

## Monterey Buchanan

*Monterey is in her early 30s and lives alone in the Oberlin Park neighborhood of south Denver. She is an author and works as a writing tutor at Community College of Denver, University of Denver, and Brainfuse. She is a disability rights activist and has worked for gender justice. Monterey grew up in the church.*

As 2020 opened I was less connected to the congregation than I had been or would like to be. I attended the Christmas Eve service with my parents in 2019 and remember the warm communal feeling of gathering together and seeing people after the service. I didn't so much take it for granted as I just never expected to lose it. Some things are so stable that you don't consider they might go away.

As a person with cerebral palsy and premature retinopathy, my life is carefully constructed to allow me independence. I live alone in my apartment near a light rail stop that takes me directly to my tutoring job at Community College of Denver. The apartment building has open communal spaces where I meet and talk with neighbors, as well as a workout room and rooftop patio that I use regularly. I don't drive, but the light rail drops me off close to weekly shopping. I spend most weekends at home with my parents and dogs.

I had started a new semester tutoring at Community College of Denver and had plans to read my short stories downtown as part of the writing community. I was in a stable place with my tutoring job, to the extent that academia is ever stable.

Early in March, I attended a couple of parties, one for my brother and a swing dance for a friend's birthday. Both were lots of fun. I also went with friends to a very crowded rally for progressive candidate Elizabeth Warren, where people were packed in over capacity for several hours with lots of cheering and shouting. Only later would these activities come to feel potentially dangerous.

In the immediate aftermath of COVID reaching Denver, the most memorable thing was whiplash from changing instructions about how we should proceed. Initial protocols focused on hand washing and extra signage about social distancing. Inside a day we had three subsequent sets of instructions before being sent home to await further direction. It was an open question whether the college would stay open at all.

The first two weeks were really scary. Then, it was determined the writing center would go remote. I knew the situation was serious after the official lockdown, when we were only allowed on site to set up our online job. I took the light rail in to the office then. Previously, commuting between 8-9 a.m. was so crowded you could never sit down. That day, there were only two people on the train. Something was really wrong here.

The writing center went online. Next, experienced people started quitting. Several older staff who had been at the writing center for a while had difficulty adjusting to the technology. No one knew when the switch back to in-person work might occur, so they resigned.

I got the hang of remote tutoring okay, though some of my vision loss made being on the computer so much tricky. But as students had to prioritize other things ahead of their education the demand for services fell. I lost a lot of work hours. One of the federal stimulus checks definitely paid the rent over the summer! I found the opportunity to tutor online with *Brainfuse* just in time and could work from anywhere. *Brainfuse* allowed me to focus on still having work and gave me something attend to besides the news.

Loss of public transit was especially difficult; that is how I get around, so it meant I had to stay inside. Access-A-Ride kept going for doctors' visits. I had my groceries delivered to my door. People who once had other income tried to survive as drivers. I struggled with the realization that using delivery services put those drivers at risk of COVID. Instacart people left notes asking for extra tips, so I had the sense they were not paid well. I tipped what I could, but that was a challenge since I, too, was struggling financially. Every solution seemed to illuminate how hard it was to equitably keep everyone supported. Weekly visits to parents became occasional as they struggled with their workplace and quarantine demands.

We wasted a lot of energy on fruitless activity. Much of the information on COVID was not verifiable, some because there were more scientific questions than answers about this new virus. But the Federal administration had so undermined journalists and the Centers for Disease Control that it was hard to know what advice was reliable, even for someone who tries to be informed. So, we spent a lot of time bleaching surfaces and scrubbing groceries and hearing the President promote unproven or dangerous treatments.

We were lucky to live in Colorado. Governor Polis did the best he could. Some other governors showed leadership as well; others were a lot less honest. Local coverage became where you had to go for news. With no divide between home and work, trying to cap how much news you took in during a day became self-preservation. You stayed so scared for yourself and for people who were in more danger than you.

In the end, I was lucky not to be sick and to have my essentials, and people who could help me if I ran short. I was fortunate to have graduated with an MFA the year before COVID. Being able to apply for other work with an MFA was easier than otherwise. It was also easier to maintain a job I already had with the conversion to remote office than it was to start a new one. Bonding with brand new coworkers online is more challenging. My parents got me an exercise machine, which was important to keeping me strong and upright. You forget how much daily exercise comes through a commute until that commute is gone. My interest in reading took a nosedive, which is really weird in my line of work. I lacked the attention span for long-form work. Envisioning the apocalypse, you think *I'll have time for reading*, but in fact I watched a lot of Netflix and other streaming services.

The fact that we had the Internet for this pandemic compared to the 1918 flu was remarkable. I called my grandmother on the phone because she doesn't do Internet, but everyone else I connected with through the Internet via social media and Zoom. A friend from my MFA program put a writers' group together and we held together through the pandemic. Early on, the church did a phone wellness check on all our members. That was great! It was so wonderful to be contacted by people in the world beyond family and work.

I saw a news story about a young woman of color who also had cerebral palsy working as an essential worker in a grocery store. She made a will, recognizing the chance she might not live through this, and she didn't. I saw a story of a black man who was paraplegic, and the hospital decided he wouldn't get a ventilator. I didn't know these people, but the stories exposed an ongoing prejudice in our society that was hard to accept. If you have a disability and confront a situation where life-saving resources are being rationed, will you be considered worthy of care? We are the richest country in the world, and we should not be having to decide who lives or dies.

Remote work opened opportunities for me. I started doing book reviews for a company in London. I got material published, including a short-story contest called "The Toilet Paper Baron of Metro Denver" for Denverite.com that subsequently won a prize and was read on the radio. I proved to myself I could still write under these conditions. I don't generally write comedic zeitgeist, but people wanted to talk about our bizarre, shared existence. I wrote another piece during quarantine that is expected out this fall. I was lucky to have more writing time, more virtual events, a writing community that held together during the pandemic, and an Internet that opened more possibilities.

People with disabilities have long argued for remote work options. Now that most of us have experience with them, I hope they will become a standard part of a workplace. We need to recognize that what works best for non-disabled, white people need not be a default but only one possibility. I hope our memory of the year's experience gives us some valuable lessons.

The summer of 2020 was also scary because of the violence going on in the world: Black people being killed by police, protests in the streets, and gun violence that continued despite the country being in lockdown. You would hope that one of the few positive side effects of the world shutting down might be fewer opportunities for violence, but I realized that the bad stuff doesn't go away and may even be amplified during troubled times.

I felt conflicted about the Black Lives Matter protests. I very much wanted to participate in them but was nervous to put my health at risk. I'm not very stable on my feet anyway, and wondered, if I fell and needed help, would I either be in danger or putting someone else in danger? Part of the issue with protesting under normal circumstances is how do I get there? I realize that people of color don't have the privilege of weighing their risks and their options.

It is an incredibly complicated time to be an activist. The luxury of being visible for causes seemed to evaporate, which was frustrating since the problems didn't go away. It was hard to gather attention for police brutality, racism and climate change when people had COVID to worry about and problems paying their rent. I managed to keep tabs on the protests, took Facebook actions and tried to start conversations with people. I wish I had eventually found a way to do more in-person actions with Black Lives Matter, but I didn't.

I worry that we lost precious ground on climate change. I have a collection of plastic bags which would never have accumulated if I did my own shopping. You see tons of disposable masks and gloves on the streets. I hope we have the time to clean it up. We were all choosing between short-term and long-term survival, and in lieu of a national response, people had to figure out

their own course. I appreciate hearing that President Biden is tying climate recovery to the infrastructure bill he's trying to get through. We all need a detox, a recovery plan from the destructive habits we fell into with the pandemic. And then a plan for making up lost ground.

Historically, this period is going to be difficult to explain. I remember learning things in history and wondering why the people acted as they did or didn't act to prevent catastrophe. Future generations are going to be incredulous. "How could you miss *THIS*?" We'll have to keep reminding them that orchestrated chaos exacts a price. Trump's term had gone on so long by the time the pandemic hit. One atrocity after another, everything more over the top and scarier than the last, without a break. You couldn't keep track of anything long enough to focus on it. The government confirmed sightings of UFOs and it was a side story to the daily catastrophe! People were frightened and lacked national leadership.

History will judge us harshly. We became a sobering lesson in why strong independent professional news is so important. Life in a crisis is dangerous when folks don't have the information they need. The pandemic also made a persuasive argument for bigger, compassionate government. Some things can't be done at an individual, community, or state level. The virus didn't care about jurisdictions. How many lives might have been saved, how much shorter the duration of outbreaks and how much less economic loss if we had been monitoring outbreaks and taking them seriously early on? If we had given all people the resources they needed to stay home while we got the virus under control?

My fear is that we'll have another case of historical amnesia. I'd rather not repeat the suffering of this year without learning it's lessons. This situation shone light on the inequities in our society, but also on options for how people can live and work. Before the pandemic we saw remote work or spending time with children as luxuries. I hope we can be more expansive in considering them to be needs rather than luxuries going forward. I hope we remember folks who may need long-term help, such as people with long-haul COVID. If we forget what we learned together, we will be more vulnerable, not just to the next pandemic but to falling back into systems that mostly benefited the people in power. I hope we remember how to take care of each other.

I hope we haven't lost people at the church. I'm especially hoping older people made it through. My grandma in her 90s made it through. I was really scared for her. I've attended more FUSD services since they were online because transportation is not an issue. I will be interested in in-person services, though I am still working my way up to larger groups. Options help.