

Mary Ann Thompson

Mary Ann is an 80-ish female who lives in Capitol Hill neighborhood of central Denver. Trying to be an inclusive human being, she feels a victim of a schizophrenic white culture. Mary Ann has a political bent and a long history of working with the League of Women Voters and processing votes in local elections. She is regularly recruited as Parliamentarian at congregational meetings. Mary Ann has been a member of FUSD since 1974, where she has served as president of the board, sat on the Religious Exploration and Property Management committees, and on ministerial search and long-range planning committees. Mary Ann has never been a Sunday-only member.

My mother was Canadian, and I was born while she was on vacation in Canada. My father was from Bridgeport, Connecticut. I have a Black daughter, Darla, who lived until recently in D.C. and a white son, Jay, who lives in Indiana. I tend to think of myself as a white American. I was raised predominantly in white institutions and am very much part of white banking and educational institutions today.

I feel a victim of my schizophrenic white culture that refuses to acknowledge the multiple cultures that make up America, refuses to acknowledge that we encompass the descendants of people who came in the hull of a ship, on the bridge of the ship, and the Natives who stood on the shore to meet them. I have an IRA in a Wall Street culture that said everything was hunky dory during this pandemic even while 600,000 people were dead and 33 million were unemployed because of it. I'm giving my money away to my church and organizations that are trying to help people disadvantaged by the pandemic because I'm not worried about my next meal.

At the beginning of 2020, things were chugging along as always: Everyone was wrestling with angst about the election, trying to predict who would be president and whether we would have to put up with daily lies and atrocities and inuendo for another term. Lots of newer younger people were getting involved in the congregation, which was great, though it was also hard to keep up with them. I appreciated our commitment to the wider community and to facing historic problems and trying to find solutions. The Giving in Action team kept us informed of other non-profit organizations and their work in our community. I was trying to keep up with the social justice part of the church and contributing financially but trying to pull back from other time commitments.

When the COVID shutdown came, I was home and stayed home. Darla and I had big plans to meet and celebrate her 50th birthday in D.C. that spring. I didn't go. She sat home alone on her 50th birthday.

I live in an apartment building that was serious about the mask mandate. I walked to the grocery store 1-1/2 blocks away with my cart and my grocery bags during early elder hours. After a while, between the mask and distancing requirements and plexiglass barriers, it felt safe enough. I walked the neighborhood for exercise and noticed how differently people treated the pandemic risk: On 7th Avenue, almost everybody had a mask and a dog, and they would move out into the street to maintain the required six-foot distancing. If I went south to the Country Club area, there

was no sign of a virus afoot at all. It was interesting to see the difference even between the various parts of our neighborhood. I walked alone, even checking on the church every once in awhile to make sure it was still there. I watched it through the tuck-pointing and eventually the roof replacement that took place during our COVID exile.

A group of us from the congregation used to go to a coffee shop on Mondays, so Stuart Ferguson set up a Monday Zoom meeting and we did that instead. That meant we connected at least once a week. It was a way to keep up and check in with each other. John Vivian joined us from Nebraska; Kathleen Sutton, Ruth Steiner, Kate Raabe, Kathy Glatz, Jim Harlin, and sometimes Angie Barnes, Mary Kay Myers, Sally Madsen, and Carol Lassen were all part of these calls. I do enjoy talking to human beings rather than computers. Zooming is okay to keep connected but it is not the same as seeing people in person.

I checked into Sunday service regularly throughout the pandemic, though not coffee hour. We conducted our core circle online. Last summer during a dip in the COVID infection rates our circle met in a park on 3rd and University, stayed socially distant, and wore masks. Otherwise, we didn't resume in person until May 2021.

Zoom meetings also provided the platform for the League of Women Voters (LWV) business, and the Museum of Nature and Science held Zoom lectures. I kept informed and didn't feel particularly isolated. The LWV hosts a bi-monthly speakers' series. In addition to getting voter materials out ahead of the election, posting policy papers and initiating a police study group, we managed to complete a big study on how to make LWV language more inclusive of non-binary folks. That was tough. We produced a tool kit for League groups to use that can be farmed out to other interested parties.

By August, I felt guilty that I wasn't experiencing depression or anxiety and was feeling relatively unaffected. I realize that 600,000 people are not with us because of COVID, but no one that I knew personally died of it, or even contracted more than a mild case. My losses were more related to people like Eric Porter (whom I didn't necessarily know well) or Ted Stockin; I felt sorry when we couldn't recognize their passing with a memorial service at church.

Where phone or Zoom connections were impossible, it was a loss to be unable to keep up relationships. Like Myrna Seiler, who is living far south in a small, assisted living home. The place shut down all visits with COVID. Myrna is going blind and hard of hearing. It became impossible to reach her and she really needs in-person visits. Or Rose Tanaka, who moved to a more intensive unit at Kovod Jewish Residences for rehab and is extremely isolated now. Her church community is really her most local family. Pre-COVID, Beth Neva would invite a group of 80-ish people to celebrate birthdays six times a year. The group included Phyllis Zumwinkle, Rose Tanaka, Sally Ortiz, and Ruth Steiner. Rose's daughter, Susan, (who lives back East) established a practice of this group doing regular Tuesday Zoom calls to help Rose stay in touch with her church family. This year, Sally Madsen, Kate Raabe, Lewis Thompson, and Rundell Brown joined in. We are all getting together but Zoom doesn't work so well for the purpose: Phyllis doesn't hear and leaves the call after 20 minutes. Rose tends to fade in and out, but at least she has some connection with her friends.

I felt guilty that I didn't demonstrate publicly my horror at what was going on with police violence last summer, but I didn't feel comfortable moving around in public, at a time before we understood the relationship between the virus and outdoors.

Family and friends helped me cope. I'm not a great telephone person. My daughter, Darla, is the only person I can talk to for hours on the phone.

When it comes to reopening from COVID, I'm concerned that people are jumping the gun. The pandemic is not over yet. How safe can I feel with emergence when we know that children under 12 can't be vaccinated yet but schools in Greeley are returning in-person with no mask requirements? It has been disturbing to see the social fallout, the backlash, bullying, taking out of anger and frustration on peers and neighbors. We're thinking the pandemic is over, but I think it may have a long tail.

My daughter works for the American Academy for the Advancement of Science and lived in D.C. until March 2021. Finally, when her employer said their staff could live anywhere in the country, Darla decided to move back to Denver. She lives between 8th and 9th on Corona, near me. Upon arriving in Denver, she quarantined except for double-masking in the car with the window down to get her two vaccines. She cleared the post-vax waiting period in mid-May 2021, and we celebrated by going to the art museum.

While she was aware there would be a lot fewer people who look like her in Denver than in D.C. I'm sad that Darla has encountered a different Denver than the one she remembers leaving so long ago: Walking down 8th Avenue with her long black curly hair waving free, a guy in traffic yelled at her, "Black Lives *DON'T* Matter." Later, as she approached the corner of 9th Avenue at Morey Elementary School, she noticed the driver of a car at a stop light slumped over his steering wheel. She hesitated even to knock on the window and make sure he was okay because he was white and she wasn't sure how he would react to a Black stranger. The car behind him started honking loudly as the light changed and the first car was not moving. Thankfully, another walker approached, and a King Soopers worker went inside to enlist a guard. It ended up with five people of color responding to a white guy in distress. Meanwhile, lots of other white people milled around but none stopped to help. It has been painful to watch my daughter have to navigate such an unsettling reintroduction and to see through her eyes the condition of present-day Denver.

Even after everybody in the country saw the video of the cop kneeling on the neck of George Floyd, the fact that police are still killing minorities is dispiriting. It is as though police assume their job is to make arrests, solving each situation as quickly as possible (even if that means shooting somebody) because they have permission and act that way under the authority of the majority white population of the U.S.

The "normal tourist visit" (AKA the January 6, 2020 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol) topped off the year. A lot of Trump supporters remain in total denial of the election results. These are not fringe people, but a substantial minority of the population, enough to organize themselves and invade the capitol, assault and kill people, to desecrate the People's House and think they have a

right to do it, to deny the legitimacy of results with no evidence to support their claims. I did not realize our democracy was so much in crisis.

In relation to the claims of election fraud, as a person who has worked on voter education for the LWV for decades and who has worked in the counting room for elections since 2006, as a person who knows in detail what our process is, I find the questioning of the Election insulting. We have so many safeguards in place. Every person working for the Denver Election Commission goes out of their way to make every vote count and count accurately. When someone says you can steal an election it insults me.

I thought the Election Commission did a superb job of trying to keep us safe as possible given the COVID risk in 2020, while still taking seriously the need to do this essential work of democracy. One person in the room had to decide whether they could keep the mask over their nose or leave, and they left. Everyone else took seriously the responsibility to keep each other safe.

If everything goes back to normal after the disruptions from 2020, then we have learned nothing. This is a whole new world. Now we can no longer pretend that police don't kill people. I can't pretend that democracy will always be there without my making an effort. We are going to have to be patient and kind and recognize that we have not all come through this in the same way. We'll need to take into account and be aware of other people's experiences.