

Ruth Steiner

Ruth Steiner is in her 80s and is a resident of the Park Hill neighborhood with her little dog Beverly. She is a past President of FUSD, and a member since the early 1960s. Ruth brings perspective of one who was active in the civil rights movement of that earlier era and retired from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Clifford Robinson, who also became a member of First Unitarian, was Ruth's partner of many years; he is now deceased.

In March 2020, the church seemed to be thriving. I sold grocery certificates each week at coffee hour and was impressed by how many new people were coming in. I interpreted it as a sign of the times: with a crazy madman in charge of the country, people wanted a haven that the church provides. Rev. Mike Moran had developed a reputation both in Denver and in the broader denomination. We had undertaken work in the Sanctuary movement. The Women's Homeless Initiative (WHI) and Family Promise both involved a lot of volunteers providing regular shelter to people who were homeless. Church was bubbling with activity so that it was hard to keep up with all that was going on.

Then all of the sudden we closed shop.

Most of the past year felt like I was in a sci-fi movie. I couldn't believe the extent of this pandemic. At first, we weren't really aware of what was coming because we were not getting the straight story from our elected leadership.

I live in my house alone. Lewis Thompson and Maryann Thompson [both church friends] and I check in with each other by phone daily. These are usually short conversations, but good to feel connected. Otherwise, I watch too much television and use it for sound even if I'm not watching it. I have had to deliberately stop watching so much of the news because it was just too depressing. I've read a couple of books. I find myself going through memorabilia: My mother kept every little piece of paper from our school years. I found a copy of my high school graduation speech in 1950 in a labeled envelope and a booklet on the story of water from the 3rd grade. I had a lot of time to reflect on childhood and what my life is all about.

Having a conversation seems like a lost skill. What I miss most is being able to talk to each other about what is going on when incidents break one after another in the larger world. Sometimes you get some piece of information that is terribly scary and then you hear, well really, that is not the way it is. How do you sift out what you want to integrate into your own being and understanding of the world? I really dislike talking on the phone.

There are times during this year when I've felt quite alone. I don't have any close relatives and I'm not really hooked into the lives of my extended relatives. Church friends help. I'm in a Monday conversation group with Stu Ferguson, and another group of six set up by Rose Tanaka's daughter every Tuesday afternoon. I'm part of the Racial Justice core group that meets once a month. I have a long-lasting alliance with the American Civil Liberties Union but they have a new director and I register for calls and then completely space out the meetings.

The whole context of time escaped me during the pandemic. It is a good day when I can remember that today is Thursday because I have an appointment. My mother drove herself into a frenzy at the end of her life trying to remember what day it was. I remember saying “maybe it doesn’t matter,” but now I know better.

Personally, I lost my enthusiasm, curiosity, and energy. Many days, the thought of going someplace is exhausting. I wake up and think, oh good, I don’t have to go anyplace today. There are lots of museum exhibits and performances online that I could tune into, but I don’t have enough energy to check them out. I wonder, how I am going to regain that? I try to imagine, where would I really like to go? I like the idea of going to a movie theater. I have a connection to the movie *Mank*, (I was roommates with the mother of the director of that movie in San Francisco for years. Her husband wrote the script for the movie while he was alive). Maybe I could see that movie in a theater....

I really miss hugging. At church you hug people.

On the other hand, I have nothing to complain about. I live in a house that is paid for with a pension unaffected by the chaos of the year. I got my little dog Beverly in May and have my backyard. Without them I would certainly have been nuttier. I keep thinking of my friends who live in small apartments or facilities where they don’t like residents going out to walk. Beverly and I make many small forays.

Compared to people who have lost everything, I shouldn’t complain.

I am still so angry with that madman who was president in 2020. I had hoped that as soon as he walked out of D.C. someone would be there with handcuffs to lead him to the nearest prison. I am so angry at his being deliberately divisive at a time when we really needed to come together and support each other. Not even acknowledging that people’s lives were being devastated.

On the other hand, I think Biden’s early days have been remarkable. He leads with compassion. Thank goodness he brings a lot of understanding that comes from his whole person. Isn’t that something to hear again?

The Black Lives Matter protests last summer were quite heartening: All of the articulate young people, not only in big cities but even in tiny towns across the country. So many white people beginning to understand their own involvement in systemic racism. We have been living off our privilege, walking on the backs of others for centuries. It feels hopeful.

I get mad at myself for not doing what I would once have done. I can’t remember the last time I was involved in a big protest. The only niche I’ve found now (at 87) is sending money and telling the stories to encourage people through hard times by reminding them of what we’ve already come through.

Ruth’s memories of 1960s activism provide an interesting prism through which to view current day street actions:

White supremacy insinuates itself into every devastating issue in this country, but it is easy to think that what doesn't directly affect us doesn't exist. Back in the 60s, people living in Littleton could say they had no idea there was housing discrimination against people of color. Our anti-racism discussion groups were steeped in denial. White liberals seemed destined to be the last bastion of racism in our country. Our church has long been involved in justice work, but we've often shown a similar blindness.

I was a registered nurse working in pediatrics in San Francisco before I came to Denver in the early 60s to work in The Children's Hospital. Soon after, I started attending the First Unitarian Church and saw a notice of a meeting to organize the Denver chapter of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE). When other, more polite methods stalled, CORE worked through direct action to demand repair for the ways racism undermines equality in civil society: in housing, employment, and education.

Helen Wolcott, I, Rose Tanaka, and Irma Schwizer from the church were among the founding group of CORE. Jim Reynolds (a member of a fundamentalist church who was skeptical of Unitarian religion) was the original confrontation man on the team. He loved to sensitize people. He taught me so much. Sometimes it was a brutal lesson, but he wouldn't stop. He was determined.

I assumed there would be a groundswell of support for CORE from the membership of the Unitarian Church, both because it was organized in our basement and because it fit so well with our values, but there was considerable resistance within the congregation. "We don't picket places. That is not the nice thing to do." We got snagged on respectability politics. Still, a lot of individual members participated in the work. Max and Mary Jane Raabe were society folks, but they were also part of our work to test redlining in a fair housing initiative. Max had a dental practice and was fearless of the impacts on his patient load. CORE organized recruits to walk the picket line at the Denver Dry Goods, a local department store, pushing for fair hiring. Many of these people were members of FUSD or other local churches.

I remember being frustrated that we weren't united as a church in support of CORE, but Dick Henry the minister at the time who was himself arrested in some actions, told me: that is kind of how it is with Unitarians. It is difficult to do something altogether because we always are struggling to assert individual conscience. Years later, when Arnie Carter and others tried to get a resolution through the congregation condemning the war in Iraq, they went to two or three congregational meetings and its failure was mind boggling, devastating for people who had championed it. I told them about our experience during the civil rights era. On the other hand, I think it is amazing we were able to come together for our position on Sanctuary.

The treatment of women was not addressed in relation to the 60s civil rights movement. Women did a heck of a lot of the work without ever being recognized, and that continues. Some of that was protective. Fannie Lou Hamer wrote of knowing that her husband would have been more of a target if he rose to speak than she was as a Black woman. She continued to be vocal to protect her family. But you don't hear her name or stories like those of men like John Lewis or Martin Luther King or Ralph Abernethy. Women got the work done, but only now is there some semblance of trying to raise up the names of women leaders.

In the end, tactics of separating groups (e.g., Blacks from Hispanics, etc.) hobbled them all and the movement of the 60s withered. I hope we can learn for this new push that our real strength lies in working and staying together.

Maybe, in a way, this pandemic helped more people realize that things can get bad for ME. So many people have been completely devastated, left with no income or resources. Perhaps it may broaden our understanding of the human condition. I hope we come out of this with a little more compassion for the circumstances people find themselves in and stop blaming poverty on poor people.

On the return to our church home...

When the pandemic allows us to get back in the church, I can't wait to get WHI and Family Promise back up and running. I am glad to see Rich McClintock working on a Climate Change justice project. There are so many smart and talented people in our congregation it is most amazing! The music program is incredible under Lia's leadership. I would enjoy more organ music on our newly restored organ; when she does play it is beautiful. We should have better information about how much we're paying our staff so we can make sure we're being fair to them. Prior to having a service, maybe we should have several little hug parties. Otherwise, the first service will never begin... I imagine we'll spend all our time catching up!