create a not-been-seen-since-the-civil-rights-movement... movement.

It brought to the forefront a mix of emotions that had been carefully held at bay. What if's pushed into closets, hid under the bed. How many loved ones would die? Who else would we lose? And the reality that this wasn't easily solved. With unacknowledged feelings under the surface; many turned to alcohol, pot, smoking, overeating, aggression, isolation as a way to deal, or not deal, with everything happening.

It was in this stressful time that I got a call from a former coworker. My thought was maybe an elderly volunteer had succumbed to COVID. But she stated it plainly: B took his life last week. Complete shock took over. What? No... Not him, I thought. She kept talking. She didn't have a lot of information. She had other people to call.

What do you do in quarantine when someone dies? I stared out the window for a while. I needed to tell someone. I told my boyfriend, but he didn't know B. I returned to my work

emails. That felt wrong too. But there was no event to attend, no event details to attend to, no gathering of people to discuss the loss, no appropriate time to face the shock together.

After a few days (I didn't want to be the one to tell), I reached out and found many friends sitting in the same boat... shocked, confused, not sure how to handle the news. Some said they knew he had struggled with depression. But we still couldn't fill in the blanks. He worked as a nurse and had been on a COVID wing of a hospital. Was that the tipping point? How many medical professionals were silently crying out and needing relief and support? How long would our most essential workers, heroes, be forced to hold the hands of the dying? How could they keep dressing up in medical fatigues to go to war against an invisible enemy with nothing to arm themselves but masks and ventilators?

I tried to cry. It didn't feel real. But it was real. I dreamed about him. I dreamed about his wife and son. How would they survive this loss? My subconscious was dealing with a reality my waking self couldn't face. It felt like sleep walking but I was awake.

Multiple phone calls and emails flew trying to find a way to acknowledge this — could we do an online memorial of some kind, coordinate a donation drive, organize some Zoom happy hour or some outside gathering? Nothing came of these. They came from a good place, but we also wanted to respect the family.

I became worried about other friends. Those like me with therapists, not shy about sharing our emotions, dramas, traumas, and thoughts — I wasn't so worried about us. I was worried about those who said they were fine. Those people for whom you would never guess they could end their lives. You never know. I also realized I am too curious to do that. I kept thinking; did he not have any curiosity about what would happen tomorrow or next week? Was he convinced there was no way out of this? Or could he no longer cope, couldn't live another minute with all the worries pressing down on him?

It was a huge loss to this community. I posted, "The thing is... I don't have enough sympathy cards for this."

As autumn rolled around, my news feed was filled with loss. Acknowledged in social media, it was maybe the only place we could share with each other what we were going through.

In August, my mom got COVID. The worry I had been stuffing under the rug had arrived. We drove like crazy NASCAR drivers around the city to get a COVID test as we had seen her a week before. I had similar symptoms, intestinal this time, and was sure mine would be positive. Four days later, it was negative. Ironically, my mom's husband was also negative even though he lived with her. For two weeks, she moved from bed to couch, checking her oxygen levels and talking regularly with her doc. She was worn out just taking a shower, but she was okay. The effects lingered for longer than she wanted, but the doctors said she was doing the same as others who had recovered.

With this, I started to notice the virus was coming closer. My boss got it, then another coworker, then a friend of a friend, and then a friend's brother died of it. I didn't know him, but the friend and her family were inconsolable. He was young — late 30's I think — with a family. He had asthma and went to the hospital twice during the illness and was told he would be okay resting at home. He died at home.

Everyone I knew was trying to help ease the pain. We sent cards, had Grub Hub delivered to people's homes, dropped off cookies and flowers, called, texted, Zoomed. None of it seemed to make any difference. Grief is a solitary activity.

Then in November, I received a text from my mom, "Grandpa has COVID." My 92-year-old grandfather had been in and out of nursing homes for a decade. Last time I saw him, over a year ago, he was in a wheelchair and he said, "Let me tell you something about getting old." We leaned in to receive this wisdom. He replied, "Don't do it; it sucks." He had lived through prostate cancer, multiple strokes, other issues that caused pain and the need for regular help which he didn't enjoy. I knew he was ready to go but I also knew there had been so many times we were told that this is it. Or this might be it. And then it wasn't it. But I figured it would be a miracle if he survived this.

In the isolation that COVID brought to many nursing home patients, he had gone downhill throughout the year. The nursing staff had figured out how to Face Time with my mom and he did so regularly. He would be on the screen, agitated, scared, saying that his sister or mother was in the hospital, and when were they getting out? These individuals had passed away more than forty years ago. The veil between worlds seemed to be thinning, even before he got COVID.

A week passed — he didn't have symptoms. We increased our Face Time "visits" and group text updates went out. A week later, I set up a Face Time with the nurse. As she held the device, he wasn't looking at the screen. I asked the nurse if he could hear me. She said he could. She told me he had been her favorite patient, and I noticed the use, already, of the past tense. I said maybe I should sing to him — singing being one of things I inherited from him. She said that would be nice, so I sang Amazing Grace. He opened his eyes a few times. But he didn't say anything.

He died three days later. My boss said to take bereavement leave, but it felt strange to do that when I wasn't going anywhere. My work-from-home situation wasn't that hard — I kept up on my work from my guestroom in my yoga pants. What would I do with my time to grieve my grandfather? I looked at photos and sent some to family members. I had a few phone calls with relatives who told me stories. But there would be no Zoom funeral. No graveside gathering as he was cremated. My mom said we would spread his ashes next summer.

A decade or so ago, I walked in on my mom and grandfather having an argument about his funeral. He didn't want one. And my mom told him that it wasn't FOR him. That after he passed, his loved ones would gather. Even if there wasn't any formal funeral service, there would be a meal of some kind and a chance to gather and tell stories. He didn't want it. He was

adamant about this and he demanded that I act as a witness to his final wish. I guess the old fart got his way. Thanks, COVID.