

Mary Sullivan

Mary is a nearing-70-year-old who lives with her 2nd husband, Harry, in the Hilltop neighborhood of East Denver. She has three grown children and Harry has two, all of whom live in the city. Mary served as President of the FUSD board of trustees for the past two years. Earlier church work included Family Promise, the annual auction, greeters, and leadership development.

Mary Sullivan spent most of the year in her house, where she and her husband Harry were both conservative in responding to the threat of COVID. “We are both at risk for bad outcomes if we contract the virus. All five of our children live in Denver but were only welcomed back into our home in late April 2021.”

Living in isolation with one other person was revealing. Mary’s husband is an introvert, so the year kept him in his happy place. “For me, my whole social life was narrowed to one person and place. It was not necessarily curative. I felt envious of friends who got in a car and went out on adventures together during this COVID year. At times, I am so grateful for my husband. My appreciation for his companionship and for what he brings to the union has grown. But the differences in our temperaments and approaches to life were cast in sharp relief during the pandemic.”

Without the benefit of deepening relationships with fellow congregants, being president of FUSD felt like work only, without the usual community involvement and relationship building. Mary sorely missed this during the majority of her term.

“My lifelong habit has been to fall back on self-reliance and find resources within to shore up when needed. That pattern developed from a history of promises made and expectations of help that never came. I went almost exclusively to that place during this year. It can be an extremely harsh and lonely place. I needed emotional support, but my husband reminded me that I present to everybody the image of a strong, able person who needs nothing. That was not the truth.”

Mary says the year brought about a shift in personality. “Traits I viewed as defining me (traveler, explorer, socializer, fun-seeker) seem not to be me anymore. I find myself now cancelling social engagements with people I really like because the prospect of going out is exhausting. Having had a year to reflect, I think perhaps I’m more introverted than I ever believed. Perhaps I don’t always need to push myself. Now I am trying to integrate both sides of my personality without going to extremes.”

Historically, Mary approached adversity with almost obstinate optimism. The past year-and-a-half challenged that orientation. “I normally stay pretty steady, but since summer 2020, I have felt as though I was experiencing a bipolar existence: Plunging to the depths: not wanting to do anything, get dressed, open emails, followed by self-deprecation, goading myself to function because people were depending on me. Then surging to be productive and feeling the high associated with *I can do this!* Then, suddenly, sunk again. Cycling rapidly.”

Events in the world outside her home often triggered the swings.

Both the 2020 and 2021 impeachments of Trump had predictable outcomes that triggered lingering disappointment and pessimism. Mary finds it bitter to watch the enduring adulation he still inspires despite observable lies and incitement to insurrection, the obvious self-serving behavior of Congress. Did she ever doubt the impeachments should have been brought? “Never. You need to do the right thing even in the face of likely failure. Probability of success is not a criterion for deciding whether to act.”

The public reaction to George Floyd’s death affected Mary deeply; especially during a pandemic, it was notable to see young and old people, people of all races, marching in masks. Events like the street protests, the worldwide recognition of the need to address racial justice, all stirred elation in Mary’s heart. Each new incident of police violence, each political failure to seize the moment to move us forward, would send her sinking back into disillusionment. And she would work again to free herself from defeatist thinking.

One of the most uncomfortable things Mary confronted over the pandemic was how ingrained she is in white supremacy culture. “Without malice, I’ve just assumed that things are the way they are. Between the racial justice protests, the ongoing violence against people of color, the covenant work, and my own personal reading, I started to immerse myself enough to see it for the first time. At some point I crossed from seeing white supremacy culture in an academic frame to holding a mirror in front of myself. That has been very humbling and embarrassing on many levels.”

Mary reads incessantly and focused on white supremacy culture during COVID. “This is the year I finally read Toni Morrison, as well as a ton of non-fiction, most notably *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Caste*, *The Sum of Us* and *Strangers in their Own Land*. On the one hand, the books depress me and make me want to pick up a fluffy novel. On the other, my reading furthered my education and my commitment to become more involved.”

The exposure gave her a lens for looking back on her family of origin and her upbringing, for examining the political and social context of earlier decades and how they continue to inform modern oppression. Mary learned to forgive her mother a little for her unconscious racist lens and to be brutally honest with herself.

She is heartened to watch corporations taking stands against states where legislatures are doubling down on white supremacy. “Certainly, some corporations are taking more substantive actions than others, but people and powers are beginning to make connections between huge wealth disparity, racial inequity, and climate degradation. I find that optimistic.”

Mary gained insight into her relationship with risk when her son contracted the virus. “He was alone in his apartment. and I left groceries and medications at his door, backed up to exchange a few words, and left. One Friday, he opened the door, and it was clear that his condition was

critical. I swept into his place, full of the COVID I'd spent a year avoiding but I didn't care. In that instant, I made the decision to care for him. It was interesting to note where the line of acceptable risk was for me."

Mary's own sense of humor kept her sane through it all. "I am funny, witty, and quick and that is an aspect I love about myself. Humor saved me and laughing by myself helped me through some dire moments throughout the pandemic."

Coming out of isolation, Mary expects there will be changes.

- I need to take personal responsibility for carving out a singular independent existence of a nature I am comfortable with. I am looking carefully at life and reevaluating what to keep and not. I have discovered that what I'm really good at isn't necessarily what I want to do or what feeds me. I'm not going to tie myself to that criteria going forward.
- I hope I can get back the physical strength, concentration, and energy that I lost over the pandemic.
- I will take the time I need to figure out what reengagement looks like.
- I am resolved to let people know what I need rather than always stepping forward as the caretaker for others. I will allow myself to need and feel and express that.