

Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh. (The beloved community belongs to divine Oneness, and so does all that it achieves.)

On Christmas Eve 103 years ago, my grandfather waited in a dark and dank cell. He sailed by steamship across the Pacific Ocean from India to America leaving behind colonial rule, but when he landed on American shores immigration officials saw his dark skinned, his tall turban worn as a part of his Sikh faith, and saw him not as a brother but as foreign, as suspect, threw him behind bars where he languished for months until a single man, a white man, a lawyer named Henry Marshall filed a writ of habeas corpus that released him on Christmas Eve 1913.

My grandfather Kehar Singh became a farmer, free to practice the heart of his Sikh faith — love and oneness. So when his Japanese American neighbors were rounded up and taken to their own detention camps to the deserts of America he went out to see them when no one else would. He looked after their farms until they returned home. He refused to stand down.

In the aftermath of September 11th when hate violence exploded in these United States, a man that I called uncle was murdered. I tried to stand up. I became a lawyer like the man who freed my grandfather and I joined a generation of activists fighting detentions and deportation, surveillance and special registration, hate crimes and racial profiling. And after 15 years with every film, with every lawsuit, with every campaign, I thought we were making a nation safer for the next generation.

And then my son was born. On Christmas Eve, I watched him ceremoniously put the milk and cookies by the fire for Santa Claus. And after he went to sleep, I then drink the milk and ate the cookies. I wanted him to wake up and see them gone in the morning. I wanted him to believe in a world that was magical. But I am leaving my son a world that is more dangerous than the one I was given. I am raising — we are raising — a brown boy in America, a brown boy who may someday wear a turban as part of his faith.

And in America today, as we enter an era of enormous rage, as white nationalists hail this moment as their great awakening, as hate acts against Sikhs and our Muslim brothers and sisters are at an all-time high, I know that there will be moments whether on the streets or in the school yards where my son will be seen as foreign, as suspect, as a terrorist. Just as black bodies are still seen as criminal, brown bodies are still seen as illegal, trans bodies are still seen as immoral, indigenous bodies are still seen as savage, the bodies of women and girls seen as someone else's property. And when we see these bodies not as brothers and sisters then it becomes easier to bully them, to rape them, to allow policies that neglect them, that incarcerate them, that kill them.

Yes, rabbi, the future is dark. On this New Year's Eve, this watch night, I close my eyes and I see the darkness of my grandfather's cell. And I can feel the spirit of ever rising optimism in the Sikh tradition Chardi Kala (ever-rising high spirits) within him.

So the mother and me asks what if? What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb? What if our America is not dead but a country that is waiting to be born? What if the story of America is one long labor? What if all of our grandfathers and grandmothers are standing behind now, those who survived occupation and genocide, slavery and Jim Crow, detentions and political assault? What if they are whispering in our ears "You are brave"? What if this is our nation's greatest transition?

What does the midwife tell us to do? Breathe. And then? Push. Because if we don't push we will die. If we don't push our nation will die. Tonight we will breathe. Tomorrow we will labor in love through love and your revolutionary love is the magic we will show our children.

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