

Rev. Mike Morran

Mike Morran is a 60-ish white male who lives in a household with his wife Tammy, their older son Zach and his girlfriend Tala in the Central Park neighborhood of northeast Denver. A younger son, Ben, is away at college. For 19 years, Mike has served as the senior minister for First Unitarian Society of Denver.

At beginning of 2020 I felt that the congregation was in a very good place amidst global, political, economic, and climate contexts that were spiraling out of control.

The congregation was moving forward in positive ways with racial justice work, enjoying a general sense of cohesion. Positive initiatives such as the developing covenant work were generating a lot of energy. We were hosting guest speakers who brought racially and culturally diverse viewpoints to the pulpit. We were beginning to learn and wrestle with some of the truths of white supremacy culture and the harder parts of American history that none of us learned in school. That would have profound implications for how the congregation moved forward, how we think of ourselves as a community, and locate ourselves in Denver socially, politically, economically. I felt we were on the cusp of digging deeply into that. I was happy to be part of leading that conversation.

Then, in mid-March, it felt like somebody pulled the plug on the sink. All the energy and direction drained out the bottom. The sustaining infrastructure of our organization and community is based on being together, having personal connection, having each other to bounce our ideas and neuroses off. That is the foundation of who we are and aspire to be. We lost the very medium by which we fulfill our mission.

Personally, I felt I was working twice as hard to accomplish half as much at things for which I had no skill. We switched to online classes and virtual services. Instead of preaching in person and dialogue to a group of people I know and love, I was preaching to a little red light in a big empty room. It changed the way I write and even how I think about preaching. All my career, when I've prepared a sermon, I thought of the people who would be in the room giving me their undivided attention for 20 minutes on a Sunday morning. Now, that seemed quite vague.

I really love and value my connection with individuals in my community. People like Rose Tanaka, Mary Ann Thompson, and some of the other elders. People I might only exchange glances or greetings with as we move across a room. Feeling like I'm part of somebody's life was the most rewarding thing about my job, but all of that contact radically changed overnight. I've tried to make phone calls, but not seeing them every week has felt like a real loss.

I find it amazing that people joined the congregation in the middle of all this. I've had a dozen people tell me they love the online sermons, feel more immediacy from the screen-sized view of a speaker than they do sitting in the crowded sanctuary on a Sunday morning. I'm glad they do, but that sure isn't how I experience it.

All last summer I paid close attention to the protests and marches for racial justice. I would have loved to take part in those and be part of that movement, but I couldn't risk bringing Covid home to my family as my wife is at high risk and vulnerable to poor outcomes. I did not attend a single protest or march.

That choice caused considerable personal anguish. I kept hearing from friends who were there that most of the violence and antagonizing of police was being initiated by white people. I wanted to encourage those people to follow the lead of more peaceful POC, or at least document the violence and property destruction by white people. It was frustrating feeling so helpless.

After a horrific runup, the national election brought relief but little celebration. Mostly I felt disgust that Donald Trump would have won the election if he could have even pretended to give a damn about COVID. Distinct from his 2016 campaign, this campaign had no message, no plan. My disgust was about how close he came to winning even so. We live in a country that would have elected that guy twice if he could have only pretended! I tried through summer and fall to understand why people would vote for him. I wrote one essay describing seven categories of Trump supporters and put it on Facebook. Towards the end, I felt that I had a decent handle on understanding his base of supporters, how they thought, what they believed, the values that inform their politics.

Recognizing that such folks don't evaporate with an election loss, the best idea I have for going forward is to focus on big picture values and shared goals of the country. Do we share a desire to live in a country that allows freedom and opportunity? At least we use the same words. What does that look like in a country where everybody isn't white, where we have all these immigrants and formerly enslaved people and their descendants?

My perennial question for conservative friends and relatives is: What is your idea? How do you propose to deal with dramatically different racial outcomes (e.g., huge discrepancies in rates of maternal death, neonatal death, incarceration, in length of lifespan, in household wealth, etc.)? If you won't address these inequities, why are you surprised when black and brown people get upset and try to make their own lives better? Yes, the government initiatives and programs that try to address these inequities are inefficient, full of flaws. What is your better solution?

Given how every issue and fact has become so intensely politicized, I strongly suspect, deeply fear, and sometimes believe we are in a country that has become ungovernable. How do you govern a country whose people hold such violently different accounts of reality?

Bigger than politics, I have been gradually coming to accept that we are probably headed towards global environmental, political, and economic collapse. Climate feedback loops accelerate and amplify global warming, creating instability and imbalances across ecosystems. We could be looking at half a billion refugees, which will of course destabilize global politics. Water in the West is drying up and entire regions are likely to become uninhabitable. It is scary.

COVID-19 pulled back the veil and made it harder to deny the inequities that are woven throughout our society. The virus gave us direct experience of how interconnected the environmental, political, social, and economic spheres are. COVID made it harder to pretend that the folks who are making decisions and holding the purse strings have any interest whatsoever in our general well-being.

Being a generally resourced and resourceful person, I have wondered how much of my energy I should put into preparing my children for the world I fear is coming. If we're facing a 50% global reduction in population, how much energy should I put into helping my children be among those who survive? Is it even possible? Is it fair? Do my children have something special to offer the world? What does my answer mean for their lives? How do you get beyond fear?

The meaning of the pandemic in my personal life shifted over the year. In March-April 2020, it was annoying and a nuisance, a massive inconvenience derailing my work and the congregation's work. Then, as it sunk in through May and June that this wasn't going away, that we were looking at a year or more of virtual church, malaise set in. NPR recently did a segment on languishing that seems such a perfect word for my experience. Especially through last winter. I felt enervated and stuck. I could think of things to do but motivation was a challenge and sometimes whole days would go by with little accomplished.

I did not anticipate how broadly traumatizing the pandemic would be. While I personally didn't experience it traumatically, I know many people who did. Especially people who live alone seemed to struggle with depression and loneliness. People on the front lines in health care felt like they were in a war zone. My younger sister is a hospital social worker in Tucson, which once had the highest infection rate in the country. Her descriptions of the way COVID took over her hospital and the pressures on staff, nurses, doctors, social workers, janitors... People would get sick with nobody to replace them. Remaining workers were inundated; understaffed, undersupplied, without even enough room to meet the need. There was not enough of anything.

My sister is traumatized. Every parent I know went through hell with their children and online learning. Every student I know felt like they lost an entire year of their education. Travel plans were canceled. Businesses evaporated. Extended families couldn't see each other. There will be a whole lot of healing and processing required to move us beyond this crisis.

I spent much of the year feeling helpless in the face of all this. I'm unaccustomed and ill-equipped to feeling helpless; it is not in my emotional repertoire.

I did not anticipate how much the pandemic would affect my son's college education, nor how deeply I would resent writing checks for a substandard education. The price did not diminish even as the quality of the offering clearly did. Ben is fine; he is resilient and smart, lands on his feet, and is an easy kid to be proud of. But we saved a long time to send him to college, and to watch that pool of savings shrink without feeling he is getting value for it has been tough.

I felt stuck at home and sick to death of being home. Sometimes Tammy and I drove to a park to walk around, just to get out of the damned house. I spent too much time feeling guilty about sitting home in relative security and health collecting a paycheck for not doing my job in the way I felt best.

Amidst it all, I drew strength from working with my hands. When I was young, fixing stuff got me through tough times with my family of origin. During the pandemic I built a little shop in my garage and made stuff. I taught myself to make finger joints and build wooden furniture, boxes, and shelves. It gets me through to this day.

Writing helps too.

I walk my dogs several times each day. A little spot two blocks from my house is a wide median planted with flowering trees on either side of a gravel path. The dogs know the spot where I stop and take a couple of minutes to notice, to take in the breeze, leaves, air, and plants.

I am deeply blessed that I like and respect and have a great relationship with Tammy. She's kept me honest for 27 years. She calls me on my bullshit and listens to me talk (and she talks). We've kept each other grounded.

Like many people, I'm worried about the uncertain future of brick-and-mortar congregations. Buildings won't get cheaper to maintain. Generations who built those institutions are aging and passing. Younger generations do not have the disposable income nor the inclination to volunteer in support of institutions like their parents did. Different relationships to institutions, to religion in particular, and different expectations from institutions layer on top of technology. No one knows what the future of organized religion looks like.

Given that, I still believe that brick and mortar congregations have something desperately needed in this world. I believe that people who invest in First Unitarian are better for it, and the people in their lives are better for it. I believe that this community does a lot of good in this world in obvious and non-obvious ways. The thought of that First Unitarian might someday no longer exist saddens me, even as I recognize that many of the forces against its ongoing presence are far beyond our control.

I believe that local congregations have a critical role to play in a free democracy. There need to be institutional bodies, not just individuals within a larger democratic society, wherein people explore and clarify their spiritual values, practice, and try to live out and live into those values collectively in a common space. The thought that such institutions might not exist in a meaningful way into the future is really terrifying to me.

Evolutionarily, I think we need each other's physical presence, the energy we give and receive, the information exchanged when we can see each other's body language. If that is lost to an exclusively or predominantly online presence, we are venturing into a situation ripe for all

manner of human neuroses. In community, in each other's presence, we provide each other a check and balance on our neuroses, fears, and loneliness. We keep each other sane.

Still, we cannot return to exactly the way things were pre-pandemic because those ways were already eroding. Moving forward, FUSD and other churches will have to invest at least as much energy, time, and money in our online as our physical presence. I don't like that, but the writing is clear and on the wall. When we come back together in person, we will do concurrent live services and live streaming.

We must seize the opportunity that lives in this moment. Younger generations communicate on different media, respond to different outreach, and have different expectations. The long-term future of our institution depends on our being flexible, focused, and authentic.

As an institution, FUSD fared remarkably well this past year. Staff worked hard to keep it afloat, but other key factors were stable lay leadership and solid finances. Many of our members who were able contributed more. We lost some pledges, but the average pledge rose to steady income. Most churches I know are concerned about dropping attendance and assessing which programs to cut. We held steady at 160-170 households attending virtual services through the winter. Now, with summer and vaccines opening the range of activities for more people, our attendance has dropped to 110 households, but we are still doing better than other congregations I know of.

A healthy church culture supported us well through the crisis. We deal with the things we need to deal with. We don't get bogged down in unnecessary conflict. Basically, I think the members trust the leadership, board, staff, and management. That is not true in every congregation. FUSD has tended to attract high quality leadership who are willing to invest in our congregation.

I foresee two main foci for FUSD's justice work going forward: racism/reparations, and environmental justice. Good teams have gathered around each of these initiatives. The draft reparations proposal is being distributed for congregational review. This will be a hard pull. But if there is any white congregation that can wrestle with that challenge and come out on the right side of it, that congregation is ours.

Lastly, as I told the congregation in a recent sermon, I plan to move into the future with three overarching priorities for my own ministry. These aren't original, I found them on a C-HeARTS Collaborative website, but this is the best model I've seen for moving forward in wholeness, addressing both the healing that needs to happen, and laying the groundwork for an unknown future. First, we will keep Justice as a guiding moral principle. Second, investing in storytelling as an act of both healing and resistance. Third, expanding (spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually) the assumptions of We and Our. What and who do we mean when we say We? As in, We believe. We practice. We covenant... Who is included, or excluded, when we say Our? As in Our community. Our values. Our congregation. Our ministry?

It will be very, very good to be together again in-person.