

Transcript of Interview with Jessy Dressin By Kit Heintzman

Interviewee: Jessy Dressin

Interviewer: Kit Heintzman

Date: 04/12/2021

Location (Interviewee): Baltimore, Maryland

Location (Interviewer):

Transcriber: Lily Crigler

Some of the things we spoke about include:

Having disproportionate access to healthcare in the USA. Pre-pandemic work schedule of 50-60 hours a week, husband similarly busy. Being a social person with a homebody husband. The pandemic increasing the number of meetings in a day. Recently hugging parents for the first time. Spending time with a 4-month-old nephew pre-pandemic with lots of touch, and moving to social distance visits. Questioning how 'worth it' it is to visit people without being able to touch or take off a mask. Being a Rabbi who is more observant than religious; prayer becoming more of a daily practice during the pandemic. Feeling personal responsibility in relation to public health; deciding what feels safe post-vaccination; needs/wants. Taking care of mother after surgery. Officiating the last public funeral prior to the pandemic in the community right before lockdown; shiva. Online funerals and weddings. Pandemic Passovers and Seders. The murder of George Floyd and observing Jewish community awakening to anti-Black racism; Freddie Gray. Volunteer organizations shutting down and reduced service. New possible futures from lessons learned during the pandemic, not wanting to "get back to normal". Jewish philosophies of universalism and service, values and action. White supremacy and the intersections of racism and anti-Semitism. Health as non-linear; health as ecosystem of mind, body, and spirit. Non-transactional relationships and allyship; covenantal relationships; leveraging privilege. Checking in with an epidemiologist in social network about safety. Masks in 1+ years worth of photos. Full time living with an aging dog (Kofi); sunset syndrome and veterinary care. Going to local, virtual live music. Being in a understanding whiteness group for Jewish people. Historians struggling to capture stories of many of the most vulnerable people

Kit Heintzman 00:00

Hello.

Jessy Dressin 00:01

Hello.

Kit Heintzman 00:02

Would you please start by telling me your full name, the date, the time and your location?

Jessy Dressin 00:07

My name is Rabbi Jessy Dressing. Today is Monday, April 12. It's 12:51pm on the East Coast, and I am located in Baltimore, Maryland.

Kit Heintzman 00:18

And do you consent to having this interview recorded, digitally uploaded and publicly released under a Creative Commons license, attribution noncommercial sharealike?

Jessy Dressin 00:29

I do.

Kit Heintzman 00:31

And would you please start by introducing yourself to anyone who might find themselves listening to this. What might you want them to know about you and the place that you're speaking from?

Jessy Dressin 00:40

Sure. I am speaking from the place of being a person who has been blessed to have a roof over my head, has been employed and has thank God, mostly been healthy during this last year. I speak as a Rabbi and somebody who has always been and especially in the last year, been a point of pastoral support for folks, a point of outreach for those who have been in need in a variety of circumstances. I speak as an educator. I speak as an executive director of a nonprofit organization that engages in service and volunteering to address needs, specifically in areas of food insecurity, and education disparity, which over the course of this last year, has been exacerbated even more than it was before the pandemic. And I speak from a place of being a creative, that has tried to dig deep into this time knowing that future generations will want to know of this time. And so, whether through visual arts, or through writing, or through testimonies like this one, I speak from a place of knowing that our stories and the way we've moved through this time will be of interest to folks for many, many generations and years to come.

Kit Heintzman 02:16

Thank you so much for that. I'd like to start by asking what the word 'pandemic' means to you.

Jessy Dressin 02:25

I would say that the word 'pandemic', to me, is a word that I never expected to mean much. And I hadn't really truthfully thought so much about outside of the creative stories, I might read or watch, or really given much thought to what that word actually means and actually implies until moving through this last year. And if I'm being honest, I'm not even quite sure when I use it that I understand the depths of what it is that I'm conveying. But it is a word that I would imagine has gotten to the top of all personal and societal algorithms in the last year that has a lot of deep implications. And the one thing that I know is, even though we're at a certain point in this pandemic, I believe we are still very much in it and will be for quite some time. And so, I think that what it means and what its implications are can change over time. But it means something that is lengthy, to me, not just far reaching.

Kit Heintzman 03:30

To the extent that you're comfortable sharing, would you say something about your experiences of health and healthcare infrastructure prior to the pandemic?

Jessy Dressin 03:40

In terms of my personal experience, sure. I am somebody that has mostly experienced living healthy my entire life. I have not necessarily had a health journey in which I have been deeply reliant on health care systems or in deep need of more than just routine maintenance and checkups. I have, I am in close proximity in relationship to people for whom that is not their story. Although I will say that, while my understanding of the health care system is disproportionately accessible and user friendly and available to people of all different kinds, I have benefited from privilege of access. I have mostly benefited from being in positions, whether professional or academic,

where the access to health care should I need it was available to me. And I do not have the same kind of understanding of the limitations as a cisgender white female, that people of whom even one of those identities may be different than mine, have individually experienced and communally, collectively, as demographics tend to experience in the United States healthcare system.

Kit Heintzman 05:02

And staying in the pre pandemic world, would you say a little bit about what your day to day life was looking like?

Jessy Dressin 05:09

Sure. My day to day life in a pre-pandemic year is that I would work somewhere between 50 to 70 hours a week, as would my husband. I would tend to jump around from coffee shop to coffee shop and from happy hour to volunteer site to farm with a little bit of travel time built in to make a quick phone call or to do what needs to be done. I would very much move in constant and expansive social circles, both as part of my professional work and as part of my personal life. We don't have children; I would say that generally my husband and I would book end six month periods with some sort of a trip somewhere. We are regular attendees of live music and large gatherings and events. And I would say that while I love being at home, and I would classify my husband as a homebody, I very much resonate to engaging with people and moving in circles physically on a regular basis as part of my general go-to identity and would create an equilibrium for me that I have been very accustomed to and used to for the 39 years of my life prior to the pandemic starting.

Kit Heintzman 06:41

Would you say something about some of the ways that you've been adapting your day to day living over the course of the pandemic, because I'm sure it's changed.

Jessy Dressin 06:49

It has absolutely changed. I have not done quantitative research. But I believe it is possible to have approximately five more meetings a day when there is no travel time, which I'm not sure is the long term sustainable model. I've not eaten at a restaurant or gone into a coffee shop in approximately 13 months. I've not hugged anyone other than my husband until about two weeks ago, when I was fully vaccinated and have now hugged my mother and my mother and father in-law and look forward to hugging my father tomorrow when I see him for the first time in 14 months. Everything has adapted; the idea of not planning, physically traveling to places and the idea of, for the most part, working from home and not building in time to be with people in the same ways that we have was kind of the starting point for us of the pandemic year. And over the course of the first few months, my husband and I worked really hard to identify what would be the things that would get us through. And those had materialized in a lot of hikes, some of which have included meeting up with another couple or another family for those hikes. It has, over the course of the last six months, included re-integrating some work meetings that would be on Zoom to being a walking meeting if it felt comfortable to do that since going back to coffee shops is not something we've done yet. It really required change. I realized in the first couple months of the pandemic, how much we've built a structure in our own life of being two people that work full time and were kind of all in in the communities that we work in. To not have this, I realized how much we were dependent on this kind of book end six months. Where are we going to go? What is going to be the thing that we look forward to, as we kind of get through this period of time and had to really think about what would those alternative kind of sources of resilience and daily general strength be? And I will just add that I knew that intellectually, and I would say about by about day 60 of

the pandemic I realized just how important that would be. Because as a rabbi, I realized that I was still being called on even more so for support of others. And so, it was really important to me and something I was very intentional about about figuring out what would be my source of resilience and strength for myself and for my family because it was clear to me that this year would not, while we wouldn't be together in person, that there would be additional kind of experiences of peoples needing support this year, that if I was going to be available for people to be able to do, I was gonna have to figure out how to how to be strong and be grounded within that. And I'll just say that, you know, I know that I'm a rabbi, so people assume a certain level of religiosity. But I consider myself more observant than I do religious and more faithful than I do practicing, although, prayer has always been a important part of my identity, and my engagement with both prayer and learning this year for myself has been something that has a lot more daily identification of where it fits in than maybe it was previously even though it's something that has been a practice of mine for many years.

Kit Heintzman 11:03

And so many follow up questions, that was lovely, I'm gonna try and hold on to them as I go. I was wondering if you would be willing to paint more of an image of what those first hugs were like and the relationship to getting vaccinated and returning to kinds of touch that had been absent?

Jessy Dressin 11:25

Sure. So, I have four nephews, and the youngest was four months old when the pandemic started, which meant I had four months of a lot of hugs and snuggles and have had a lot of distance visits and a lot of FaceTime dates with all of the nephews, although three of them live up the road from me, one of them lives about an hour and a half away. That's the youngest, and that's my sister's child. So, there's a little bit of a different connection there. And I say that because over the course of this last year, my sister has been kind of navigating not wanting to teach her kid not to want to touch people, she wants to have a relationship with and also as a first time parent and having a partner who's high risk, like a lot of a lot of protective inks around that. And so, we've kind of figured out ways where like, you know, as he started to walk, and he would like, put his hand on your knee, and like, you know, we would be masked and you know, and there's definitely a difference in terms of comfort level when it's just me and my husband versus when there's other people around and all those kinds of pieces. My husband and I have joked this year that we're really grateful that we love each other, and we like to hug each other because there have been a lot of times where we would visit with our family, and even though we are so grateful to be able to be together, I would almost always find the drives home from those visits in that place of was it worth it? Is it worth it, to see each other and not be able to hug each other? Is it worth it to be together and be limited in what you can do together only to drive home and, and find yourself really moving through the energy of what's sad about that, rather than what was valuable about being able to do it in the first place. It felt so good to hug my mom. And it felt so good to hug my in-laws and to walk in their house, which we hadn't done in a year after going on a weekly basis for family dinner for the eight years or so before that happened. And it's really emotional. And I will say that, fine this time you asked a little bit about after vaccination. There's both a personal and a public responsibility. And so, on some level, you know, my husband has a lot of anxiety around medical issues, for good reason. And so, the level of fear of if a parent of ours contracted COVID, or the experiences of just living through other people who were having those experiences in real time and the various ways that they turned out, really terrifying. And there is a level of personal danger-fear that I think has started to dissipate. And also we have done very little other than those hugs. And I think in general, my husband and I feel a really strong responsibility around public health. And so vaccinations are going up in Baltimore, but also so our daily cases. And so unlike some of our friends, of which I really try not to get into a place of judgment as well, being honest and I'm being

human, it happens. We haven't gone out to eat at a restaurant. We're not talking about that vacation we really want to go on like we have agreed that there are things we can do now that we have desperately wanted to do in the last year that we haven't been able to. But we're not kind of like all systems go. We're paying attention to the actual reality on the ground. And I think that even 60, 90 days from now, we may think differently about some things, but we kind of, for us, in a post-vaccinated household are starting to integrate some things that we can in personal space and that we should feel comfortable to do so based on what the science tells us. But we actually haven't started thinking about other things yet, because we're waiting to see numbers go down and trying to do our part. Whether or not it makes a difference, it feels like from a place of responsibility and public health concern that that's the way we should still be going at this point.

Kit Heintzman 15:54

I'd be interested in hearing a little bit more about what you remember when the pandemic first hit. So initial impressions, what do you remember hearing?

Jessy Dressin 16:02

Yeah. I have a few anecdotes from the transition of those days that are really stuck with me. I officiated the last public funeral in our community. And in Jewish tradition, there is a funeral, and then there is a period of up to seven days of mourning, in which it's customary for the mourners to sit in a home and for guests to come through. And there's food in there's schmoozing, and schmoozing is a Yiddish word for talking and all of that stuff, and it happens to be the mother of a really good friend of mine, who also was of a family that had pretty prominent stature in our community. So, there were 300 people at the funeral on Thursday afternoon, March 14th, I think, I guess it was 12, or whatever that day in March was, where the decision was that effective 9am the next day, we were going kind of into lockdown. And my friend's mother passed away on Monday morning, and on Tuesday, I went to meet with the family to plan for the funeral and the other arrangements. And on Tuesday, it was we're gonna we're gonna have the funeral as we planned. We're gonna sit Shiva, which is those seven days of mourning as we planned. And we planned everything that was Tuesday by Thursday, that level of anxiety of should we or shouldn't we was so high. The person who was the friend of mine whose mom's funeral it was, my husband grew up with. And so the so we officiated the funeral at four o'clock that afternoon, and at seven o'clock that night, we were going over to my friend's home to lead the mourner service. And my best friend had come up from the DC area, and she came over and she brought dinner over, and we had dinner together. And by the time she got home that night, her husband was like, should you have gone? I mean, it was just all of this. And by the time and when we went over to leave the service, my husband said, we're not hugging anyone, like we're just like it was it was this incremental should we shouldn't we, and we were all just like getting used to the idea that it seems so crazy. We were thinking about this. And also, you could feel like the tide shifting. And I remember we led this service, and we kind of observed that no touching. And then when we went to leave at the end, my husband wrapped his arms around his friend, and we left and the whole way home, he was like, I can't believe I hugged him. And now, that was it. And it was the last public funeral in our community for months. And I can tell you that I have officiated baby namings, and funerals, and weddings, and all kinds of things in this last year. And if there's one thing that has a level of hollowness to it, that is not intended to be virtual, it is mourning and grieving the loss of a loved one. And the notion that we were able to kind of just get it in at a time where I actually don't think anyone got sick from being together that night, but could have created that very easily. It's something we've returned to plenty of times, and a number, enough of us were together in that space. It also effectively was the last time we were all kind of together in our social circle. I have another memory from actually just a couple hours earlier that day, I had a meeting with one of my best friends. She was a bridesmaid in my wedding, and she happens to work

at a theater in downtown Baltimore. And we were getting together to kind of do a walkthrough for an event we were planning to do in June. And we saw each other but we agreed not to hug each other, even though we were together inside, and so like I can think of a lot of those kinds of should we or shouldn't we stories. I'll also share that it was just about four weeks into the pandemic that I turned 40, and it took like a good two weeks to accept that everything we had planned to do was not possible. So, I think another piece that I could really go into in more detail, but just categorically would mention, is that period of settling in that like, became longer and longer and longer and at some point required a recalibration of how are we going to move through this time. And, and for me personally, and for my family, specifically, and then I think, more broadly out over time, the acceptance of this is a time where we're gonna put the when will that time in front of us be on hold? At the point we did, that was a real gift, because it eliminated a sort of cycle of chaos that was not going to be sustainable. And I also recall that was about two to three weeks into the pandemic, where we celebrated Passover. And I love this holiday, but also this holiday is one, the most observed holiday by Jews, even Jews who don't identify as religious or observant, and two, it happens around the table. So it happens in people's homes. And so I mocked up a Seder last year, using a whole bunch of links. And you know, at that point, I had been on Zoom for three weeks with work, so and I work for a national organization. So, there wasn't a general like accustomed nature to being on Zoom, that predated the pandemic. And I put something together that I sent out to over 100 people. I just put on Facebook, you know, like, I don't know if you, you know what you're doing, but here if you want to use this, and the night of the Seder, I noticed while I was in the Google Doc, because I created it as a Google Doc, there were almost 100 People in the Google Doc. And it was still horrible. And yet it felt really joyful to be able to create that which I will say two weeks in felt novelty. This year, I was like, I don't want anything to do with that. Like I didn't, I really didn't want to start a second year of things. I didn't want to get to the point on my photo scroll where my memories from a year ago were masked in distance. I didn't want to celebrate a second cycle of holidays. That was something I had to do a lot of prep work around as we were getting closer to this year mark, because I felt a really strong kind of resistance around.

Kit Heintzman 22:37

Does that mean you didn't celebrate Passover this year, or did it look different?

Jessy Dressin 22:43

We, well we were with the exception of my brother in law, all of the adults on my side of the family and my husband's too, were fully vaccinated. And my nephew who's now 18 months old, we went to my sister's house, we sat on her back porch, we did a Passover Seder fit for an 18 month old where we went through and did all of the stuff. But we didn't eat together because we weren't ready to have a meal together. So we kind of did all of the ritual together, and then my husband and I came home and we had the meals together. For me, I think also because in so many spaces where I engage Jewishly, I have a responsibility for facilitating that experience for others. It was really about just like going in and do and for the basics. It wasn't that I didn't want to observe it, we definitely observed. I didn't want to do it on a virtual platform. So we did not join a zoom Seder we were invited to with a little bit of feelings around that. But it was very clear that it wasn't the holiday itself. It was the effort to do it in a way that I just kind of felt like, we'll do it simple. We'll do a really basic this year and God willing, next year, we'll be able to do it in person with you know, a more regular kind of feeling to what we would have done otherwise.

Kit Heintzman 24:11

So 2020 was a pretty big year. 2021 is also feeling not particularly small so far. I'm wondering if you could say a bit about what some of the bigger issues on your mind have been over the course of this period of time?

Jessy Dressin 24:26

Sure. One thing that this pandemic has allowed for is for us to have more eyes on what's been happening predating this pandemic, and I so, so when George Floyd was killed in May, I spent the first two weeks really angry because I live five miles up the road from where Freddie Gray died in the hands of police custody five years earlier. And I saw an awakening in our local community, specifically our local Jewish community, in the aftermath of George Floyd's death that I hadn't seen in the aftermath of Freddie Gray's death, and at first I was just livid because of proximity and because of time, and I recognize in my role as an ally and a comrade, that's not helpful, because it's just who am I to judge whether or not it was the right time. But I noticed it, and I paid attention to it. And then spent many nights with my husband and with other people talking about like, why now? And is this time different? Or is this just another, so I mean, for me, both in the place where I sit professionally and in the things that I care about personally, racial justice and racism in America is something I care a tremendous amount about. And I'm a reluctantly hopeful that there is something about this year, and the fact that people were not as easily distracted that I hope is an indicator of something, but I'm not holding my breath. And I'm showing up every day to do my part because I also know that the history of systemic racism in this country is a lot stronger than anyone of these series of protests that we see. But, but racism and addressing systemic racism and confronting kind of the house that we live in, even if we didn't build it to use Isabelle Wilkerson's analogy in the book, *Cast*, is something that I'm paying attention to, and I feel like we are in a new layering of, but I'm not gonna, I'm not gonna stand down because that just, I'm not foolish to think that we're really in something so different, until we start to build more seriously towards that. I think that, obviously, the past four years of living under a Trump presidency is something that I was paying attention to before the pandemic, but it is something that has been exacerbated and all of my righteous indignation, and all of my hopeful spiritual organizing, and all of that stuff like I'm all in, and I'm also not so foolish as to think we're out of that, even though we currently have a new administration. And I'm also vastly celebrating having a black woman and a multi-ethnic woman in the in the White House, like that is something I need to celebrate, and also, you know, I work for an organization that engages people in volunteering and service. And I know that this year, so many numbers of organizations who depend on volunteers had to shut down. I've watched firsthand so many people pivot, have watched organizations that were doing food distribution at 80,000 pounds a week, move to 70,000 pounds two times a week. I mean, I've watched it, and I think the coming to the surface surface of so many things that have always been true, but without one, as much distraction because people were at home, and two, with a little bit more access to just seeing the visibility of it during the pandemic, I am hopeful we don't move forward to, so the last thing I'll say in answer to your question is there's a lot of language of like when we get back to normal, and I happen to be somebody in my work that really focuses on younger generations and the way where we're going, and I would not wish this year on anybody, but I also think that what has been one result of this last year is some inevitable shifts, about how we do work in our community, how we build community, how we think about people who are different than us, has been expedited in terms of its timeline. And I will work every day for us not to go back to normal but to take what we've learned this year in all of these areas and figure out what that means to apply as we move forward. So, I think there's been a lot of learning to do during this year, and some of which I wouldn't wish away but I will also kind of be a contributor to making sure that we don't just kind of forget about those things but try to think about what it, what the implications of are those lessons for how we move forward in kind of like a pre, like a post pandemic reality.

Kit Heintzman 29:30

I wanted to touch on something that came up in this answer and something a little bit earlier. Would you just, to contextualize for anyone listening to this, speak about the nuances between religiosity, spirituality, prayer, how those intersect with activism for you?

Jessy Dressin 29:51

Sure. I subscribe to the idea that Judaism has three primary goals: personal meaning making, the imperative to be part of a collective, and the responsibility to make the world a more just and whole place for all of its inhabitants. And I also happen to understand my own particular religious identity as part of a universal reality in which the particularities are just an attempt to explain how it is that we live in the world who it is that we are responsible to and how to think about ourselves in relation to the whole. So, you know, there are a lot of people my age and younger who will or you know, there's a lot of research that says, I'm spiritual, but not religious, or, you know, all of these things. I am a person of deep faith, and I am a person that has been really lucky to grow up in more progressive and liberal interpretation spaces of my tradition. But I'm a student of the tradition in a rich enough way that I understand a lot of the opportunities for religious observance that are not how I live out my Jewishness, or how I move in the world on a daily basis. And that being said, I don't think I would have gotten to this year without prayer. And I don't think that I would have felt nurtured and nourished the way I was, if it wasn't for my ongoing learning of the tradition and the way that that intersects with others. And I do work in a lot of places that are across lines of faith and difference. And for me, the exploration of what we have in common, all but very different particular explanations of how we understand those otherwise universal ideas, has always been a point of connection. So, I'll give an example. You know, in the Jewish world, we spend a lot of time concerned in looking at anti-semitism and acts of hatred and violence against Jews. And sometimes in the liberal progressive world, there is anti-semitism and racism in the same place. And if you know even just a little bit about the way that white supremacy functions, it functions on the idea of keeping those of us who experience different systemic oppression separate from one another, that if we, and so I, and so my activism, through a lens of my faith is really about trying to interpret what does it mean to live in a world that's worthy of blessing? What is my active responsibility to help build that, and I think, in part because of how I was brought up, and how I was brought up to learn to interpret the tradition, it's a non-negotiable for me that any God in this world would want that of just my own people, or my own constituency, because that you know, the expansiveness for me, but I believe reaches out to the entire living, living universe. So, I think, I grew up outside of Washington, DC., and I didn't realize that everybody didn't go lobby on Capitol Hill with their Jewish youth group. So that's just been something that's been a part of my DNA, my entire like life and life as an engaged Jew, and I find myself in a lot of places where I'm working closely with other clergy of different faiths, and other activists who are motivated by a grounding set of values, whether they're faith based, or something else. And that they they make complete sense to me. I learned my freshman year of college, that any Jew who thinks that faith enough is alone didn't really get a good enough Jewish education, because so much of Judaism is about the marriage between values and action. And so even if the way that I act Jewishly looks different than kind of the Jewish legal framework that traditional Jews are used to, the idea that I need to pair my actions to hold me accountable to the values that I purport to hold is a non-negotiable. So, the activist space both in terms of like the internal work that I do to be able to sustainably engage and the activist work that I do to kind of meet those three primary goals, most importantly of which is building a more just and equitable world for all people, moves through my faith and identity with like an endpoint that if I didn't reach that endpoint would be interpreted as somehow self-serving or vain or not extended out beyond myself, which I think in like traditional circles, would be easily interpreted as what God wants of us. But like for

me, it's about this like, self-serving versus extending out beyond yourself that really guides how I try to move in the world and then leads me into those activist spaces that we're talking about.

Kit Heintzman 34:48

Curious, what does health mean to you?

Jessy Dressin 34:51

Health? For me, health is an ecosystem of the mind and the body and the soul. And then it fits into these kind of concentric circles of, you know, personal and familial and communal and societal. I think one thing that is true of this virus that we have been living around this last year is that there really is not rhyme or reason. There are people who you or I might have assumed if they came into contact with it would not survive, who came into contact with it and managed to fare through it relatively mildly. And there are people for whom I am still in shock, that they're no longer living in this world, as a result of contracting the virus. And so, health is not linear. And also, access to health and access to being able to put the things into place that you're instructed to do in order to try and protect yourself as much as possible as possible, is a privilege. The idea that I could work out of my home, that I live in, with only one other person that has enough room in that home if one of us needed to quarantine from the, like, all of that is a privilege that I am keenly aware is available to so few people in the grand scheme. You know, I grew up in a society where doctors help you, and you call the police if you're in danger. And over the course of years, I've learned that that is something that was a narrative afforded to me because of the privilege from which I enter into those systems. And our systems disproportionately help and don't help groups of people. And often, it, are, is lower income and black and brown communities, and immigrant communities, and native communities that do not have the narrative of health that I was afforded from my earliest years. For me, health has always been more about preventative. And I've learned so much about what's wrong with our healthcare system. But I also believe that health is about mind, body and spirit. And that one of the things I tried to do this year was to keep myself and my family and my community as healthy as possible by providing the opportunities for the spiritual and the mental support, with the hopes that we're doing what we can and for those of us who recognize it, are privileged to do so to try and keep ourselves as physically healthy as possible too.

Kit Heintzman 37:49

What are some of the things that you would like for your health and the health of those around you, and how do you think we could get there?

Jessy Dressin 37:58

Well, I will admit that I've never identified as a radical. And I also have a lot of trouble figuring out how we will revamp systems that have been built to privilege some and not others in order to be more equitable across the board. I want for me and for my family, and really, for every human being, to feel like they are able to reach their fullest potential and that there are not barriers that are put in their way, especially just because they are clumped in as a as a grouping that has been underserved or has been actively kind of disenfranchised, in the systems that we've built that are supposed to be equitably accessible and available and helpful to all. And I have no idea how we're going to do that. But I'm committed to doing my part to try and agitate and try and work and try and do what I can. You know, I am, we haven't spoken much about it, but I feel like I want to name that I think in general in this past year, a lot more about mental health and mental well being. And I think that I want for people to feel like they have the safety net, whether it is spiritual, whether it is communal, whether it is all those things that nobody, nobody should suffer from an ailing health that is preventable if we don't interact in society with one

another as if we're disposable. I want us all to live the fullest of our days, and I want as many people as possible to not have one less person at their table when the next holiday gathering takes place. And I do think there's a lot of infrastructure and system work that needs to be done if we're ever going to be able to do that, and then I think every day about what is actionable as an individual, what is actionable in part of the community that I'm a part of. And especially if I think about the place of privilege from which I come from and the majority of the people in my orbit come from, like, trying to dig deeper to understand the role that we play in that, and recognizing that, that there's inherently a redistribution of things that will have to happen that those of us who might have to help be part of the redistribution, if we're going to create equitable opportunities are going to have to accept as a necessary part of this work and ultimately are going to have to be the reason we do or don't get there. Because, because if you are operating from a place of abundance, then in order to distribute resources in an equitable version, you're not going to have to necessarily move to a place of scarcity, but you're going to have to be willing to subsidize some of that abundance that from which you operate from.

Kit Heintzman 41:06

I'd love it if you would be willing to say something about what it means to you to signal your privilege and relationship to where you're speaking from.

Jessy Dressin 41:19

I have been afforded almost every privilege I could imagine, simply because I was born into those privileges. And I am deeply angered by this systemic injustices that privilege some over others, for which the majority of those things were not decided by anybody who's living in those spaces. I'm a cisgender, straight white female, and I care to be a good comrade in racial justice work and a good ally to the LGBTQI community and all of these things, that in order to one, build real relationship that is not transactional, and two, to build trust, and three, to orient myself to how I show up in order to do those things, both with the best intentions and with the awareness of the blind spots, that is a lifelong part of being in this work, to, to not acknowledge and identify the privilege in which I enter into it works against all those things I'm trying to accomplish. And it also, it signals by naming it, that I'm prepared to figure out how to leverage the access and the privilege and the affordabilities that I do have as part of the bigger commitment to be a good comrade in this work and to do my part, even if my part looks different than what others do. In Jewish tradition, we talk a lot about covenantal relationship when we talk about the relationship between God and the Jewish people. And one of the things that for me is so helpful in that is that the expectation of the groups in that relationship is not that we all do the same thing. That actually like the role of God, and the role of the people is different. But collectively, it accomplishes something that can't otherwise be accomplished. And I see, like, if we're trying to not be in transactional relationship, then maybe we're trying to be in covenantal relationship in which I understand that my role to play may be different at times than others. But collectively, hopefully, we're able to work on something together that we won't accomplish without that. And so I think it's a really important part of my own self awareness and how I show up and how I also enter into spaces in terms of what I'm prepared to put onto the line.

Kit Heintzman 43:53

May I ask what safety means to you?

Jessy Dressin 43:59

I think right now to me, safety means the freedom and the permission and the viability to take deep, full breaths and not fear that it will be cut short. Whether that is because you cannot breathe without a ventilator helping you

to do so, whether it is because you cannot breathe because somebody is obstructing your breath way. And if you live with any sense that you could not fully breathe, then you're not, you're not operating from a place of also feeling safe. For all intensive purposes, we live in a world in which anything can really happen at any time, but I go to bed at night feeling as safe as I think I could imagine feeling in this world. And I think that I took a walk with a really good friend of mine the other day. He's a black man, my age; we've become very good friends. We have professional and personal ties to one another. And I took a walk with him on the same trail that I take a walk on five days a week. And he and I both live at different ends of that trail. And at the end of our walk, he shared with me that he'd never walked in the woods with a white woman; he shared with me that I helped him to overcome this fear. And he didn't want to share it with me before we took a walk because he didn't want it to distract me. And I thanked him for sharing it with me, and I told him, I would have never even thought that suggesting we go to take a walk together. And that, to me is the both the like increase ability of potential safety, from a starting point of not feeling safe in the world, that this person who is dear to me, but occupies many different identities than I do, has to think about when we meet on a morning to walk our neighborhood trail that we share in proximity to one another as neighbors. Those are all parts of my thoughts on safety.

Kit Heintzman 46:29

We've been living in a moment where safety typically has a quite narrow sort of focus under public health. And I'm wondering, what are some of the ways under that more narrow narrative you've been negotiating your needs and desires with others?

Jessy Dressin 46:47

I mentioned to you earlier that I'm like a deeply social person. We really scale, we we scaled back to the point where that same girl friend who I mentioned bringing dinner over to my house, the night of that last funeral. We saw each other for the first time last week; this is a best friend of mine of 30 years, we've never gone this long without seeing each other, but at one point, I said I'd rather not see you than see you and not hug you. And so in some cases, there were some people for whom I just couldn't bring myself to see it and not hold on some level. And I would say that while we created opportunities to sit in someone's backyard, go for a hike, that circle of people that I would reach out to was very small. And unfortunately, there were people for whom I'd like to be in that circle that didn't fit in because of the level of kind of fluidness that they were applying to where they would be going. That didn't work for us. So, you know, for us masks everywhere, you know, we had went through periods of time where we would order groceries, and we would do things that I would never typically have thought I would do. One of my very close friends, her husband is an epidemiologist that works out of John Hopkins, and so, we've kind of this year applied our entire regimen. So what does he say we should do? And we've I've had kind of regular check ins to update that along the way, but we've been talking a lot this year in terms of needs and wants. And most of the wants we put to the side. And most of the needs we kind of had to filter through in terms of like what tier of need were they and what was a regular need and what was a circumstantial needs. So, for example, my mother, who lives alone, and is not quite 70, fell and broke her ankle in December and had to have surgery. And she couldn't stay alone after surgery. And external care wasn't available because of COVID, and so, I had to stay over at her house, which is not something that we were prepared to do, but was the non-negotiable when my mother needed it and there was no one to stay with her. And so, I went to her house, and I was masked, and I didn't hug her, but I did you know, I did cook for her, and I did her laundry, and I did tuck her in, and I did and, I did try to kiss her from her head behind. I did all of these things. And yet, there were still things I did not do because we needed to. And then as she started to heal, then we had to kind of go through the unfortunate reality of like, now we're not going to come into your house, and those kinds of things.

So, the narrowness has been real. And I'll admit that even though some of that is expanding, I feel a new type of stress around this time we're living in. I was just talking to a colleague of mine this morning that I wasn't feeling before because now the spectrum of like how you feel like you want to live when you get to the point where you're on the other side of the vaccine is a lot more vast than I think what we've been thinking of in the in the months prior.

Kit Heintzman 50:18

How are you feeling about the immediate future?

Jessy Dressin 50:23

I feel both hopeful and responsible. They have a team of five, of which we are one week out from all being fully vaccinated. And we've worked almost entirely remotely this year. You know, the idea that my, I haven't seen my dad in 14 months, and he's just down the road from me instead of in California, and I will see him tomorrow. All of those things to me are in them, theirselves are so expansive and liberating in the possibility of what's in front of us. And I feel deeply responsible because as I mentioned to you before, as more and more reintegration starts to happen, those of us who do have certain privileges will be afforded the opportunity to decide whether or not we are going to continue to be invested in the things that we might have been because we either didn't have anything else to do, or we had more time, or it was more visible to us because of our own constraints. And so, I'm definitely feeling and grateful that I'm in a position in my work life, where it's, it's congruent to kind of recommit myself to this work as a result of what we've been living through. But I also know that we live in this society of rampant individualism, so I, you know, I can only do my part, and I can only share my opinion when people ask me of it, but I also like, you know, I, I lament that there will probably be a time where there's a much more bifurcated back-to-life as usual. And people for whom that's like, not only not the case, but are like disproportionately more like, disadvantaged to try and play catch up in, in, in a system where like, these years like this, we'll, we'll just pronounce that even more. And if we aren't living it, and we don't see it, we may forget that it's that much more so. But I'm feeling hopeful that, you know, even as the weather warms up, and, you know, or just if I want to see my sister, and it rains, we don't have to cancel, like those little things to me are everything.

Kit Heintzman 52:51

What are some of your desires for a longer term future?

Jessy Dressin 52:57

Well, I desire to not live in a 10 hour zoom day.

Kit Heintzman 53:01

Sure.

Jessy Dressin 53:06

I desire to see live music again. I desired to go somewhere at some point where I don't feel guilty for doing that in a timeframe, that doesn't feel like it's a good timeframe for a general kind of beyond ourselves. I imagine the Jewish High Holidays and breaking fast together. I imagined going to my mom's for Thanksgiving. I imagine kind of reclaiming that photo scroll where we will have a time where we're not only looking at mass-distance photos that we tried to capture in the year that, you know, we were just doing what we could. And I hope I look forward to some real changes that will come out of this period of reckoning that, at least from my vantage point, should be

different than it has in the past and should lead us to some more action and mobilizing that if we can do, would, would almost make it so that all of the lives that have been lost this year and all of the restrictions that have been placed on us were not in vain. Like I sometimes don't know how much faith I have in humanity working against its individualism, but I have a responsibility to always look for the potential of where we can grow into, and I feel really hopeful that this year will not be a year that's lost if we can build forward in ways that don't negate the learning that has been forced upon us during this year.

Kit Heintzman 54:59

So self care has been a really powerful narrative across the pandemic, and I'm wondering if you would be willing to share some of the ways that you've been taking care of yourself?

Jessy Dressin 55:10

Sure. Well, I mentioned prayer, and I mentioned learning as two already. I feel very lucky to be married to a beloved friend, and self care has definitely been in part, being in a loving relationship. Self care has also been a year where I've been with our 13 year old dog around the clock, and I will never forget the time we've been afforded to be together this year, as he's getting older. Self care absolutely looks like getting outside and back to that notion of deep, full breaths, being able to breathe in fresh air and being able to get my body breathing at different levels in order that I could sit still for those 10 and 12 hours and days. And self care has also looked like Saturday afternoon housecleaning dance parties, because we have been lucky enough over the years to have someone help us with the chores that I don't love once a month, and we did not have that person come to our house for the last year, which meant my husband and I would have to do it, and we would make it as fun as possible. So, I would say that self care has also looked like cleaning our house with good music in the background. And, and we have a lot of musicians in our life, and one of them who's one of our dearest friends and also local here has played a live set from his basement every Tuesday night for the last 55 Tuesday's. And that has been self care; I wouldn't have expected self care to come in the form of Tuesday nights. But Tuesday night's, Chris Jacobs basement sessions has been a part of not just individual self care, but there's been this like virtual space in which you see friendly faces. And often, I'm just laying in bed while I tried to stay awake long enough to hear it. But that is that, and when I reflect on it that will always be a part of this year's self care, too.

Kit Heintzman 57:27

Can I ask you to say a little bit more about your 13 year old dog, and how that relationship has changed over the last year?

Jessy Dressin 57:35

Sure. I mean, on some practical level, it has sometimes meant taking five zoom calls in my car sitting outside of the vet's office while he undergoes tests, and I can't go in with him. He is, his name is Kofi, and he is you know, he's got a lot of things going on with him. But he's mostly in a really good, healthy state for being 13. And one of the things going on for him is that he is something called Sunset Syndrome, which is like doggy dementia, so he has a different, you know, our relationship has changed in that I'm pretty accustomed to waking up one to two nights in like times in the middle of the night and taking him out with love. And in general, kind of coming to terms with the fact that the things that might otherwise be annoying or create an inconvenience are the things he'll need from us for the rest of his life that if we weren't doing them, it would probably be because he wasn't with us anymore. But you know, it's a joke, my husband and I have because most of the time, like, right now that we're speaking, he's just snoring at my feet. And then my husband comes in home at the end of the day, and like, he

wants to do stuff, and he like, you know, he wants to play, and he's very particular about which rooms in the house he's willing to settle down in. He used to not mind a fire in the fireplace. Now he's got plenty to say about it. So, it's really just about, this year has been about the three beings in my house making each other as comfortable as possible to move through a year in which everywhere we are that's not here, you have to think about what you are and are not able to do. And I would say Kofi is just as much considered in our house about how to make sure he's as comfortable as he can be as Mark and I are considered, and sometimes that means that I work from my basement instead of from my office during the day.

Kit Heintzman 59:45

This is my second last question. So, we know we're in this moment of a flurry of biomedical and scientific research. I'm wondering what you think people in the humanities and the social sciences could be doing to help us understand this moment?

Jessy Dressin 1:00:03

You know, I'm, I've often been asked what is it about Judaism that causes me to want to be a rabbi that causes me to be such a different kind of rabbi, whatever that means. And I have always said that, for me, Judaism is a radically countercultural invitation to live in the world, kind of that's not in a framework of rampant individualism and capitalism. It is just a different framework and invites a lot of different things to consider about what your priorities are what motivates you. And it's always worked for me. And it's always worked for me, because it's always been really great that I was born into a tradition that had this alternative to otherwise what I would have if I didn't. And so, I think in the humanities and in the arts, for me, the the notion of community and like, what makes community and like, and what is a member, aside from someone who pays the into membership, like what does all that mean? I can't wait to read what comes out of this time and to challenge people to consider like, the communal fabrics that we're a part of and that we're contributing to, and how we think of ourselves as part of that. And I think that's all in the realm of the humanities. You know, I like to think I'm a student of Mr. Rogers, and I will look forward to reading about the helpers. And I will, you know, I'm participating in this group of 100 folks in the Jewish community, it's called a whiteness covered. It's 100 white folks who are committed to doing learning through this year, and I've heard a lot of my colleagues, many of them younger than me, or just getting started in their racial justice work, reflect on this year as being vastly limiting because they're stuck in their homes and, and when they're out in the world, they're actively trying not to relate to people. And so, for, for a number of them, they've expressed a sort of impatience with this time because it's been limiting to them to get really deeper into this work. And that hasn't been my experience. This has been a time where I feel really convinced that people who are in the work that they are in, regardless of what that is, if they've already got relationships, and they've already got a foundation in which they understand, I think this is a time of tremendous work that nobody's been paying attention to. So, when it emerges, and when the outputs of what's possible, from the conversations and from the planning, and from the imagination that comes in this time that has been vastly limited but has also been a time when no one's really paying attention to those things. Then, I look forward to seeing how they have moved and how we have built stronger coalitions and how we have deepened our relationships to address, you know, challenges in our community and things like that. So, and I cannot wait to read the books and listen to the music and take in the visuals of interpretations of this time because one, I think it will be a part of our healing out of this time, and two, I've heard this from a number of my creatives in my life. Some people can write and create through this time, but there's, there's layers of emergence, that will create like a different flow of that. That in some cases is not possible until you take a certain number of steps out of it. And so, as we start to be able to have access to

those outputs, I think they will also serve as guideposts for us in terms of the time that we're moving forward from this time we've been in.

Kit Heintzman 1:03:58

And this is my last question. So, this is an oral history interview, and, I come to it with some assumptions as a trained historian and with my own values, which are historically contingent, and one of the things historians of my generation are taught to pay very close attention to is what our historical actors valued, not necessarily valuing their values but paying very dear attention to what they think mattered. So, I'm asking if you could speak to an imagined historian in the future, let's say someone who never lived in this moment so has no experiential, direct memory. What kinds of stories would you want to tell that person ought not be forgotten?

Jessy Dressin 1:04:48

The stories that ought not to be forgotten are the stories we're most unlikely to be able to capture in the first place. The stories are the people who can never take an hour with someone like yourself and to sit down and to reflect on this time because they are currently cleaning up a room in a hospital and will probably not get the credit that the doctors and nurses who are going to care for that person in the hospital will get after the fact. They are the people who are shopping for the groceries because someone is in a position to pay someone else to shop for their groceries so that they can stay at home and talk to someone about their experience of living through this pandemic. And so, for me, I think the stories are, the story is of all of the people who make up this time. And the stories that you would have to really not just search to find but build deep trust to be able to tell in a way that was going to value those stories as if they were sacred on their own and not part of a broader narrative that would often tend to exploit those stories for the sake of the narrative. And I think I would want future historians to be able to look back on the stories that we have captured during this time as an act of resistance to say that the historians have and the people who write our history books have so much power, that they would encounter stories that today's historians may not be able to encounter because of the decisions made by people previously. And there are so many other stories I'd want to capture, but I would prioritize those over all of the others.

Kit Heintzman 1:06:39

Thank you so very much for everything that you shared today. And those are all of my questions, so at this point, I just want to open up some space if there's something that you would like to say that my questions haven't facilitated, presenting you some space to say so.

Jessy Dressin 1:06:58

Though, the one thing that really comes to my mind, I've spent a few times referencing Zoom and referencing certain things we've been able to do, we wouldn't have otherwise. But there is one thing you can't do on Zoom. There's probably many, but and that is sing together, you have to pick someone to stay unmuted. And, and you can you can't like if you and I tried to sing happy birthday together right now would not work. And I think singing together with people is such a healing bomb and something that we are just going to need to do so much of when we can. And I often sometimes imagine that time, when I will be in a space where I will be able to sing with other people because there are a lot of things that I have muscle memory for that I've just kind of put on a shelf this year, and I'm like, we'll get back to that. But the one that is of huge kind of depletion for me, that has just been impossible to really figure out how to create the alternative for in this year has been singing together. And, and I don't know why but for some reason that feels like the thing I want to mention here, because I also feel like it captures that sort of, like ephemeral like I know it's out there, but without being able to tap into it. And thinking

about a time when we can tap into creates a sense of longing that is just as indicative of the loss in the moments of right now as it is kind of the opportunities it presents itself for how it will replenish not just itself, but us when that time happens again.

Kit Heintzman 1:08:56

Thank you so very much.