

My Tryst with Destiny

A Journey to Sarbat-da-Bhalla

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MY MOTHER SAVED ME FROM some of the worst atrocities of a rural Canadian boyhood - shooting birds, torturing groundhogs, putting frogs on the roadway to be pressed into the asphalt by passing traffic. She didn't like it when I pulled the wings off flies and she gave me a good talking to when a couple of times I called someone a "creep." "Creeps" as my mother understood the term – those who are variously physically or mentally challenged – have their own dignity, and she insisted I grant them that respect.

As a civilian in southern Germany during the Second World War, my mother had experienced the horrors of war firsthand. She told me about the hunger and bombings, melted asphalt that held your feet while the flames slowly sucked the life out of you, the dehydrated doll-like remains searchers would find in buildings afterwards. After my age of innocence had passed, I was not allowed any type of guns. I still remember how my mother would suddenly turn nervous and agitated at the pop-pop-pop of a cap gun or firecrackers going off.

My father had gone to war against Soviet Russia, had come close enough to see the lights of Moscow, and survived. He didn't say much about these things, but a couple of times he showed me the marks where he was shot in the legs. His father, my granddad, perished in the defence of Germany at the end of the war. Before my dad's unit surrendered, never to be seen again, he and a buddy of his were lucky enough to make their way west to a Red Cross camp. In 1952, he came to Canada like many other refugees of the war in Europe. My mother followed shortly after.

I grew up with war as a fact of daily life – on television. Each day, we watched the evolving drama of war in distant Indo-China and student demonstrations across the U.S. I grew up in a town with a respected military college. To be an officer with a smart red tunic and a pillbox hat was a fine way to make a living, so I was told. When I studied philosophy and allowed my hair to grow long, I was given a stark choice: cut your hair or leave home!

It wasn't such a hard choice to make at the time. I was sixteen, the age of legal independence and I was unhappy at home. I didn't understand my parents' indifference to the war going on just then, didn't grasp the way just feeding and clothing and keeping a family could take up all a person's energies, with nothing to spare for machine-gunned and napalmed Vietnamese.

But I needed to move on. Destiny was calling me. The blood of nonviolent protesters had been shed a few weeks earlier just a day's drive away, in Ohio. I needed to be with my people - longhaired and dissident - in the peace movement and, if possible, to find a spiritual guide.

Seventeen long months later, I found my first Sikh teacher in Toronto. She was Margaret Kaur, my Kundalini Yoga teacher. Margaret Kaur was

vegetarian, kept her hair, and rose up at 3:30 a.m. - she informed a fellow student and myself - to shower and exercise and chant each day before dawn.

After half a year of thinking about it and wrapping up the details of my other life, I took up the invitation kindly proffered by first teacher and her husband Michael Singh, and joined the Sikh yogis living at the Guru Ram Das Ashram downtown in Toronto.

Three months later, I had the chance to meet their teacher. Yogi Bhajan looked so fierce on the posters and pictures I had seen. When we met him at Cornell University during a symposium of *swamis* and priests, rabbis and *imams* and one singular yogi, he kindly taught us all a profoundly simple manner of meditating, a way that has enriched my life immeasurably, and which I practice still. Their teacher was now my teacher, and his Guru Nanak inseparably mine.

It was only later that I heard what a great Sikh Yogi Bhajan was and that, by extension, we had a natural connection and a responsibility to the Sikhs of India. When a high level delegation from the S.G.P.C.¹ came in 1974, partly to gain a better understanding of the growing confluence of new and old Sikhs in Canada, America and Europe, I was otherwise occupied in Ottawa. Still, my wife and I made many friends among what was then still a little, but ambitious, community of Sikhs with their roots mostly in Punjab.

Twelve years later, I was made a "Singh Sahib," a minister of Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere, as in March of 1971 our teacher had been deemed "Siri Singh Sahib" before the Akal Takht and commissioned to return West to create a Sikh Dharma ministry of many "Singh Sahibs." It was as a Singh Sahib that our beloved Siri Singh Sahib introduced me to a Unitarian minister when he visited Montreal in 1986. Although I wasn't aware of it at the time, it was my introduction to interfaith ministry.

Unitarians, I discovered many years later, are a denomination of liberal Christians whose origins date back around the time of Guru Amar Das. Their first inspired leader, a Spaniard named Michael Servetus, proclaimed the oneness of God, hoping to effect a reconciliation between Christians, Muslims and Jews. For the trouble he gave them, Servetus was sentenced to death twice, once by a Catholic religious court in France, then in Switzerland by Calvinists who managed to burn him at the stake.

About that time, in the mid-1980s that is, a number of us at the Guru Ram Das Ashrams in Toronto and Montréal put together an organization we named "Sikhs For Peace." Activism was already second nature for a number of us, and together we campaigned for an end to the nuclear arms race between the United States and Soviet Union. As "Sikhs For Peace", we organized letter-writing campaigns to our government in Ottawa and turned up in numbers, with a brightly-coloured banner, at a large demonstration outside our provincial Parliament in Toronto.

When in 1990 our government sent the Canadian army to confront a band of aboriginal activists demanding developers - not make a golf course out of a traditional burial ground - I loaded up a van with family and friends. Eight hours later, we were at the site north of Montréal with a few hundred others showing our support for a peaceful settlement. The soldiers held their fire and eventually there was a nonviolent resolution to the conflict.

In January of 1998, having acquainted myself with the deceit in the media during the Gulf War and the deadly toll of a military blockade keeping essential supplies like medicine and chlorine from the people of Iraq, I formed the “Ad Hoc Campaign To Stop The Bombing Of Iraq.” Using a simple fax and a phone, I contacted newspaper editors and union representatives and the agents of a number of those celebrities whose opinions Americans value so much, telling them the awful truth.

In April of 2001, I was able to join tens of thousands of others in Quebec City for what was called the “Summit of the Americas” – all the Americas except for Cuba, whose ebullient president, Fidel Castro, was not invited to the party. Inside a twenty-foot-high fortified perimeter and a police cordon, leaders wined and dined and talked about lowering national barriers to trade. Outside, there were packed workshops in schools and community centres about how giving transnational corporations *carte blanche* to operate however and wherever they pleased would impoverish workers, stifle human rights, and degrade the environment everywhere. By the end of it all, the air was wafting teargas. Not all demonstrators were equally compliant. Neither were the police.

Last October, when the anti-Iraq propaganda out of Washington had again risen above a tolerable level, I offered my fellow chaplains – for by now I had joined the University of Toronto Campus Chaplains Association – that we might dedicate a day to pray for peace. Their support was unanimous – Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jew, Muslim, Pagan and Unitarian – although I suspect there were those who did not expect much to come of it.

Within a day it became apparent that, in order to oppose months and months of military preparations, just one day of prayer would not be enough. At least a week would be necessary. “Peace Prayer Day,” an annual tradition founded by Siri Singh Sahib Ji in New Mexico in 1986, had just become “Peace Week.”

Everywhere I went, I felt manifest goodwill and generosity, though some discretely wondered how a diverse group of people of religion – religion’s legacy of persecution and strife being well known to all – could be collaborating and taking such an initiative in opposing war. It goes almost without saying that without Guru Nanak’s guiding hand nothing would have come of anything.

It also helped that, besides loving peace, if there is one thing Canadians are not, it is American, and the rushing to war of the Bush administration offended a good many northerners fearful that their government and military might incidentally be drawn into a needless conflict. Financial support, venues and speakers of the first order soon fell into place. Our first Peace Week was scheduled for February 2-8, 2003.

When Peace Week came at last, we began with a day of prayer and humility, remembering that we all have a lot to learn about nonviolent coexistence. Many have died, needlessly perhaps, as a result of our clumsiness in the art of peace. Since the wife of our head chaplain, a Mennonite Christian, had just delivered a baby a couple of days before, I was asked to convene the first day, which was a little awkward because, after all, I did not wish this to appear to be a preponderantly Sikh event.

After a few words of welcome and prayer we began with a student *jatha* for *Gurbani keertan*. “*Too mayraa pitaa*,” they sang and it held a special meaning in

that variegated congregation. Then, in a spirit of equanimity, we gave the stage over to a Japanese artist who inspired us with the soothing sounds of her native instrument, the stringed *koto*. In their turn, a Christian duo, a vocalist and pianist rendered a touching psalm of peace. Then our aboriginal chaplain, Elder Grafton Antone of the Seneca tribe, and his wife and daughter led us in a number of peace chants as we all joined hands and walked in a circle to the rhythm of their drum.

For the next five evenings we had some wonderful presenters on various aspects of the challenge that keeps us from peace. Zanana Akande, the first black member of Ontario's Parliament, together with a panel of students – Hindu, Muslim, Jew and Chinese – facilitated a stimulating workshop called "The Roots Of Prejudice." Stephen Lewis, a United Nations special envoy just returned from a tour of AIDS-stricken Africa, talked about the dire needs in that part of the world and the squandering of money on death-dealing armaments around the world. Military historian Gwynne Dyer talked about the global trend toward democracy and peace, and the tragic detours being taken by the U.S. Bush administration. Noble Peace Prize-winner Jody Williams told us the inspiring story of how she managed, beginning in 1992, to build a network around the world dedicated to banning the use of landmines. Ms. Williams reminded us that just feeling bad or merely being educated about world events is nothing more than a type of narcissism – unless we are willing to take our emotions and intelligence and exercise them in the effort of bringing about positive change.

On Friday, our Jewish chaplain, Lisa Isen Baumal convened a special event to accommodate her custom of observing the sabbath, from evening Friday to evening Saturday to purely religious pursuits. Starting a bit late, to allow the Jewish students to have their traditional sabbath dinner beforehand, we had a riveting presentation by Craig Kielburger.

Craig reminds us of the effulgent spirit of Guru Harkrishan Ji – that we are hardly ever too young to make a difference. When he was just twelve, Craig and his schoolmates began an organization called "Kids Can Free The Children" to help youngsters in developing countries become free of slave-like work situations in so they can acquire an education. So far, they have arranged the building and funding of hundreds of schools. After that, we had light refreshments and a number of us joined in singing traditional Jewish hymns. At our hosts' request, I taught them a little *simran* from our tradition. A splendid time was had by all.

Then, Saturday, we had a peace concert celebration. Our Wiccan chaplain, Dana Shaw, did the honours of welcoming and introducing everyone. Just having her there was, I would say, in itself quite an event. Not so long ago, Wiccans – known as "witches" back then – were burned by the thousands as heretics in Europe and America. Dana is a very nice witch, and she did a splendid job.

After our program – a performance by the talented cast of an anti-war musical, a series of original songs of peace by vocalist Honey Novick, the lively contributions of a Bulgarian children's choir, and then a sublimely beautiful *sitar* performance – it was just about time to retire for the night. At that point, Swami Pramathananda, our Hindu colleague, offered a fitting Sanskrit prayer to take us from darkness to light and from conflict to peace and harmony. Exactly a week later, we joined together with thousands of others in the streets of Toronto - as millions of others gathered

throughout North America, Europe, the Middle East, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand – to physically demonstrate our love of peace.

Along the way, the effulgent spirit of Guru Nanak blessed us manifold. I am certainly not under any illusion that I myself am the center of the larger story. The glory is his, not mine. Still, there is a striking observation I made and a constructive criticism I feel I ought to share.

I truly exult in my spiritual heritage, the legacy of all the Gurus, saints and martyrs – those who gave their lives for the dignity of man and the freedom of their country. I love the spirit of *Sarbat da Bhalla* – goodwill to the peoples of all religions and nationalities – a tradition I frankly did not grow up with. As it happens, in the course of my activist journey I have occasionally met young people of Punjabi heritage, passionate social activists, who have dumped their religious baggage along the way. Can we fault them?

Guru Nanak showed us the virtue of equanimity as Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib showed us the need of sacrificing for the good of others. These are values we must continue to hold dear if we are not to lose our precious roots. It is not enough to pray “*Sarbat da Bhalla*,” then do nothing.

Sikhs in America today are in a difficult position. They dare not be too visible in their opposition to war and the trammeling of Muslim rights, for fear they might be taken as Muslims themselves. This has already happened. As America curtails civil liberties and its growing security apparatus targets mosques, no one should want to be mistaken as a Muslim in the United States today.

Elsewhere, however, and certainly in Canada and Europe, I believe we have an obligation to stand up to governments and politicians who would enter into war for shallow political or personal considerations. **Twelve years of sanctions against Iraq have killed an estimated million and a half civilians already. War – and we should make no mistake which side possesses the weapons of mass destruction – will only increase the terrible toll of death, chaos and destruction. Is Iraq not also the land of Guru Nanak? Did he not visit there?**

If the traditions of today's Akal Takht have less relevance for our politically awakened young than the humanitarian edicts of the Vatican, we should not be surprised. After all, was it not Pope John Paul II who in 1984 condemned the slaughter of innocents at Harimandir Sahib? What is our corollary in Amritsar? Who at the Immortal Throne of God cares about the suffering in Iraq? The devastation of AIDS in Africa? The scourge of war?

If the Pope's threshold of compassion was engaged by the deaths of a few thousand innocents in Amritsar, not one of them a Catholic, what is our respected Jathedar's threshold of concern where so many hundreds of thousands and millions are concerned? When will he take a stand and, in the finest tradition of *Sarbat da Bhalla*, speak out for them? Do we want it? Do we not expect it of him? Will it hurt our flow of immigration into the U.S.? Do we care? Should it really matter?

Perhaps we should hold a widely represented conference to decide what role we should, as a community of twenty five million, with a long tradition of tolerance and service be playing in the world. The fact is that, having practically invented the

concept of *Sarbat da Bhalla*, there are others now, secular and religious bodies, who have adopted that noble ideal. Many Christian churches, long known for their bitter history of intolerance, have started taking it up. Bhai Kanhaiya's creed is also the foundation of the Geneva Convention and the Charter of the United Nations.

We should cheer them on. But we also need to keep our eyes open to the world around us. The Mughals are long gone. By the Guru's grace, we played a part in vanquishing them. Afghan armies have not trespassed into India since Maharaja Ranjeet Singh's time – nor should we fear them. The British, too, are long gone. With strikes and boycotts and bullets and bombs, we wore them out.

These are not our enemies, and it will do us little good to keep talking about past glories if we allow present challenges to go unanswered. If we are not to allow Khalsa – the potent force of the Tenth Master – to become a mere anachronism, something to talk and sing about in the past tense, we must keep alert to today's and tomorrow's threats to human dignity and freedom of worship – and we must be willing to raise our heads and look beyond, far beyond, the postage stamp-size state we have come to know and love as "Punjab".

As Khalsa in this cyber-age, this age of diminishing distances, we must seek out and courageously confront oppressors and warmongers, wherever they are, whatever their status and power. This is our tradition. It is our role. It is our function and our defining characteristic. Wherever we might go, whatever we might think, we cannot afford to lose the living inspiration of *Sarbat da Bhalla* - for without it, we are truly lost.

In Guru Nanak's Name, may we be blessed with indomitable spirit to recognize the goodness of Your Will and give ourselves unsparingly to the good of all.
Waheguruji ka Khalsa! Waheguruji ki Fateh!



Reference

¹ The then President of the Sri Guru Singh Sabha Shatabdi Committee, Sardar Hukam Singh, S.G.P.C. President Gurcharan Singh Tohra, S.G.P.C. Secretary Mahinder Singh, and General Secretary of the Akali Dal, Surjit Singh Barnala.