

Kristen Atkinson

Kristen is in her 40s and lives with her partner, Justin, and their two young children in the Platt Park neighborhood of South Denver. She trained as a social worker and lectures at Metropolitan State University of Denver. Kristen joined First Unitarian in 2017. She served on the Giving in Action Committee and has been recruited for the FUSD Board of Trustees.

The first quarter of 2020 is a blur for Kristen Atkinson. She experienced the events of the year as a series of major life decisions made inside waves, with information that was constantly roiling.

The uncertainty amplified a feeling of breathlessness and fear. Kristen is loath to claim much attention to her own experience given that she knows others endured much more profound loss. But her voice seeps with exhaustion when asked to describe the year as it unfolded with her family.

Kristen lectures at Metropolitan State University of Denver. Her partner, Justin, owns a gym business in Chicago that anchors the family income. “We can’t make ends meet on my university salary alone without a complete overhaul.” The couple’s children were four and seven years old at the outset of the pandemic.

Kristen vaguely remembers 2020 opening with cautiously hopeful optimism about future political change. A social worker by training now working as an academic, she has long grappled to understand and explain how threads of social/racial/economic justice interweave. “That focus drew me to the congregation I joined three years ago. I was excited to explore it further as a community.” She had started some important work around white supremacy and racism and what they look like in our daily lives and in our Unitarian Universalist tradition.

The year 2020 shifted into a field practicum in surviving trauma.

“This year was fraught with real personal and collective trauma, even as I am aware of how much my privilege insulates us from the worst that many people of color and people who are poor experience.”

Stress came in waves, each breaking abruptly over the next: Hearing about the virus affecting other countries, then quickly coming to the U.S. Swelling fear around its spread across the country, then suddenly it was upon us. Schools cancelled and campuses closed. Classes and teaching transferred online. Having the kids home while she taught. All interactions outside the family shifted to email or Zoom. Every decision magnified: Can my babysitter come? What risks will that pose to her and her family as well as mine? Do I need to require masks all the time? How to decide when it is safe to undertake even routine out-of-house activities? When to decide? The waves of stress had cumulative impact, the landscape reordered by one wave not fully oriented or adapted to before the next wave hit.

Kristen was advantaged by her previous experience with online teaching, but classes over Zoom were still completely different. Participants lose all body language and facial expressions, and

students are differently comfortable with online classes. “The atmosphere was fraught. Students were losing jobs and field work internship placements, having their graduations blocked. They saw their futures crumbling besides whatever they were dealing with inside their own households. Many were scared, anxious and fearful. I found it necessary to pivot, to hold space for them to debrief and process their experiences in the collective Zoom room. It was a challenge to balance making space to support students and trying to further their learning of content. I limited class length to 1-1/2 to 2 hr. since that seemed as much as anyone could absorb, but reducing time by half requires that you reprioritize content. I left the sessions physically exhausted to cook dinner and care for my kids.”

Universities generally were hard hit during the pandemic as student enrollments plummeted. Loss of tuition revenue coincided with increased costs, as the State redirected funding toward COVID response. All faculty absorbed furlough days equivalent to a 10% pay cut. Metro chose to institute a hiring freeze to minimize layoffs. “I’m on a one-year contract renewal status and was in line for a three-year contract status, but that evaporated with the hiring freeze. My job stability was compromised; still, I am so grateful to have my job and health insurance for my family through my job. Everyone took a hit and that is just part of what one expects right now. Many of my students have seen worse. The student body at Metro is highly diverse, and they and their families were hard hit this year. What my family had to absorb relative to what everyone else had to absorb...”

Kristen’s partner confronted an equally amorphous decision environment with his gym business in Chicago: Can I stay open? Is it better to keep funneling savings to cover costs or to cut my losses now? How many of my staff can I keep on for how many hours? How would I reopen safely? How to enforce mask and distancing policies and ensure cleanliness? Making decisions about letting people go is a loss for both employee and employer. “Such decisions sucked up all of the brain space, leaving little room for even the necessary emotional grieving.”

Justin’s business remains open in Chicago with limited staff and restricted capacity, the outcome of some small business relief and an incredibly generous landlord who was willing to work with tenants. Still, it was a rough year for the business financially. “Hopefully, we will weather this storm. We are just doing whatever we can to stay open for as long as we can.”

Deciding how much risk to take for school was also a challenge in the family. Kristen and Justin kept their second-grade child in virtual school until January 2021. The 5-year-old went to part-time preschool from August 2020 until November. A long-time babysitter had planned to transition out for pregnancy leave in December but during the mid-November spike in COVID, Kristen’s family caught the virus. What was planned as a measured transition became an abrupt stop. “She was like a member of our family, here on Friday, and on Saturday my husband got sick and tested positive. She never was able to return.”

The fact that the family had considered itself careful of COVID protocols increased the feeling of vulnerability. “We were careful: Maintaining a small social pod. Working from the house. Following all the cleaning and masking protocols. Only leaving the house once a week for grocery shopping. Justin’s symptoms resembled a severe flu. My only symptom was a loss of smell for two months. Our eight-year-old tested positive without symptoms. And the

preschooler, who was the only one going out of the house to school, never tested positive at all. The hardest part for us was when the doctors prescribed that everyone should isolate. I'm working and worrying and trying to take care of kids, wearing masks when cutting food, not hugging. The kids stayed home without outside support until January. Their music and dance classes and speech therapy still take place virtually, without much social interaction or practice."

Kristen mourns contact with the parents, nieces, and nephews in other states the family has not seen in more than a year. She worries especially about her parents (now in their 70s) and their lost opportunities to be with grandchildren.

If the world for Kristen's household was tumultuous, the world outside was volatile.

She was painfully aware that in a "normal" time she would have been on the streets protesting police brutality and supporting the campaign for the value of Black lives. But in this COVID summer, it did not feel safe. "That was a hard decision to make. It felt like a cop-out, like another way I can enact my privilege. And essential to keeping my family intact."

The struggle seemed to further the distancing she had felt with her move to academia. "As a community organizer, I went to work every day to support young people of color who did not regularly have opportunities in their neighborhood. I felt real purpose in that work. Now I struggle being a step removed in academia. I try to remember that teaching is now my practice rather than being in the field. I don't always have mental, emotional space, or time to do both. But the conflict about where I ought to be endures."

In the natural world, summer wildfires burned intensely across the West for months. Kristen's family had lived previously in California, so Colorado wildfires triggered memories even as she worried about friends still living in California. She worried about Justin's asthma in the thick air.

And just as intensely, the election season raged like a vicious hot fire racing forward with crucial consequences and uncertain outcomes.

Amid these conflagrations and personal angst, Kristen also experienced a recentering, a renewal and affirmation of priorities. The isolation allowed her to reassess how much energy she was putting where. "I remember feeling the tension between what used to be, what I want things to be, and what the emerging reality is. I keep circling back to the central question: Is this something I will accept or work to change?"

The amalgam of 2020 changed a lot of priorities for Kristen's household. It shifted energy toward the nuclear family and the marriage. It highlighted the importance of time and energy spent with a small circle of friends, and gratitude for the support they offered. Work slowed as Kristen became more intentional about commitments and priorities within this moment. Rather than simply worrying about the loss of innocence that seems to associate with more screen time, she focused on what she can do: Talking with her kids about social justice, poverty, and climate change. Helping them interpret and prepare to stand into the world they are inheriting.

Finding ways to laugh has been helpful. Joy is contagious and children and students give her strength. Kristen is glad to have church even though the remote format is not the same. “I do appreciate having space to reflect. My own spirituality is important to me and helps through difficult times.”

2020 changed how Kristen teaches in more than the obvious technological ways. “Now, I center all my teaching around anti-oppression and trauma-informed practice, all the way down to the bones of how I frame the class and lesson plans. I’d been moving toward that direction, but the events of the year gave me confidence that this is what I really need to be doing.”

Moving beyond COVID, she is concerned with its effect on women’s careers generally. “My university and department are pretty attentive to social and economic justice and will try to mitigate these effects over time, but I will be impacted.” She is more concerned about the effect on a collective level in relation to low-income women and women of color. About the impact on children’s brains, their learning losses and mental health and developmental issues. About how we will navigate tensions to get to a place of healing and wholeness as a nation.

The year shone a light on our collective need to grapple more squarely and effectively with historical and contemporary racism, sexism, and homophobia; to couple exploration and self-growth with action informed by communication with the people who are most affected.

Kristen is eager to be part of the group forming at FUSD to think more about climate justice. What does that look like in our lives? How can we influence more equitable and effective policy around that?

She wants to continue being more intentional and working at a slower pace; doing work that values quality of life and pushes back against the American emphasis on productivity and constant motion. “I want to figure out how to slow down and be meaningful with everything that I put energy into.”

Kristen is drawn to a model of teaching called slow teaching that prizes going more deeply into a smaller number of topics. She has struggled to do that within the structure of accreditation and professional standards, the overarching expectations of the education system. But now seems a good time to make a more concerted effort at changing systems to be more responsive to the new world that is emerging. She is ready to stand to the challenge.