

Randle Loeb

Randle is a 70-year-old Jewish male of German descent who lives in Central Denver. His Black and Latino children (two daughters and son) are spread along the East Coast from Georgia to New York City and Randle is a little stunned to find himself a great-grandfather. Randle came to First Unitarian Denver in the late 1990s as a person who was homeless and seeking rest. At FUSD, he worked with others to establish projects that evolved into Family Promise and the Women's Homeless Initiative. He was editor for the church newsletter for several years and co-chaired our Social Action Council circa 2000. Randle has been involved in cleaning and grounds maintenance over the years. His most recent ministry was presiding over that singular Unitarian sacrament, coffee hour.

I was born to a Jewish family in Pennsylvania. My parents raised me to value critical thinking and challenge the status quo. My mother was an avid intellectual and the real reason that I, as a teenager, went to the Germantown Unitarian church in Philadelphia. I earned a Master's degree at Bank Street College of Education in NYC at 25 years old and a Masters of Divinity from Iliff Seminary in Denver at 30.

I came to First Unitarian Denver one Christmas Eve in the 1990s when I first became homeless. I came into the service to get out of the elements, to sit down and be still. The Reverends Hobart, (ministers at the time) allowed me to come and rest and store my things. It was for me a place of sanctuary.

On New Year's 2020 I was living at the Aloft Hotel at 15th Ave. and Stout Street in the hub of Denver. With the outbreak of the virus, the Federal Emergency Management Agency established a protective action for people who are homeless and at risk of dying from COVID. A heart condition and other issues put me on the highest level for protection. At 70 years old and at risk both economically and medically of dying from a viral infection, the protective action ensured I could live at Aloft through 2021. I remain in this situation isolated from everyone and everything.

While COVID limited other people to working from home, I worked full time outside in the world. At the beginning of the pandemic, I worked for Capitol Hill United Neighborhoods as a caretaker. Early in 2020 I left the CHUN job and went to work for Bayaud Enterprises, where I trained as a CDC level II and III cleaner. This is the high threshold of decontamination and disinfection. I spent the duration of the pandemic cleaning and disinfecting the control towers of Denver International Airport.

Mine is solitary work that gives me little reason to be near other infected people. I always carry a mask with me and usually double-mask in public places. My journey to the job on the A light rail train during the week was always precarious because so many people in the city refused to mask up. In February 2021, I received Moderna vaccine jabs at the Stout Street Health Clinic that is on-site at the Aloft Hotel. I continued my community engagement on Zoom throughout the pandemic closures. Now, I clean the main office at Bayaud Enterprises and am beginning to take on more direct in-person work, including pastoral care and peer mentoring.

Even while I lived in isolation, I rode a bicycle through the winter, spring, and summer. I often rode when few others were out and about. I practiced contemplative prayer and meditation as a way of keeping fit.

I bicycled all over Capitol Hill, throughout the central corridor and its parks, along Cherry Creek and the Platte River, and the estuaries around Broadway and Lincoln. On these treks, I saw ballooning homeless encampments that clearly spoke to the lack of resources for people who live at risk. Nobody can afford to get a place in Denver without multiple jobs, and even shared rentals commonly run more than \$1000/month. I saw hundreds of people experiencing homelessness everywhere I turned. At Morey Middle School on 13th Avenue where I worked as a lifeguard for DPS during the 1990s, the population of homeless grew exponentially. It was a sea of tents and garbage, a quagmire. Long-time Denver businesses like the Mercury Café were squeezed out by the sharp escalation of homeless people in their neighborhoods and increasing demand for services. The city tried not to violate a judge's order against homeless sweeps, but in lieu of them, seemed paralyzed by the growing scope of the problem, even in areas where programs like Urban Peak sought to provide services. Park-and-ride places along the light rail and bus routes transformed into camping spots for people with vehicles but no housing. Around the metro region, money and services for homelessness increased but could not match the rate at which people were unable to find affordable housing. The escalating and unsustainably high cost of housing predated the pandemic, but COVID fueled it and highlighted the lack of infrastructure for low-income housing anywhere in Colorado.

For years I have participated in the annual service that the Colorado Coalition of the Homeless holds to commemorate people who died on the streets. In December 2020, a number of those people and people on the advisory committee were sickened and some died of COVID. I'm saddened that such a vast number of people I knew became ill with COVID and many died amidst simultaneous political and social upheaval that insists the virus is a hoax. This belief extends to my son's family in Georgia, where the virus still rages out of control.

Being vital and physically involved in taking care of things helped me cope with the pandemic. I am firmly convinced that people have a vital role in their own recovery. I checked in on the church regularly throughout the year of closure, making sure things were okay. Custodians were not there, so I walked through the building, did work around the church, took out the trash. I have long used the church as my mailing address, so I picked up my mail and sometimes during the pandemic I'd go to Metro Caring for food and prepare it in the church kitchen. For me, FUSD remained a sanctuary where I could read, meditate, and chill out.

My own family, whether they are safe and sound, is always paramount in my mind, particularly with my two daughters and my oldest sisters. I worry about whether my son is taking care of himself.

My family experienced the profound disruption of education by the pandemic and the degree to which racial injustice and poverty magnify its losses. My wife is Puerto Rican, and two of our three children were born there; all of my family are African-American and Latino. My oldest daughter has grown children who are doing really well; her youngest went to university in Santa Monica. But my son's children live in a small, impoverished county in conservative rural

Georgia. Their incompetent public health system bungled pandemic messaging, and schools experienced outbreaks and quarantines and disruptions in class time. It was profoundly disturbing to see how severely their environment limited available resources. I would like to be sure that my younger grandchildren will be okay, will be able to have the same access to and caliber of education as my older grandkids had.

Before the pandemic I started to write a book entitled "A Short Bio of a Man with a Brain on Fire" to leave as a legacy to my children and grandchildren. I still would like to get back to that.

COVID is a world we did not anticipate, but it is a predictable outcome of our blind, heedless response to environmental issues that have been raising alarms for decades. The virus is the response of the natural world to our screwing up the entire ecosystem. We will continue to have these plagues that take out millions of people. We will continue to see an escalation in refugees without places to live. Ours is a fragile world and we are messing it up as fast as possible. Viruses are not separate from environmental degradation. And we cannot address either problem by separating out into right/left politics. We can only deal with them holistically.

As FUSD emerges from this latest outbreak of the virus, from this point forward, I believe we must remain vigilant and careful. We can't assume we will ever return to operating as we did before COVID. We cannot feel confident, even with inoculations and boosters, that any of us is safe. The church's safety team will need to expand their role to include epidemiology.

Importantly, insuring safety must be our shared responsibility, making this place a sanctuary for anyone who walks through: child, elder, or refugee. This is a new wrinkle for us, defining community not just inside the building, but all around us. Our duty is not to justice work alone, but also to making sure that all who come feel honored and respected, whether they agree with us or not. We follow in the footsteps of tremendous contributors. Now is our time to live up to our ideals.

As I desperately communicate that people must be aware to stay alive, I channel an aphorism from *Cry, the Beloved Country*, "Go well, stay well!" I passionately believe that we must care and be more careful of everything that we touch in this epoch. I am blessed that I stayed safe and sound, though I have struggled mentally and physically throughout this ordeal.

Blessings always.