

A decorative floral graphic with intricate scrollwork and floral motifs, centered on the page. The number '7.' is positioned above the word 'breathe.', which is written in a large, elegant serif font.

## 7. breathe.

**T**HIS TIME, IT HAPPENED AT HOME. MY SKIN BROKE OUT IN A SWEAT, MY legs gave way, and I collapsed on the steps, my back arched. I felt like a mongoose gripped by a boa constrictor, gasping between slow deliberate squeezes. Sharat carried me the rest of the way upstairs, peeled off my clothes, and lowered me into the bath, but my body would not stop writhing. When the contractions came, there was no language in my mind except a voice that said, “Breathe.” Sharat held my wrists as I twisted in the water. I leaned over the edge of the bathtub and vomited. He held my back, strong and steady. When the wailing quieted and the water stilled, he laid me on the bed. Our dog, Shadi, came out of hiding and curled up next to me. My back throbbed and the stone in my belly burned, but I fell asleep. Later, when Sharat leaned over me with a cup of herbs, he said that my lips had gone gray. This time it lasted six hours. It would be another twelve hours before I could eat. And another twenty-four hours before I would be able to get out of bed again.

Neither of us called 911, because we knew the pattern and let it run its course. The first episode happened in 2008 while I was volunteering in Barack Obama’s campaign headquarters in Austin, Texas. I was rushed to the emergency room, but by the time I arrived, the contractions had quieted and the doctor shrugged, saying it must have been a bad virus. It happened almost every month after that, always at the onset of my period, suddenly, dramatically, without warning. Like labor without the gift. All through law school, my friends Lauren and Tommy were my secret team who knew the drill if Sharat

wasn't there. They would bring me clear broth and cover for me when I disappeared for thirty-six to forty-eight hours. Then I would show up in the law school again and walk the great hallway as if everything was fine, as if the contracting and bleeding had never happened, as if my body had not just drowned my mind for two days. Until it happened again the next month. It went on like this for four years.

"Why didn't you tell me?" asked Appa. I had an episode while staying at Sharat's parents' house and they heard me moaning in the bath. Now his father was asking me what was wrong, as a medical doctor with good bedside manner would do. Dr. Tonse Krishna Raju was among the nation's foremost experts on prenatal research, the chief of pregnancy and perinatology at a branch of the National Institutes of Health. I should have told him, but shame kept me silent. It was not my shame alone. I think it was also the ancestral shame of women who for centuries endured a culture where reproductive maladies like mine would cast them out of the house. This ancestral shame ran so deep that it could still live in my body, half a world away. Sharat's family had only showed me love. They were an educated family of letters, my father-in-law an actual scientific expert on conditions like mine. But I did not want them for even a second to regret their son's choice of a partner. So, for four years, I had tried to heal myself—I cut out gluten, dairy, white sugar, and alcohol from my diet; took needles into my skin for acupuncture; drank bitter herbs; and burned moxa on my body at night. But none of it had worked. And now I had to come clean.

"It happens every month, Appa," I said.

He made a call. A specialist at Yale saw me right away and diagnosed the problem: endometriosis. Cells similar to the uterine lining were growing on my ovaries and intestine, bleeding at the onset of my period each month. The intestinal twist from scar tissue caused the abdominal contractions. The condition was correlated with vaginismus. The specialist recommended surgery.

I was lucky. Nearly nine million women and girls in North Amer-

ica suffer from endometriosis, yet it remains underdiagnosed and undertreated, an “invisible” women’s disease. On average, women and girls wait eight to eleven years and see five doctors before a confirmed diagnosis. Girls who complain of painful periods are simply not believed. Women of color and low-income women often suffer far longer without access to care. Had I not had a father-in-law who could make a call on my behalf, my condition would have gotten worse, setting me up for organ dysfunction and infertility. The more I learned, the more I blamed a healthcare industry that did not commit enough resources to the health of women and girls. But I did not take time to reflect on why I did not do more to seek out help. I did not think about the shame I still carried under my skin. Or what my decision to suffer silently for four years said about my relationship to my body and how little I prioritized my health. It was hard to see my own suffering as worthy of attention when I was witnessing and working with communities enduring hate, torture, and violence.

At this point, Sharat and I were married and living in New Haven, running the Yale Visual Law Project. I had also become a senior staff member at Auburn Seminary, a two-hundred-year-old progressive seminary in New York City, where I was building an initiative called Groundswell to connect and equip faith leaders working on social justice campaigns. I was inspired by my experience in East Haven, Connecticut, watching church leaders transform a corrupt police department. I wanted Groundswell to give faith groups everywhere access to the same tools to build solidarity and change policy. Groundswell soon became the largest online multifaith organizing community in the country.

I started getting calls to appear on MSNBC as a political commentator and became a regular guest on Melissa Harris-Perry’s show. Each day, I commuted between New Haven and my office in Manhattan, working on the train, either creating a Groundswell presentation, arranging a film shoot for my students, or prepping for a television interview. I started sleeping in my NYC office without anyone knowing

it. My career was flourishing on the outside, while stress was eating away at me on the inside. The endometriosis episodes got worse each month, but I was too busy to see it. When my diagnosis finally came, I scheduled surgery for August like it was any other event on my calendar.

Then—Sunday, August 5, 2012.

An aerial view of a Sikh gurdwara on the television screen and the words: ACTIVE SHOOTER.

Sharat and I were on our way home from a conference at the White House, where I had spoken on a panel about the now decade-long struggle to combat hate violence against Sikhs. We received frenetic texts, pulled over at a fast-food restaurant somewhere on Highway I-95, and found a television screen. That morning, a white supremacist had entered a Sikh gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin—and opened fire. Seven people were dead, including the gunman, and many more were injured. It was the most violent hate crime against Sikhs in U.S. history. At that point, it was also the bloodiest attack on any faith community in the United States since the 1963 Birmingham church bombing that had killed four little girls.

The first hours of national media coverage were dismal: Television screens showed images of turbaned men in tears, and the primary response of reporters and audiences was not sympathy but confusion: *Who are these people?* Reporters called us Hindus, Muslims, or foreigners, mispronounced our names, and misrepresented our beliefs. When Sikh advocates finally got through to the right producers at the right television networks, a handful of us were thrust in front of the cameras with a near-impossible task: to explain who Sikhs were in the first place, help people see us not as outsiders but as Americans like them, place this shooting in the broader context of ongoing hate violence since 9/11, invite them to grieve with us, and call them to action, all in two-minute sound bites. As I went from interview to interview, I don't remember feeling much at all except raw in my throat.

“The news is reverberating through every Sikh American house-

hold,” I said in one interview. “When I saw the television screen, I thought: *That is my gurdwara, those are my aunts and uncles, my brothers and sisters, our children caught in the gunfire, and so . . . right now, every expression of support, every candle lit, every prayer, every story, every message is being deeply felt, not just by the Sikhs in Milwaukee, but across the country.*”

A few days later, Sharat and I went to Oak Creek to grieve with the families of the dead. We were supposed to be there a week but stayed longer. We played multiple roles—reporting on television, print, and radio; coordinating the support of the interfaith partners; counseling the families; and directing our little film team to document the story as it unfolded. We would soon recruit teammates from around the country to join us—Ivy, Aseem, Jonathan, Hilda, Don, and Deep would shuttle in and out of Wisconsin. I had long since canceled my surgery. Days turned into weeks, weeks into months. As time went on, Oak Creek became my second home, the local community my extended family, and what I experienced there changed my life.

I had always called the victims of hate crimes just that—*victims*. We as Sikhs were *invisible* victims, and so I thought that our role as advocates was to call the nation’s attention to our suffering—to jump up and down and wave our hands in the air and ask America to see us. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Muslim, Arab, and South Asian American (MASA) advocates jumped into action to respond to the onslaught of discriminatory policies by the state and hate crimes in the street. The threats never ceased, so we became masters of crisis management. We built infrastructure for crisis management. We got funded for crisis management. Crisis management protects victims from immediate harm. It does not easily make space for those victims to be seen as survivors who have something to teach the rest of the nation.

That all changed for me in Oak Creek. Sikhs had something to teach America about *how* to respond to the violence of white nationalism, socially, politically, and spiritually. I saw the practices of revo-

lutionary love at work—we wondered, grieved, and fought; we raged, listened, and reimagined the future. All of this was anchored in breath.



Breathing is life-giving. In every breath, we take oxygen into our bodies to nourish and sustain us. We inhale the molecules we need; we exhale what we do not need. Breath is constant: Its rhythm moves within us whether or not we are aware of it. Buddhist, Hindu, and many other wisdom traditions have taught conscious breathwork for centuries: When we pay attention to our breath, our minds are called to the present moment. Not the past, not the future. Here and now. Inhale. Exhale. Breathing creates space and time to be present. Present to emotion. Present to sensation. Present to surroundings. Present to one another. Present to ourselves.

Deep breathing, and paying attention to sensations in our bodies as we breathe, increases our resilience. Shallow breathing makes us more vulnerable to stress and illness. Breathing from the diaphragm engages the parasympathetic nervous system and vagus nerve, inducing calm in the body. It changes our blood pressure and heart rate and reduces the risk of inflammatory diseases, including those caused by social trauma and chronic stress. Breathing is perhaps the most universally available wellness tool. Try it now: Take one deep breath. Notice the sensations in your body as you do this. The ability to notice and slow down our breath connects us to a sense of agency: Even in dire circumstances, even when we cannot control anything else, we can consciously take one breath, and then another.

Breathing creates space in our lives to think and see differently, enliven our imagination, awaken to pleasure, move toward freedom, and let joy in. For those of us who live in bodies that are denigrated by society, breathing like this is a *political* act. The world sends a barrage of signals that our bodies—as women, people of color, women of color, queer people, trans people, and disabled people—are not beau-

tiful or strong or worthy of love. Taking the time to breathe—literally and metaphorically—is a way to assert that our bodies are worthy and beloved. Loving our bodies is the first and primal act of loving ourselves.

When I arrived in Oak Creek, I was not taking the time to breathe in my life, but it was in Oak Creek that I learned how to breathe. Most people don't remember the Oak Creek mass shooting, if they even heard of it in the first place. Oak Creek did not receive nearly the same media coverage as other mass shootings. It disappeared from the nation's consciousness almost as soon as it occurred. But I invite you to hear this story. I invite you to grieve with us and, in doing so, to love us. Listening to a story about mass violence is labor. But labor is bearable when we breathe together.

## The Story of Oak Creek

### *Inhale.*

Fields stretched on all sides as we made our way from the Milwaukee airport to Oak Creek, a predominantly white suburb with a population of thirty thousand on the southern edge of Milwaukee County. In the late 1990s, local Sikh families established the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin. They were immigrants from India who worked as taxi drivers and gas station attendants and built small businesses to pursue their dreams, as had countless immigrants before them. Their families gathered in rented halls until they could build their own Sikh gurdwara, a brick building set back from the main road on South Howell Avenue. Like all gurdwaras, it was not only a house of worship but also a community center bustling with activity each day—families prayed together and cooked together and argued together and counseled each other, children played in the hallways as the elderly scolded them, couples met and got married, new babies were blessed. The gurdwara was where life happened.

On Sunday morning, August 5, there were about forty people inside the gurdwara preparing for the day's services. By ten A.M., aun-

ties were in the kitchen, cooking *langar*, the communal meal, to feed the few hundred people who would soon arrive. They were bringing *cha* to a boil, stirring enormous steel pots of dal and tossing rotis between their hands, letting the rotis puff up, *gol-gol*, on the stove before piling them on a tray. In the living quarters at the other end of the gurdwara, uncles chatted as they tied their turbans. They were granthis and ragis trained in India who lived and served in the gurdwara for months or years at a time, leading ceremonies, reciting scriptures, and singing *kirtan* during the services. In the *diwan* hall, the main prayer hall, a few had come for quiet meditation. Children played throughout the gurdwara before their Sunday school classes began.

Two children, Amanat Singh and her little brother, Abhay, were sitting out in front of the gurdwara, giggling and singing, when they saw a white man pull up in a red pickup truck. The man approached two granthis who were talking to each other in the parking lot—Ranjit and Sita Singh, two brothers in their forties. Their wives and children in India had been separated from them for sixteen years while they sent money home, waiting to be reunited. Meanwhile, they performed religious services at the gurdwara each day. The brothers prepared to greet the man. He was probably lost and needed directions. Maybe he would come inside for tea. The children saw a gun and heard popping sounds. Smoke drifted above Ranjit Ji's turban. Ranjit Ji staggered toward the gunman, then fell onto the pavement. His brother Sita Ji fell on top of him, bleeding.

Narinder Kaur witnessed the killings from her parked car. She managed to drive out of the parking lot, hands shaking, and made the first 911 call. Amanat and Abhay ran inside the gurdwara and cried, "Someone killed the Baba Ji!" Everyone began to run. They rushed into closets, hid behind doors, and ran down to the basement. From the street, Narinder Auntie called her friend inside the gurdwara, who answered in a whisper, "Someone save us!" The gunman was now inside.

Wade Michael Page, armed with a 9 mm semiautomatic handgun, was stalking the building. He saw a woman behind a large column in

the main foyer and fired, grazing her with a bullet. Amarjit Kaur ran down the hallway into the kitchen, where other women pulled her into the pantry and tended to her wounds with napkins. The pantry was small and dark and hot, sixteen women and children crammed inside, clutching each other as they heard more gunshots.

Page stepped into the *diwan* hall and found Paramjit Kaur, a forty-one-year-old mother of two sons. She served the gurdwara nearly every day of the week. He shot her in front of the Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred scripture. She died where she fell; her blood soaked the carpet. He then proceeded down the hallway toward the kitchen where he had seen Amarjit Auntie disappear.

In the meantime, the aunts in the pantry had smelled something burning. Pammi Kaur and her friend snuck out to turn off the burners on the opposite side of the kitchen. Just then, Pammi Auntie turned to see Page on the other side of the counter that separated the kitchen from the *langar* hall. He was staring at her. He had no expression on his face. He lifted his gun and began firing. Bullets flew and grazed both of them before they dove back into the pantry. Page must have thought that the pantry door led outside. Had he pursued them, all sixteen women and children in the pantry would have been dead.

Page returned down the hallway into the main foyer when he saw an elderly man coming out of the library. Suveg Singh Khattrra, an eighty-four-year-old grandfather, had come to live in Oak Creek with his son after retiring from his life as a farmer in Punjab. His son dropped him off at the gurdwara nearly every morning. He spent the day praying and playing hide-and-seek with the children. Page shot him in the head. Page continued down the hallway toward the living quarters on the far side of the building.

Baba Punjab Singh had been tying his turban in one of the bedrooms. He was a renowned Sikh teacher, a man of many words who traveled the world to speak and teach in gurdwaras, splitting his time among Wisconsin, California, New Jersey, and India. His sons and grandchildren loved him as much as the thousands of people who flocked to listen to him. Page forced down the door and shot him in

the face. The bullet entered his jaw and permanently damaged his spinal cord. He would survive—but he would never again move or speak.

Page crossed the hallway to the other bedroom, where three more granthis were hiding along with Satwant Singh Kaleka, the president of the gurdwara. They called 911 when they heard gunshots. One of them, Gurmail Singh, hid in the bathroom and heard what happened next. Page entered the room. Prakash Singh was the first to be killed, shot in the head through the eye. He was a thirty-nine-year-old father who had just moved his family from India to serve the gurdwara. His wife and children were hiding in the basement.

Santokh Singh, one of the granthis, faced Page and said, “What is your problem? Why are you doing this?” Page lifted his gun and shot him twice in the stomach. Page pulled the trigger to shoot again but the gun did not fire. He stopped to reload. Clutching his belly, Santokh Uncle pushed through the door and ran down the hallway and outside while Page tried to follow him. He was running and bleeding and breathing “Waheguru, Waheguru.” He staggered to a nearby house and collapsed on the front lawn where the neighbor called 911. He would survive.

Meanwhile, Satwant Uncle made a final 911 call. Page then returned to the room and killed him. Police found a butter knife near Satwant Uncle’s body. The FBI told his sons Pardeep and Amardeep Kaleka that they believed he had died while trying to fight the gunman.

At 10:28 A.M., Lt. Brian Murphy arrived on the scene. Lieutenant Murphy, a former Marine who had served on the Oak Creek police force for twenty years, was not supposed to work that day. He had traded days off with another officer who was attending his son’s ROTC graduation. As he pulled down the driveway, he turned off his lights and sirens. Brian saw the bodies of the brothers in the parking lot, one on top of the other, and called for an ambulance. Sita Ji’s eyes were open and fixed. Brian knew they were dead. He saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Page had emerged from the gurdwara.

“Police! Stop!” yelled Brian. Both men raised their guns at the same time and pulled the trigger. Brian missed. Page did not. The bullet hit Brian in the chin, tore through his voice box and larynx, and lodged in his trapezius. Brian dove behind a car for cover as bullets flew around him. There was a lull. Brian crawled out to look for Page but he wasn’t there. Page suddenly appeared behind him and opened fire less than fifteen feet away. The next bullet tore off half of Brian’s left thumb and knocked the gun from his hand. Page shot him again in the thigh and upper arm. *Better get small*, thought Brian. He flipped over and crawled under the car as more bullets hit the back of his vest.

As he lay under the car, losing blood, the world started to get quiet, heavy, and warm. He started to close his eyes. He was losing consciousness. He was about to give in to the powerful urge to sleep when he thought of his wife and children. He wasn’t going to die in this parking lot. He willed himself awake.

There was a lull as Page reloaded his gun. Drawing up the last energy he had, Brian began to crawl across the pavement to his car to retrieve his shotgun. But Page fired again, hitting the back of his arm and leg. At this point, Brian made eye contact. There was nothing in Page’s face. Not hate. Not anger. Not emotion. A final round pumped a bullet in the back of Brian’s head.

Sirens. Officer Sam Lenda arrived on the scene. Page shot a bullet that shattered the windshield of his police car. Lenda fired back six times. Wounded, Page dropped to the ground, crawled a few feet, and shot himself in the head. It was over.

*Exhale.*

When the gunshots ceased, everyone hiding in the gurdwara began to stir. Two children who huddled in the basement, Palmeet and Prabhjot, climbed the stairs. Their father had told them to run into the basement to hide and then left to warn others. Now the children were looking for him. They walked past dead bodies and went from room to room until they found their father on the floor of one of the bedrooms. They shook Prakash Singh’s body and begged him to wake up. Palmeet touched her father’s face around his missing eye. There

was blood on her hand. The children hid in the bathroom for another hour until police entered the building and led everyone out. The police asked everyone to put their hands behind their heads as they left the gurdwara. Kulwant Kaur, who had been hiding in the pantry, saw her father-in-law's body in the foyer and started to rush to him, but the police told her to keep her hands up.

Outside in the parking lot, Brian felt his fellow officers lift him up. He could hear stress in their voices. He was their boss. He thought, *Calm it down. Autogenic breathing. Breathe in for four counts, hold for four counts, and out for four counts. It lowers the heart rate, calms the nervous system.* But he couldn't speak to remind them. He had twelve bullets in his body.

As ambulances rushed people to the hospital, the parking lot filled with police cars, FBI agents, media trucks, and family members looking for their loved ones. Kamal and Harpreet Saini, twenty and eighteen, were searching for their mother. Every road was blocked. Kamal fought his way through with a picture of his mother on his phone. "Have you seen her?" he kept asking. The brothers spent all day searching in hospital after hospital. Kamal returned at night to the bowling alley across the street from the gurdwara. Classic Lanes had been transformed into a temporary morgue, interviewing location, and family assistance center. "Do you want to tell him or do you want me to?" an agent asked his father. Everything went dark for a few minutes. Kamal went home to tell his brother, "Mom's not coming home, because she's looking over us from above."

"I've only had one dream about her," Kamal told me. "I told her I was hungry and she made me *saag*." Spinach with butter and spices. "If I could have her back just one day," he said, "I would eat the food she made for me, food from her hands."

I was sitting with Kamal and Harpreet in their mother's bedroom. The shooting had happened three days ago. Both sons were tired and grief-stricken but they knew it was better not to be alone. Thousands of people had shown up on Tuesday night for a vigil for their mother

and the others who were killed. They wanted to keep people around them.

“We heard from the medical examiner that she died a painful death,” Kamal said. “I know the last thing that probably went through her mind was ‘*Mere Preet da kee hovega?*’ What will become of my Harpreet? She loved him. I know she believes that I’m here for him.”

Kamal was the older, independent brother. Harpreet was the shy younger one, the one who never left his mother’s side. She was his best friend. “I was bullied through my childhood,” Harpreet said quietly, “but I never thought that this would happen to my mother.” She had tried to wake them up in the morning to go to gurdwara with her that day, but they turned over and went back to sleep. “If only we had gone with her,” they kept saying.

Their father was an alcoholic and had a history of beating their mother. The boys always threw their bodies between them to protect her. They thought he might kill her one day. But she died a different way—at the hands of another man. Now they felt like orphans.

Every weekend, their mother used to make them their favorite food, *gobhi wale pronthay*. The brothers opened the fridge and found the *pronthas* their mother had prepared for them. They sat together and ate her food for the last time, savoring each bite. They would move out of the house a few weeks later.

Suddenly there was a buzz of movement in the rest of the home. Wisconsin’s Governor Scott Walker entered the tiny living room of Kamal and Harpreet’s house with an entourage of men in black suits.

*Inhale.*

Governor Walker took a seat and wore a solemn expression as family and neighbors gathered around and the boys described their mother. “Why did he have a gun?” their father moaned. The governor agreed that guns should not be in the hands of deranged people. He then said, “We offer not only our condolences but also our love.” He quoted Dr. King: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that.”

I quietly thought: *King also said that love was not emotional bosh but sustained committed action.* “What will you do to prevent another Oak Creek?” people asked him. He didn’t have a good answer. In the days to come, elected leaders like Governor Walker and Representative Paul Ryan and other lawmakers would show up to offer condolences with words like “love” on their lips—but they refused to support gun safety laws, curb hate crimes, or actively combat white nationalism. Their silence would become even more deadly during the Trump era.

Sitting there in that cramped living room, watching the governor nod politely as community members desperately sought his help, knowing that he would do nothing, my fists clenched. I felt the colossal force of rage rise within me. It was not rage against the gunman: It was rage against the lawmakers. I witnessed the rage and let it have me. And then I took the next breath.

*Exhale.*

On Thursday, August 9—just four days after the shooting—the FBI allowed the community to reenter the gurdwara. The FBI typically cleans crime scenes, but the Sikh community insisted on doing this labor themselves. Media cameras were not allowed inside but family members had asked us to be there to document it.

When we walked into the gurdwara, it was a site of massacre. Blood in the carpets. Bullet holes in the walls. Sacred places are extensions of our bodies. When we step inside them, their familiarity—their smells and colors and sounds—shows up in our bodies as felt sense. It is the feeling of ease and safety and belonging. If we cannot feel at home anywhere else, we can be at home here, even if just for a Sunday morning. When a sacred place is ravaged, it’s as if our bodies themselves have been violated. As my eyes darted around to each smudge of blood, I felt dizzy, and nausea overcame me. Here is your home back, full of death.

Prayers sounded softly over the loudspeakers. I watched the same aunts and uncles who had survived the shooting roll up their sleeves and get to work. They ripped out the blood-soaked carpets with their own hands. They painted over the bullet holes in the walls, scrubbed

the floors, drilled in new doors, and repaired shattered windows. Over the next few hours, I watched this community literally rebuild itself before my eyes, reciting and breathing “Waheguru, Waheguru” as they worked. They were restoring the gurdwara, and they were restoring themselves. By midday, they were already cooking *langar* and serving food.

“I’m not scared,” Pammi Auntie told me. She was the auntie who had rushed out of the pantry to turn off the burners. “*Mainu seva karan to nahi rokyā javega.*” I will not be stopped from serving.

*Inhale.*

That night, Thursday night, the Department of Justice organized a town hall meeting. One by one, nearly every Sikh who took the open mic told the panel of officials onstage that the shooting was not an isolated incident but one in a long pattern of hate crimes since 9/11 and long before. Our children are bullied and our people profiled at airports, barred from military service, and subject to racial slurs and hate crimes that are not specifically tracked by the government, they said. Just three days after the shooting, a Sikh cabdriver in Oak Creek reported that a white man asked him to roll down the window, pantomimed shooting a gun, and said, “This isn’t over.” I was reminded how Rana Sodhi was shown a knife at a stoplight shortly after his brother was killed after 9/11. These were the same stories I had heard repeated for a decade.

“A picture is worth a thousand words,” one Sikh uncle said. “Can President Obama please come and take a picture with us to show the country that we are Americans, too?” We were begging for . . . a picture. The officials listened and nodded politely.

The Obama administration implemented a strong and swift response to the Oak Creek shooting. The FBI and Department of Justice investigated the attack as both an act of domestic terrorism and a hate crime. Flags flew at half-mast for us. But our community longed for more. We longed for the deeper spiritual and emotional assurance that we were welcome in a nation that had produced the gunman, the kind of assurance that could have been provided by a presidential visit.

Or at least a photograph. A few weeks earlier, President Obama suspended a day of campaigning and flew to Colorado in the wake of a horrific mass shooting in a movie theater in Aurora. He mourned publicly with the families before they buried their dead. He said that he hugged his daughters closer, imagining them in the theater. In his condolences after Oak Creek, the president referred to Sikhs as members of the “broader American family” as if we were distant relatives. Obama did not come to Oak Creek. In the president’s stead, Attorney General Eric Holder attended the memorial. Community members were quietly disappointed. I had conflicted feelings: President Obama should have shown up for us. It was the right thing to do. But it was also difficult to criticize a president who had been maligned since his appearance on the national stage, accused of being a Muslim as if that somehow made him less American. How do we hold leaders accountable when we see them attacked by the same oppressive forces we are seeking to transform? I bit my tongue.

*Exhale.*

The memorial service was held on Friday, five days after the shooting, in the gym of Oak Creek High School. Sharat and I got there early. There were wooden risers, electronic scoreboards, and conference championship banners on the walls. It could have been any high school gym in America. Sikhs were laying white sheets on the hardwood floor like in a gurdwara. A procession of black hearses arrived. Family members came together and carried a casket inside the gym, chanting “Waheguru, Waheguru,” then went back outside to carry in another, then another, and another. They set the caskets down beneath an enormous American flag that hung on the gym wall. When some of the family members had asked my advice about whether the caskets should be open or closed, I said open. The world needed to see.

But I wasn’t prepared for the moment they pulled back the white sheets. I looked into the faces of people who looked like my family. Next to each casket stood their sons and daughters. Satpal Kaur Kaleka threw herself over her husband’s body and sobbed as other women

held her. Kamal and Harpreet stood next to their mother's body, hands clasped, trying to stand tall. The doors opened, and the gym filled with people—Sikhs in turbans and *chunnis* and *ramals*, then a flood of mostly white people from the local community. Some were dressed for church, others wore Brewers and Packers T-shirts. Police officers in uniform tied on *ramals*, head coverings worn at Sikh services. I was in awe. Three thousand people had come to mourn with us.

“In the recent past, too many Sikhs have been targeted and victimized simply because of who they are, how they look, and what they believe,” said Attorney General Eric Holder. “This is wrong. It is unacceptable. And it will not be tolerated.” He echoed President Obama's words: “It is that fundamental belief that I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper, that makes this country work.” He named the shooting an act of domestic terrorism. This was significant. Since 9/11, the Justice Department routinely declined to label white Far-Right extremists “terrorists” even when their crimes met the legal definition of terrorism: “ideologically motivated acts that are harmful to human life and intended to intimidate civilians, influence policy, or change government conduct.” It's as though the government reserved that label only for those for whom it wanted to conjure the threat of collective peril: When the perpetrator was Muslim, he was called a terrorist. When he was white, he was called a lone wolf or mentally ill. The label signified whose security was a priority. By calling the Oak Creek massacre an act of terrorism, Holder was making an official statement about the severity of the crime—and the government's commitment to protect us. “We will discuss how to change our laws and hearts in the coming days,” he said. Sikhs called out, “*Bole So Nihal*,” and thousands responded, “*Satsriakal!*” May it be so!

Family members took the podium and brought the audience to tears. “I couldn't speak in front of twelve kids in speech class,” Kamal whispered to me, “but I just spoke to thousands, and my voice didn't shake. It was my mother's spirit.”

It was time to pay our respects to the dead. Everyone lined up. Police officers wept as they approached the open caskets. A priest

walked by each one silently making the sign of the cross. An indigenous leader left a dream catcher. When it was my turn, I touched the foot of each casket and said, “Waheguru.” It was difficult to breathe as I looked into the lifeless face of each person. On the way back to my seat, I saw a familiar face—Amardeep Singh Bhalla, the program director of the Sikh Coalition. Amar had been on the ground all week working alongside other advocates, including Sapreet Kaur, who ran the Sikh Coalition; Jasjit Singh, who directed the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF); Deepa Iyer, who led South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT); and Dr. Puni Kalra, who had brought her team of mental health professionals. Most of us had worked alongside one another since 9/11. But our bonds ran deeper than professional ties. We saw one another as sisters and brothers in the trenches. What was it all for, this decade of advocacy, if not to prevent a massacre like this? Amar hugged me—more like he caught me—and, for one long moment, we let ourselves breathe together. “We may not live to see the fruits of our labor in our lifetime,” Amar said to me, “but we labor anyway.” I returned to my seat, and Sharat saw my tears. We had been professionals all this time, trying to capture the story on camera, but in that quiet corner of the bleachers, we wept together and let ourselves become mourners. The bodies of the dead were cremated after the ceremony. In most cases, ashes were returned to Punjab and poured in the sacred river Sutlej to merge with the ancestors.

*Inhale.*

After the memorial ended on Friday, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney—who had referred to “the people who lost their lives at that sheik temple”—announced that he had chosen a vice presidential running mate, Paul Ryan. Oak Creek was in Ryan’s district. Ryan did not speak at the memorial but he was present, so Romney waited until the memorial was over before making the announcement. In an instant, I watched the media trucks in Oak Creek pack up and disappear. I was booked to talk about the shooting on weekend television shows, as were other advocates, but all of us were bumped

from our slots. We had hoped to move the public beyond Sikhism 101 into a national conversation about hate and white nationalism in America. But that was it. It was over. Our window closed. The shooting did not sustain national attention—not even for a week.

But did we ever have the nation's attention to begin with? CNN was the only network that sent an anchor to report live from Oak Creek. None of the other networks gave the shooting the extensive coverage they had given to the shooting in Aurora a few weeks earlier, or that they would give to the mass shootings to come. It took a massacre for Sikhs to receive the most national attention we had ever gotten in more than a century of history in the United States. Thousands of vigils were held across the nation, hundreds of op-eds published, and it still was not enough. We had not succeeded in helping Americans *as a whole* imagine the gurdwara as a house of worship like their own, or see the people with turbans and headscarves as fellow Americans worthy of their attention, let alone their solidarity. To this day, people nod when I mention Aurora, Newtown, and Charleston, but they draw a blank when I say Oak Creek. As scholar Naunihal Singh reflects, had the shooter been Muslim and the victims white churchgoers, it's hard to imagine that anyone today would not know Oak Creek.

And yet, as Amar said to me, the labor continues. After the media trucks left that day, we stayed on to help tell the story of what happened next.

*Exhale.*

On Sunday, exactly one week after the shooting, the community reopened the gurdwara. In the morning, hundreds of Sikhs from all over the country, especially the Midwest, arrived at the gurdwara, now a site of pilgrimage. As we pulled in, Kamal and Harpreet showed us where to park. Amardeep Kaleka, whose father was the deceased gurdwara president, introduced the program. I was astonished. Just a week after the shooting, the children of the dead had organized this service in the same place their parents had been killed.

First, the community gathered outside around the Sikh flag—the

*Nishan Sahib*. We washed the flagpole with water and milk, replaced its gold cloth, and raised the flag again to the buoyant sound of our call-and-response: “*Bole So Nihal!*” “*Satsriakal!*” Then we entered the main foyer of the gurdwara, now filled with flowers and portraits of the dead. The granthis had just finished the *Akhand Path*, the continuous reading of the Guru Granth Sahib that takes three days, a way we honor the dead. At the doorway to the *diwan* hall, a single bullet hole remained and beneath it the words: WE ARE ONE. 8-5-12. It was an embodiment of the Sikh spirit of *chardi kala*, an act of defiance, a declaration that we were not going to be deterred from rising up.

The service, like all Sikh services, was comprised of *kirtan*. We listened to the poems in our scripture become song and music. The sounds filled my chest and certain lines echoed in me:

*Meditate and vibrate upon the One,  
and you shall cross over the terrifying world-ocean.*

*Listen, you do not have to go to the house of death.*

*Meditate on the Name and you shall dwell in the fearless Divine.*

*The world is just a dream. None of this is yours.*

*As bubbles in water rise up and disappear again, so is the universe created.*

*Nothing is permanent.*

*My strength has been restored and my bonds have been broken,  
now I can do everything.*

A granthi rose to deliver the *Ardas*, the final prayer in every Sikh service that invokes the sacrifice and resilience of our ancestors through history and culminates in a prayer for here and now. We rose to our feet. I closed my eyes during the familiar chants. Then came the

part that was for this moment, and we prayed for all who had been killed in the shooting. I heard the names of the dead—“Sita Singh, Ranjit Singh, Suveg Singh Khattrra, Satwant Singh Kaleka, Prakash Singh, Paramjit Kaur.” I heard the names of the wounded—“Lt. Brian Murphy, Baba Punjab Singh, Santokh Singh.”

Then I heard his name. “Wade Michael Page.”

I looked around. Everyone’s eyes were closed, hands folded in prayer. I took a breath and closed my eyes again. Wade Michael Page. Behind the expressionless face that stalked these halls was a pained white man who, too, deserved peace.

The final line of the *Ardas* rang out:

*Nanak Nam Chardi Kala Teray Banay Sarbat da Bhalla.*

In the name of Divine Oneness, we find ever-rising high spirits.

Within your will, may there be grace for *all* of humanity.

During the service, Kamal and Harpreet sat together in the spot where their mother had bled to death, the spot where the FBI told them they wrapped her body. “When I sit here, I feel at peace,” Harpreet whispered to me. “It’s like feeling her hug me.” For a fleeting moment, these young men wanted to find the white power group that radicalized Page and exact revenge. But that impulse had receded. They were surrounded by *sangat*—community—and breathing as one. They were breathing through guilt and rage and grief and letting breath anchor them. “I don’t think much about the gunman anymore,” Kamal later declared. “Our community is not about retaliation, just love.”

After the prayers ended, speakers took the podium in the gurdwara. I presented bound books that contained four thousand prayers and letters Groundswell had collected from people across the country—so that families could remember in quiet moments that they were still surrounded by support. It would become a practice that we would repeat in the years to come. In the aftermath of every mass shooting in a house of worship—a church in Charleston, a synagogue in Pittsburgh, mosques in New Zealand—we would collect prayers and let-

ters and funds to show that our solidarity lasted long after media trucks left.

“We must live together as brothers and sisters or die apart as fools,” said the Reverend Jesse Jackson to the community that day, echoing King. The media was not there to hear his words. “Let your pain fortify your strength. In this place of worship, you were shot down, slaughtered, your worst fears realized, but you turned to each other, your Maker, and you turned to joy and hope. Sikhs, keep living, keep sharing, keep building, keep loving. There is power in your faith.”

*Inhale.*

After the Sunday service, I learned that Baba Punjab Singh, the renowned teacher who had been wounded in the shooting, was being treated at Froedtert Hospital down the hall from Lt. Brian Murphy. His sons Raghuvinder and Jaspreet were in India and got the news over the phone that their father was dead. Their mother, Kulwant Kaur, overheard and went into shock. Another phone call came that night—their father was alive but in critical condition. The sons flew to the United States, rushed to the hospital, and found their father hooked up to a ventilator, his hands and feet swollen. They got to work. They massaged his body until the swelling went down and stayed at his bedside day and night, day and night, to the constant sound of prayers on a small radio. Their father had walked eight miles every morning, so they circled his legs each morning at the same time to keep up his routine. When Baba Punjab Singh opened his eyes for the first time on Tuesday, ten days after the shooting, he moved his lips to try to speak to his sons. But no sound came out. They weren’t discouraged. “He has doctors and family but also the power of God, healing power, from within,” Raghuvinder told me. His father was his best friend. He had to get better.

Now their mother had arrived from India, and I accompanied her to the hospital to see her husband for the first time. Mata Ji was quiet, draped in a shawl, prayer beads in her hand, “Waheguru” on her lips. We followed her into the hospital room and saw him—a Sikh grandfather cocooned in white sheets, hooked up to monitors, mouth

agape, his long gray hair neatly tied in a small bun, skin glowing, eyes closed. Mata Ji set her head down at her husband's feet and wept quietly. She grasped his hand and pressed his forehead and asked him to open his eyes. "Waheguru, Waheguru," she recited with each breath.

"Baba Ji, rise up and tell us one of your great stories!" said Raghuvinder. "The *sangat* is waiting. All are praying for you!" But no response. I took Baba Punjab Singh's hand, warm in mine, and gazed into his face. He looked like my grandfather. He looked like Papa Ji.

Outside the room, Raghuvinder told us, "People didn't really know about Sikhs in this country before, did they? Millions of people know who we are now." I remember hearing the same words from Rana Sodhi more than a decade ago, after Balbir Uncle was killed. I wondered how many more of us had to die before the nation "knew" who we were. We didn't need simply to be known. We needed to be loved.

*Exhale.*

I was seeing that the Sikh community's response to this massacre had something to offer the nation—how to grieve together, how to breathe through hate and violence together, how to practice love together. I wrote an open letter to President Obama, asking him to come to Oak Creek. CNN ran the letter. "If Trayvon Martin could have been your son," I wrote, "and the kids in the Aurora theater your daughters, then the aunts and uncles shot while praying that Sunday could have been your own, too." A colleague from the White House gave me a call. They were going to send Michelle Obama.

On Thursday, August 23, eighteen days after the shooting, the First Lady arrived at Oak Creek High School to meet the families privately. After she left, I saw something new on their faces—I saw them smile.

"She spent time with each family in turn, asking questions and listening to our pain and hope," said Kamal.

"She told me that my father was a hero," said Amardeep, whose father died fighting the gunman. "That meant a lot to me."

"I'm really glad that the First Lady came," said Harpreet. "I want

to go into law enforcement to protect people and fulfill my mother's dream, but I don't want to give up my *pag*." His turban. "The First Lady said that she would work on this for me, and I was shocked. She said that maybe one day I could become Secret Service and protect her!" Harpreet was beaming.

"Look, our parents were just grateful that flags were lowered to half-mast," said Sandeep Khattrra, whose grandfather had been killed. "But we grew up in this country, so we wanted more. We wanted to be heard. The First Lady's visit feels like the first step."

In the meeting, the sons and daughters of Oak Creek—Kamal, Harpreet, Amardeep, Sandeep—presented Michelle Obama with a gift: a simple orange wristband with the words "I Pledge Unity. August 5, 2012." She pulled up a chair and said, as they remember it: "We have much work to do as a nation. I'm ready to do my part."

Years later, when I got to spend a few minutes with her, I thanked Michelle Obama for coming to Oak Creek to grieve with us. "Thank you for showing us your love," I said. "It made a difference." The First Lady's visit did not capture the nation's attention as a president's visit would have, but it did give us the energy we needed—not only to grieve, but to fight.

*Inhale.*

The Sikh community was poised to pursue policy change. In the past decade, we had grown existing community organizations in scope and impact—South Asian Americans Leading Together, the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund, United Sikhs—and we had built new organizations, including the Sikh Coalition. Shortly after 9/11, I had filmed one of the Sikh Coalition's first meetings in an empty office building in Manhattan not far from Ground Zero, where the rubble was still smoking. I watched Amar Bhalla organize a band of young Sikh lawyers to respond to the torrent of calls and emails from Sikhs reporting hate violence in the hours and days following the terrorist attacks. Eleven years later, the Sikh Coalition was the nation's largest Sikh civil rights organization, leading the policy response to Oak Creek. We had never had so many allies before. If we waited

too long to act, everyone would disperse. We had to act now. We harnessed all of that energy into a single razor-sharp policy goal: to demand that the government track hate crimes against Sikhs and other minority groups.

“There is no box for me to record the six homicides at the gurdwara down the street as anti-Sikh crimes,” said Oak Creek Police Chief John Edwards. He was puzzling over Form 1-699, the Hate Crime Incident Report. “How can we combat a problem we are not even measuring?”

Statistics collected on this form allow law enforcement officials to analyze trends in hate crimes and allocate resources. But, under the FBI’s tracking system, there was no category for anti-Sikh hate crimes. They were lumped in with “anti-Muslim” crimes. The same was true for Hindus and Arabs. Sikhs had been asking for years for separate categories. Longtime Sikh advocates Simran Jeet Singh and Prabhjot Singh wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times* that began, “Do American Sikhs count?” They called on the government to track anti-Sikh violence and got national attention. The coalition pushed for a Senate hearing.

On September 19, the Senate Judiciary Committee held a hearing on “hate crimes and the threat of domestic extremism,” chaired by Senator Dick Durbin. Just forty-five days after his mother’s murder, Harpreet Singh Saini became the first Sikh in U.S. history to testify before Congress.

“I had my first day of college and my mother wasn’t there to send me off,” Harpreet said. More than four hundred people sat behind Harpreet and in the overflow room. People wept quietly as he spoke.

“I want to protect other people from what happened to my mother,” said Harpreet. “I want to combat hate—not just against Sikhs but against all people.” He told the senators that he and his brother wanted to be police officers like Lieutenant Murphy so that they could serve and protect others just as he did for our community. Then he made our policy asks.

In the same hearing, former Department of Homeland Security

analyst Daryl Johnson testified that the government had effectively turned a blind eye to right-wing domestic extremism. At DHS, Johnson authored a 2009 report on the alarming rise of white supremacist hate groups after President Obama's election. The department caved in to the political backlash and shut down Johnson's team of five. It left just one analyst to focus on domestic terrorism by non-Muslims in a time of "heightened extremist activity throughout the country." The Southern Poverty Law Center had tracked Page for a decade, but the government did not have a case on him. Could Oak Creek have been prevented if our government had made *our* protection a priority?

"Finally, Senators, I ask that you stand up for us," said Harpreet. "As lawmakers and leaders, you have the power to shape public opinion. Your words carry weight. When others scapegoat or demean people because of who they are, use your power to say that is wrong."

The Oak Creek massacre had taken place during the 2012 election season amid a resurgence of anti-Muslim propaganda. Political candidates were now actively vilifying Muslim Americans in order to win votes, using propaganda created by a mini-industry that had not existed before. The Center for American Progress reported that between 2001 and 2009, seven foundations poured \$42.6 million into well-organized think tanks to promote anti-Islam ideologies through blogs, books, and films. As the anti-Islam industry grew, the nation saw a disturbing rise of hate groups, now a thousand strong. The number of hate groups had grown by more than 50 percent since 2000. Muslim American advocates like Wajahat Ali raised the alarm about the Islamophobia industry, but the public paid little attention. We did not know it then, but these were signs of the white nationalist "awakening" that would come to define the Trump era.

After the Senate hearing, we gathered for a press conference in the hall outside. I joined longtime champions Deepa Iyer and Linda Sarsour behind the podium, alongside our black, Christian, Jewish, and queer allies. We called for an end to hate in America with one voice. It was the kind of deep solidarity we would need in the years to come.

That night, Sharat and I took Harpreet and Kamal to see the mon-

uments in Washington, D.C. It was their first time. We went from the Lincoln Memorial to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial. We gazed up at the words etched into the monument of Dr. King: *OUT OF THE MOUNTAIN OF DESPAIR, A STONE OF HOPE*. Harpreet said, “I feel my mom is still watching over us. That’s what made today happen.”

In the ten months that followed, the Sikh Coalition and allies led a full-throated campaign to change how the government tracked hate crimes against Sikhs, Hindus, Arabs, and other at-risk communities. Senator Durbin and more than a hundred members of Congress from both parties supported the policy change. Three thousand people of all faiths signed petitions collected by Groundswell. We fought for this single policy change together—and finally won. In 2015, for the first time, the U.S. government began tracking hate crimes against Sikh Americans, along with Arabs, Buddhists, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Orthodox Christians.

“It makes me feel we did something for our mom,” Harpreet told me, fighting back tears, when the policy victory was announced. “The grief feels the same as it did the day she died. But at least I know that she would be proud.”

*Exhale.*

“I see a lot of victims,” Police Chief John Edwards told me. “I am used to seeing people want revenge. Meeting this group of people changed me. All I’ve seen is compassion and love and support—not only for us but for the entire city. For Wade Michael Page, too. It’s changed a lot of people. My officers spend a lot of time at the gurdwara now. They stop in, they go to the services—that’s unusual.”

Today the gurdwara in Oak Creek is a meeting place not only for Sikhs but for the whole community. That white man sharing a meal in the *langar* hall is Steve Scaffidi, the small-town mayor who was thrust onto the national stage as he managed the crisis. He’s now a national voice for gun safety laws. “I’m proud to represent Oak Creek,” he said. “Not as a scene of violence, but as a symbol of what one small community can do.”

This white man over here sharing a cup of *cha* with a family is

James Santelle, the state's U.S. attorney who assured the community that it would have full access to government resources. He is now fluent in Sikh concepts and history and can even speak a little Punjabi with us.

And if you come on a quiet morning, you may find a certain police officer in the *diwan* hall, sitting quietly, head bowed in prayerful silence. Lt. Brian Murphy survived the shooting rampage but not without a lot of pain. In those first weeks in the hospital, Brian dreaded the moments in the middle of the night when nurses came to suction out his trachea. It felt like drowning. But then he would look up at the thank-you letters pinned on his wall—thousands of letters pouring in from Sikhs across Wisconsin and the United States and around the world—and think, *I got thousands of people behind me, my family and friends and the entire law enforcement community . . . and now the Sikh community, too.* He became a legend to Sikhs worldwide. There are framed pictures of him on the walls of Sikh gurdwaras around America. To the Sikhs in Oak Creek, he is also a friend. When he addressed the gurdwara for the first time, Brian said to the congregation in a hoarse whisper, “My voice has been replaced by yours of *chardi kala*.” Ever-rising spirits.

Brian doesn't like to talk about himself. I asked him to help me understand what it is like to take twelve bullets and live. His voice box was permanently damaged, but he could still speak in a whisper. “On a good day it feels like someone holding you by your neck,” he confided. “On a bad day it feels like someone squeezing you by the throat. There's no point in any day that I'm released from this pain.”

Brian's injuries forced him to retire from the police department. He was racked with survivor's guilt. A few months after the shooting, President Obama honored him and told his story during his State of the Union address in 2013. Brian decided he would use his time on this earth as best he could. He began to train police officers around the country on crisis response. Brian asks police officers to treat every person they meet during a routine stop or in the middle of a crisis as a member of their own family. Once, in a televised CNN town hall

meeting, he asked then candidate Trump how he proposed “to protect the constitutional rights of minority groups like Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and Jews.” The candidate evaded the question.

When Kamal reached out to Brian a year after the shooting, Brian stepped up to become a father figure to him and Harpreet. By that time, the brothers had moved into their own apartment. They had created a makeshift memorial for their mother in their living room. They placed the white shoes she was wearing that day at the foot of her portrait and draped her face with the *chunni* she was wearing that morning. “It still smells like her,” Kamal said. Next to the portrait was a piece of carpet from where her body was found. Kamal bought a jewelry box where he put the rings and necklace she was wearing that day. “I come home to her every day,” he said. “It’s the first thing I see when I walk through the door. I *matha tek* to her, and say ‘Hey, mom.’” Kamal often slept on the floor of the living room, at her feet.

Kamal, inspired by Brian, joined the Marines. He still returns home for the anniversary of the shooting every year on August 5. Together the brothers help organize an annual memorial walk and run in the field behind Oak Creek High School in honor of the dead under the theme “Chardi Kala.” They string banners, blow up orange and blue balloons, and arrange speakers and music, reclaiming life out of death. No matter where they are, when the clock strikes 10:50 A.M. on August 5, the minute they were told their mother died, Kamal and Harpreet always step away from the fray and spend the moment alone, Kamal’s arm over Harpreet’s shoulders, taking a deep breath together. They spend the rest of the time with other sons and daughters whose lives were transformed that day, including Pardeep Kaleka.

After his father was killed, Pardeep, a schoolteacher in his thirties, was desperate for answers. Then he saw Arno Michaelis on television. Arno was a former white supremacist who founded the white power skinhead group that radicalized Page. Arno spent seven years in the white power movement as an active organizer, leader, and recruiter. When he renounced his allegiance, he became an eloquent and powerful messenger about life after hate. But Arno was racked with guilt

after the Oak Creek shooting and was searching for what to do. When Pardeep reached out, Arno agreed to meet him.

“Why?” Pardeep asked Arno. He wanted to know what drove the gunman to kill his father.

Arno explained how the skinhead group gave him a sense of belonging and filled a void in his life. Until all the people he was trying to hate—a Jewish boss, a gay supervisor, black and brown co-workers—showed him kindness again and again. Hate became too exhausting. Arno described the suffering and loneliness of the young men in the white power movement. He believed that the solution was to meet hate with love, even for them.

It was the beginning of an unlikely friendship. Pardeep and Arno began to call each other brothers. They teamed up with other young Sikhs in Oak Creek, including Mandeep Kaur and Rahul Dubey, and formed Serve 2 Unite, an initiative that works with Milwaukee-area schools and calls for love and action in response to hate. Every year, on August 5, they all return to the gurdwara as a site of pilgrimage, a place to reunite with other families and survivors and allies, their bonds strong, their lives changed.

*Inhale.*

There was one family, however, for whom time had stood still. As days turned into weeks, weeks into months, months into years, the grandfather and teacher Baba Punjab Singh’s condition never changed. He remained in a hospital bed, unable to move or speak, except to blink his eyes. His sons Raghuvinder and Jaspreet remained by his side around the clock. Neither saw their wives or children in India that first year. Jaspreet’s wife had given birth to a baby girl, Ekom, and he had yet to hold her. The sons moved their families to the United States so that they could take turns caring for their father.

“It’s still August fifth,” Raghuvinder told me five years after the shooting. “It has always been August fifth. The pain is evergreen. A year feels like a week. Every day we go to the hospital, and every day we see him in the same condition. Nothing has changed.”

There was anguish around Raghuvinder’s mouth, and weariness

around his eyes, but he somehow still radiated warmth and kindness. He tied his turban in the same style as his father; I started to see gray in his black beard. We had spent so much time together since the shooting that I called him “Veer Ji,” elder brother.

“Every day we live in *chardi kala*,” Veer Ji said.

There was the invocation of *chardi kala* again. I grew up with this phrase. *Chardi kala* was woven into Sikh scriptures and our vernacular, commonly translated as “relentless optimism.” But what I witnessed in Oak Creek and what I was learning from this family was different from optimism. This was not about the future at all. This was about a state of being in the present moment, as if now is all there is. Now and now and now. It is moving from Moment with a capital M to Moment with a capital M. This is a state of joyfulness inside the struggle—an energy that keeps us in motion, a breathing that keeps us laboring, even inside the pain of labor. Hope is a feeling that waxes and wanes, sometimes brilliant and luminous, sometimes a faint sliver in the sky, sometimes gone completely. No matter how hopeful or hopeless we feel, we can choose to return to the labor anyway. Sometimes we receive the gift of our labor. Sometimes we do not. But it does not matter. Because when we labor in love, labor is not only a means but an end in itself.

I made a pilgrimage with Veer Ji and his family to the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab. It is the most revered gurdwara for Sikhs in India and around the world. The moment we walked in, the noise and dust and chaos disappeared behind us, and we were surrounded by peace on all sides. The Golden Temple shone like a shimmering palace on blue waters. The smell of sweet *prashad* filled the air. I sat next to Veer Ji on the cool marble, prayed for his father, and gazed at the gurdwara. Blood had been spilled here, too, even in these pure waters, as recently as 1984, before and during the pogroms. And yet our ancestors had cleaned the blood with their own hands, made the sanctuary anew, and cleared the way for new life. As we listened to the prayers, baby Ekom played around us, and she giggled as Veer Ji scooped his niece into his arms. Her name means “Oneness”—Guru Nanak’s vi-

sion that we belong to each other. I took a deep breath. Just then *Tati Vao Na Lagi* began to sound on the loudspeakers, Papa Ji's prayer: The hot winds cannot touch you. Sitting there, with the sound of our ancestors all around us, the shining temple before us, and new life in our arms, I was finally learning how to breathe. *Vismaad*. So that's the secret to living inside of *chardi kala*—ever-rising spirits even in darkness, joy even in struggle—one breath at a time.

*Exhale.*

These days, each visit to Baba Punjab Singh is the same. I walk into his room and the sound of ever-constant prayers. I help his granddaughter Amrit and Veer Ji wash his hair and make one long braid. Like them, I call him Papa Ji, which means "Father." I rub oil into his skin and massage his legs. I take his hand in mine. His eyes open. His eyes sparkle.

"Papa Ji, do you recognize me?" I ask. He can only blink to communicate—once for no, twice for yes.

He blinks twice.

"Papa Ji, we are all praying for you. Do you feel our prayers and our love?" I ask.

He blinks twice.

Veer Ji asks his father: "Papa Ji, are you in *chardi kala*?"

And his father blinks—twice.

*Yes, I am in chardi kala.*

If Baba Punjab Singh can live in a state of *chardi kala*, so can I.

The family wishes that no one take photographs of his face, so every time, before I leave, I spend a long time looking into his eyes so that I can take him with me. Baba Punjab Singh represents the state of the Sikh community. We arrived in America more than a century ago with vitality, potential, wisdom, and many words—but hate in the form of white supremacy has tried to kill us. Hate paralyzes our bodies and silences our voices. It finds us in our homes and houses of worship, our schools and streets, and online. Hate strips us of language and denies us recognition. To this day, America cannot pronounce our names or remember our tragedies. Our turbans mark us as terror-

ists, not seekers of truth and justice. America forgets us, or never knew us to begin with. Yet we go on living; we refuse to die. In fact, we find a way, beyond all odds, to communicate that we are still residing in the Sikh spirit of *chardi kala*. We blink twice. That is our defiance—to practice love even in hopelessness. And to show you. So that you might take our hand, and love us, too.



During those first months in Oak Creek, I barely ate or slept. I was organizing in the trenches alongside other advocates, reporting, filming, writing, and counseling. And I was bleeding. At the end of each day, I discarded pads soaked with blood. I had canceled my surgery for endometriosis and not rescheduled it, hoping to get by on medication. But now instead of bleeding every month, I was bleeding every day—bleeding inside my body and from my body while my community was bleeding. But the community was breathing, too, breathing through rituals and traditions of music and song and meditation, and, in time, I was breathing with them, breathing even as I bled.

I returned home for my surgery three months after the shooting, November 2012. I wrote to friends and family and asked them to envision my surgery as a healing ritual. I received a wave of wishes as Sharat wheeled me into the surgery room and felt an elated joy, rising like buoyant warmth. It surprised me. I marveled at it and rested in it as the anesthesiologist counted down from ten. The surgeon used saline water to wash my intestines, ovaries, and organs. He pumped water into my veins through the IV to hydrate me. My body had been the container for dying, each month my eggs dying, the lesions bleeding. Now my body was being washed clean.

“Your surgery was successful,” the doctor told me. “But remember: The endometrial tissue grows back.” I had a small window of time if I wanted to have biological children.

A few weeks later, in December 2012, we returned to Oak Creek with a short film Sharat and I had made for the community. We

screened it for families in a theater, just for them, before releasing it online. After the film ended, Kamal, Harpreet, and Pardeep stood up to tell their stories, moved the audience, and inspired new connections.

As we flew back home, I thought about what I witnessed in Oak Creek. In the wake of the shooting, many people chose to *wonder* about us and hear our stories and share our pain. The Sikh community knew how to *grieve* together, and we made space for others to join us. In grieving together, we built bonds strong enough to organize together, and our allies followed our lead to *fight* for various social and policy changes. Along the way, we offered one another safe containers for *rage*—rage for the gunman, and rage for lawmakers who did nothing, or not enough. Some of us had the ability to *listen* to people like Arno who helped us understand the gunman's context. This information helped us focus on the change we wanted to make—to hold our institutions responsible for fanning a culture of hate. To start, we chose to *reimagine* how our government prioritizes, tracks, and responds to hate violence. Throughout, we were helping one another *breathe*, taking care of one another in the labor.

Sharat had been breathing with me the whole time, by my side. When the plane touched down in Hartford, Connecticut, the two of us had one task left for the year: to pack our carry-ons and finally go on our honeymoon.

I glanced at my phone as the plane taxied to the gate and saw the breaking news: twenty children and seven adults killed in a mass shooting inside Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. This happened in our own backyard, less than an hour from New Haven. We had traveled from the site of one mass shooting to another. Instead of going home, we drove toward Newtown and saw people in cars sobbing over their steering wheels. A few churches were holding vigils that night, including Newtown Congregational Church, UCC. By the time we arrived, an army of media cameras waited outside. Inside the church, families mourned openly in each

other's arms. Sharat and I embraced people we did not know. We were breathing together in this church, just as we had in the gurdwara.

I thought—*This is it*. Newtown will be the tipping point in the movement to end gun violence in America. The massacre of children will wake the nation's conscience.

But it would not be enough. In the years to come, the list of mass shootings would only grow—a queer nightclub in Orlando, a concert in Las Vegas, a high school in Florida, a store in El Paso, among hundreds of others—and Congress would fail to pass any meaningful laws to stop them. Not even background checks. Not even when the majority of the country wanted them. “Thoughts and prayers” would become the refrain of lawmakers who did nothing. Oak Creek would become the first of many houses of worship attacked by white nationalists. The death toll would rise rapidly: two people at a Jewish community center in Kansas City in 2014; nine people in a historically black church in Charleston in 2015; six people in a mosque in Quebec in 2017; eleven people in a synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018; fifty-one people in mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019; one in a synagogue in Poway near San Diego shortly after. I could not have imagined we would see so many Oak Creeks in succession. Back then, we had to link the massacre in Oak Creek to the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, the last major attack on a faith community, separated by fifty years, just to get people to understand the terror it inflicted. Now such massacres are routine. White nationalists are a globally connected network; each new shooter leaves behind a manifesto or example to inspire another. And behind each of the headlines are stories of the dead and living that are just as complex and deep as those we saw in Oak Creek.

It did not have to be this way.

After Oak Creek in 2012, our nation could have named white nationalist violence a national and global threat and poured resources into fighting to protect our communities. We could have held tech companies accountable for the rapid spread of hate and misinformation on social media platforms. We could have passed strong laws that

prohibited racial profiling and created task forces modeled after the National Church Arson Task Force of the 1990s. We could have modeled for the world how to respond to tribal nationalism and initiated local and national dialogues on ending white supremacy. We certainly could have limited the free flow of guns.

As it was, our tiny community had to fight with all our might just to add a box to a federal form. We are not helpless in the wake of this violence. But it will take *all of us* to remake the culture and institutions that authorize hate—and to reimagine a society where no human being is disposable.

In the church in Newtown, grieving those small children, holding Sharat's hand, I felt my face wet with tears in the long night. The choir sang one last hymn to end the service, and we all joined our voices together in the "Hymn of Promise":

*In the cold and snow of winter, there's a spring that waits to be,  
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

There was so much work to do. I turned to Sharat.

"Do we need to cancel our honeymoon?" I asked.

Sharat had never left my side. His hand was on my back, steadying me as we stared into the abyss in Oak Creek, and before the world went dark in the minutes before my surgery. Our honeymoon had already been postponed by a year. But he didn't answer my question. He just repeated my own words back to me:

"The *way* we make change is just as important as the change we make."

"I said that?"

"This is your test," he said. How much longer was I going to sacrifice my body, and his, for the cause?



There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. . . . To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.

—*Thomas Merton*

I had been made to believe that overwork was the only way to make a difference. I had come to measure my sense of worth by how much I produced, how well I responded, and how quickly. I had worked for so long, and so hard, and at such great speeds, that I had become accustomed to breathlessness. I could not remember the last time I had a long night of rest. Or gazed at the night sky. Or danced. I told myself that it was for good reason, that the need was so great, and our work too important. Perhaps you too have felt this way.

This is what I want to tell you: You don't have to make yourself suffer in order to serve. You don't have to grind your bones into the ground. You don't have to cut your life up into pieces and give yourself away until there is nothing left. You belong to a community and a broader movement. Your life has value. We need you alive. We need you to last. You will not last if you are not breathing.

Place a hand on your chest. Take a deep breath. Feel your belly fill up. Hold the inhale for four counts. Feel the suspension. Now exhale for eight counts. Feel your heart beating in your chest. You are alive. You are here. Look around you. What is the most beautiful thing that you can see right now? Look at it for a moment. Notice its color, and shape, the way the light falls on it. Let yourself wonder at it. No matter what is happening out there in the world right now—no matter how dark or violent or cruel—this beautiful thing also exists. The

world *right here* is just as real as the world *out there*. Take another deep breath. Notice how it's a little easier. Now—who can share this beautiful thing with you?

“When we see something that beautiful, we call it breathtaking, but we really should call it *breathgiving*,” my friend Rabbi Sharon Brous says to me. “Because when suffering constricts the heart, awe stretches it back out, making us more compassionate, more loving, more present.”



Loving ourselves is frontline social justice work. Audre Lorde said: “Caring for myself is not an act of self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” And bell hooks wrote, “I have seen that we cannot fully create effective movements for social change if individuals struggling for that change are not also self-actualized or working towards that end.” Without loving ourselves, our other efforts to love fail. When asked why we should practice radical care for ourselves, Angela Davis responded: “Longevity.” “As we struggle, we are attempting to presage the world to come,” she said. “If we don’t start practicing collective self-care now, there is no way to imagine, much less reach, a time of freedom.” That means finding ways to breathe life *into* the world we want, here and now.

Perhaps it is time to shift the terms from “self-love” to “loving *ourselves*.” Loving *ourselves* happens in community. Black feminists in my life show me how. My colleague Lisa Anderson, a black queer theologian, leads retreats and convenings that support the wholeness and wellness of black and brown cis, queer, and trans women. She says, “Movements for social justice will no longer happen on our backs, or over our dead bodies.” Activist adrienne maree brown has created a handbook on reclaiming pleasure as essential to the health of our movements in what she calls “pleasure activism.” Melissa Harris-

Perry, my friend and big sister, is shifting public discourse from self-care to collective-care. The term “self-care” implies that caring for ourselves is a private, individual act, that we need only to detach ourselves from our web of relations and spend our resources on respite or pampering. But Melissa reminds us that care is labor that we all do for one another, in seen and unseen ways. It should not come with a price tag. It should be available to all of us. Melissa calls for “squad care”—a way to be in relationship with people committed to caring for one another: “Squad care reminds us there is no shame in reaching for each other and insists the imperative rests not with the individual, but with the community. Our job is to have each other’s back.”

Loving ourselves can begin by breathing together. We carry in our bodies and psyches the trauma of our ancestors but also their resilience. How did *they* breathe together? What were *their* rituals? Singing, chanting, dancing, drumming, shaking, bathing, plunging, burning, walking, writing, resting, eating, sleeping, meditating, expressing gratitude, retreating, bodywork, and being in nature. Notice which practices your body wants. If some practices come from someone else’s tradition, seek out people who are sharing such teachings in a culturally respectful way. Now think in rhythms: What can you do every day? Every week? Every month? Every year?

The self-help industry profits from “spiritual bypassing”—the belief that we are changing the world by investing in our own spiritual wellness, even as we continue to participate in the same systems that oppress people. But we can act consciously so that our wellness does not come at the expense of others. If we pay for childcare or housekeeping, we can ensure that domestic workers, often poor black and brown women for whom such respite is not accessible, have fair wages and hours so that they, too, can breathe. If justice work is a matter of choice for us, we can reach out to support those for whom it is not. When the next crisis comes, we can step into the fire to respond, so that others can step back to rest. Perhaps we can cook a meal for a fam-

ily, volunteer childcare, organize an action, or help another grieve, rage, and breathe. In any given moment, each of us has a role in the labor of revolutionary love.



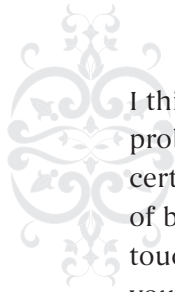
“What is the life you want for every person on this earth?” my mother asked me.

“Um, let’s see, safety, shelter, food, water, healthcare, education, and . . .”

“And time with the people they love,” she said. “Go on your honeymoon, please.”

I realized what was stopping me: an inflated sense of self-importance. I was acting as though things would fall apart without me, that others could not do the work as well as I could. But, really, I was just terrified that I would no longer have worth if I shifted from *doing* to *being*. I had grown so accustomed to the breathlessness of crises that paying attention to my own breath in my body was the new frightening thing. It was time to find the bravery to surrender my ego and equip others to lead. I made calls and connected advocates in Oak Creek to those in Newtown, and they began to build solidarity directly. Sharat and I then packed for our trip—two months to explore the world and ourselves, breathing together, wondering together, remembering all that was beautiful and good and worth fighting for.

I boarded the plane and held Sharat’s hand and took a deep breath as we lifted into the sky—higher and higher and higher—until we turned toward the horizon. In the moment the plane was sideways all we could see was sea and sky, sea and sky.



I think the inability to love is the central problem, because that inability masks a certain terror, and that terror is the terror of being touched. And if you can't be touched, you can't be changed. And if you can't be changed, you can't be alive.

—*James Baldwin*