

An Encounter with Sikhism@

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I was raised a Protestant. I suppose that's appropriate since I have been protesting since Kindergarten. Why must I have an afternoon nap? Why can't I fingerpaint my interpretation of Picaso's *Guernica*? When adults tried to impose their will upon me, I stomped my feet and repeated my *mantra* – "that's not fair". Too young to know about the character Don Quixote, yet somehow a Quixotic being, I put on my armour and tilted at as many windmills as I could find. It was a never-ending war against fierce dragons – real and imagined.

This frustrated our Vicar to no end. I didn't know what it meant to be Protestant, let alone Catholic or Buddhist. As a 'teen' I only knew that I hated the church dress code requirements. Why did I have to ensure my shoulders were covered? Why couldn't I wear open toed sandals? "God forbid!" my mother would exclaim!

Church was a test of endurance. I remember the sharpness of my mother's elbow. Like the well-honed tool of an expert blacksmith. *When thrust against my ribs during sermons*, it was a dangerous weapon. Every Sunday, I would listen to the minister deliver yet another admonition about honouring thy father and mother, obeying without question, and believing in the face of doubt. Mother would unsheathe her elbow. The pew calisthenics (which now included elbow avoidance) – seemed an incredible waste of energy – all this for a stale wafer and a sip of sherry wine? I just couldn't see the point in all the pomp and circumstance.

By the age of 25 I had stocked a fire of frustration and disillusionment that made it impossible for others to tolerate me. Every cause was my cause, every injustice, my responsibility and every slight against those I cared for, a slight against me. I believed there was no humanity left in the world, so faith in anything was a waste of time.

Then, by chance or fate, I noticed an ad in the paper. An organization required an idealistic knight errant to right all wrongs, to fight for the weak and poor, to lobby for human rights in Canada and abroad. At the first interview, however, my excitement fizzled out when a very dignified turbaned Sikh met me at the door.

My stuttering made it obvious that I was completely unprepared. Suddenly, I was keenly aware that I knew nothing about this strapping man in a saffron turban, except what the media had told me for the last ten years, that he - and others like him - should be feared as violent, militant extremists. My instincts throughout the interview told me otherwise.

We talked. Not about politics or injustice not about government scandals. We talked like we had known each other for years. It seemed as though he somehow already knew about my rebellious nature. We bantered about human frailties. We discussed fears, goals, family, pain happiness, service, kindness.

I phoned my parents, ecstatic. Despite my ignorance, despite my agnosticism, and despite the fact that I was white, I got the job. I shared with them everything I learned. That Sikhs, as a religious practice, do not discriminate on the basis of race, creed, or colour. The equality of women was set in Sikh scripture over five hundred years ago. Justice counted.

So did the elimination of ego. Clearly there was much I could learn from this community. Completely awed by the strength and serenity I saw in the demeanour of so many Sikhs, I wanted what they had.

Ironically, I worked on dress code amendments to the RCMP, pursuing human rights at the United Nations and educating the media. However, I championed issues with an evangelistic fervour, struggling daily to rid the world of ignorant assumptions that I once possessed. I believed that to share my new found enlightenment I needed to point out the glaring stupidity of others. **Yet the Sikhs around me wouldn't get angry or frustrated. In the face of many challenges and insults, they fostered humility.** They responded to personal degradation with a genuine interest in positive changes for all of society.

Six years after I began working with Sikh community, my father became very ill. I received no censure for being off work for five weeks holding vigil at my father's hospital bedside. Instead, my boss, the man who I had come to call *Uncle Ji*, dropped by to visit. He must have understood that dad was dying, for in a very quiet voice, Uncle Ji told him how pleased he was with my work, how it benefited people from all corners of the earth, from all races and religions. My antagonistic and cynical nature was not mentioned. **My boss said that my willingness to empathize, to embrace diversity and overcome my own fears were special gifts that were a direct result of my father's loving kindness.** Uncle Ji thanked my father for raising me so carefully. He then smiled, shook my father's hand, hugged me, and left.

Dad looked directly at me. There was a tear making its way down his cheek, and the broadest smile that a father could display. Not a word was spoken as we sat together and cried. He died two days later.

That day, like a seed in warm soil, I started to grow with a confidence in who I was and where I came from. I found my roots, and my branches all at the same time, in my sorrow and frustration I found succour from the Sikh community, and an unbidden compassion that I had never known. My Sikh family helped me to accept the good and the bad in life by their patient demonstration of simple faith. There was no ritual, there was no ceremony, just an unwavering belief that purpose could be found in faith, and faith could be found in purpose.

In the last nine years of working with the World Sikh Organization of Canada, I have changed from decidedly cynical to less cynical. From faithless to hopeful.

The Sikh example has changed me, ever so gradually, from anger and frustration, to peace and acceptance. I have actually started to believe in people once again – as the Sikhs do so faithfully. I have started to believe that perhaps, perhaps... There IS some humanity remaining in our world. I have, in a word, become more Sikh. And while I have not converted to Sikhism, I have

the privilege of enjoying all the peace and humility that is afforded the faithful, by working with this community every single day.

Perhaps I am not so Quixotic after all!



Are we making life difficult for Sikhs in India?

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I just received a note from a very senior government officer in India. He is a Sikh and feels the pain of the Sikhs. After spending some time visiting the Sikh community in the United States, he has raised several issues and I think he is both right and wrong. Let us examine some of his concerns.

He recognizes that Sikhs abroad need "proper identity and respect". He laments the facts that we are busy building gurdwaras and do not realize the importance of good public relations. He is quite correct that we have been slow in seeing the power of the media and how they operate, but there is growing awareness, even though it is belated and inadequate. Things are changing largely by dint of a new generation of Sikhs, primarily the products of this society. Our travails, though frustrating are nothing new; every new immigrant community has faced similar challenges. It is like a trial by fire.

Then he broaches a second matter. Let me quote him:

"I do not understand why the Sikhs in America speak against India. We may dislike certain Government but not the country. The present Government is very friendly to us and have done so much that we all appreciate them. To raise slogans of Khalistan in Sikh congregations and denounce India will not pay us. The so-called Sikh leaders, who instigate on this matter, should be avoided. The Sikhs in America should look to their future in that country and need not worry about us."

It is this point that has spurred this column; it deserves a fuller exploration and an ongoing discussion. Let us put things in perspective. Let me start by saying that, having lived away from India and in America now for over 40 years – I came here when there were hardly two or three Sikhs in New York – my identification now is with the political entity of America. Yet I am a product of the culture and ethos of India. That cannot be denied nor do I wish to.

But I separate the country and the nation that is India from the governments that come and go every few years. A government is not the country. Indira is not - and was not - India even though she was promoted as such. (That was the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi) We must separate the nation from its leader, no matter how wise, farsighted, warmhearted and sagacious he or she might appear to partisan supporters! Politicians need not be mythologized. Friendship between

nations and in the political arena is not the same as personal friendship. To criticize a government, a politician or a policy does not automatically translate into criticism of a country.

To cast a critical eye on a government – to be a watchdog – is not only a citizen's right but also duty in a democracy. I know that half the country routinely criticizes the policy initiatives of the U.S. President at any moment of any day without being afraid of any repercussions. I believe such rights and duties are sacred in any democracy. But I see that in fact the writer is questioning why those Sikhs who live outside India criticize the Indian government.

He asserts that the present government is "friendly to us" and that may be so, but is it wrong to raise questions because of such perceived friendship? Let me be clearer. If sitting in America I can ask uncomfortable questions about apartheid in South Africa or the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East, atrocities in Bosnia, or the singling out of Hindus in Afghanistan, why must I remain silent about human rights in India? As friendly as the present Indian government might be to us, as the writer claims, does he believe Sikhs around the world should remain untouched by the seeming complicity of the allies of the same government in the destruction of the Babri Masjid or the anti-Christian violence in India. If the Indian government or the Hindus around the world can raise their voices about the treatment of Hindus in Afghanistan why can Sikhs not speak of what they perceive as governmental neglect or highhandedness in Punjab?

His last sentence "The Sikhs in America should look to their future in that country and need not worry about us here" saddens me. By this logic, the world was wrong to raise its voice against the slaughter of Jews by the Nazis, no Hindu in India need speak for his brethren in Afghanistan, no Jew or Arab in America should concern himself with the Middle East, no country or organization may speak for - or against - any policies of any other government, and Guru Tegh Bahadur need not have spoken for the Hindus in Kashmir.

By no means do I imply that when Sikhs raise slogans here they are always accurate, precise or justified in their context, but they have the right to speak and, I think, also the obligation. It is discussion and debate in the public arena that focus the harsh light of scrutiny and accountability, it is only then that truth emerges - or painfully dribbles out. That, to me, is the essence of the American way. Living democracies have to reconcile themselves to the fact that the people are watching and public discussion will always be contentious.

Khalistan, as we all know, is a complex issue; grown men and men can disagree on it. Both Khalistanis and anti Khalistanis have greeted my writings on it with equal displeasure – perhaps I have said something right. Look at the fact that the Irish in America have been intimately involved with the civil war in their homeland for over fifty years. Jews in America disagree on Israeli policies everyday. This is how perceived injustices become internationalized, governments often respond only to groundswell of pressure and protest. There is little wrong in this.

Sikhism is now a global religion. Our local imperatives define what we do and how we react to situations. We have to give each other the freedom to act according to our conscience, even foolishly at times. We need to ensure that the ties that bind the far-flung Sikh communities to our faith remain strong without becomingly suffocating and controlling of each other.

