



9/15/21 Vigil for Balbir Singh Sodhi

Transcript of words from Valarie Kaur

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

Thank you. Thank you to the elders of this land, the Hohokam and the O'odham peoples, thank you to the Sodhi family. And for the Sikh, to the Sikh coalition, thank you for organizing this vigil tonight and bringing us all together from all corners of the country. Thank you to the faith leaders who are here tonight and the elected officials. Thank you to the community members and all of you watching at home. Thank you.

We are gathered here tonight, 20 years after Balbir Singh Sodhi was killed at this spot. At this gas station. Balbir Uncle as so many of us called him was the first person to be killed in a hate crime after 9/11. So we are gathering here tonight to honor him and all we have lost to hate in the last two decades. You see, this gas station is the second ground zero. It is the ground zero for all the people who have been killed or harmed in the hate violence, the state violence and the wars abroad for the last two decades. So we are gathering tonight in our grief and our sorrow and our trauma over all that we have lost and all that we continue to lose. And we are finding the audacity to lift our gaze on this sacred night and reimagine a world where we are all safe and free. How? How do we do that?

We are here to remember Balbir Uncle's death. But the answer lies in his life. Balbir Uncle lived a life of love, Balbir Uncle's life is our North Star. So with the blessing of the Sodhi family, with Auntie Ji, his wife and his children and his grandchildren, with his brothers, Rana and all the families gathered here with your blessing, I will tell the story of Balbir Uncle's life as you have told me these last 20 years.

Do you see him? He is a little boy and his mother is braiding his long girth and tying it in a joora, a bun and making the burka really tight so his little strands of hair stay inside as he runs through the village with his sisters and brothers. Balbir is the third eldest of 11 siblings and his childhood was the fields of Punjab.

Do you see him? He is a young man. Kind eyes, radiant heart, and it is his wedding day. And he is standing next to Auntie Ji in the car and you are making the lavaan. And it is a day of happiness. And then he is holding his first daughter in his arms. Sukhwinder Kaur who is here tonight, and then his sons, and he is filled with pride and with joy.

Do you see him? He is holding his head in his hands, shaken by what he is seeing on the city streets of New Delhi on fire. Six lynched, tires thrown over their bodies as they are burned alive and the anti-Sikh pogroms of 1984, and he knows that he cannot stay and keep his family safe.

Do you see him? His plane touches down on U.S. soil. And his heart is filled with relief and excitement and gratitude, for this is a nation where he can practice his faith freely. This is a nation where his family will be safe. And so he is driving cabs and working the register at the 7-11 and sending money home to Aunt Ji and all the kids, and when his brothers ask him to move to Phoenix, he goes with them believing, believing in the dream of America.

Do you see him? He is standing in front of his gas station, his very own business. And the children run up to the store and he sees these children of his customers as his own children and he gives them candy. They call him Dr. Bill. Mr. Bill. And the kids, as they're riding their skateboards in that parking lot over there. His brother Rana Ji looks at him and says, "You know, a kid could get hurt and they could come and sue you."

And Balbir Uncle just says, "These are God's children. Let them enjoy it." When people came to fill up on gas and they realized they had no money Balbir Uncle would say, "Oh, just fill up and go."

And Rana and his brothers would look at Balbir Uncle and say, "Are you a saint or are you a fool?"

And Balbir Uncle would just laugh and say, "Well, God wants us to serve all."

Do you see him? He is in the car with his son Sukhwinder, and they're passing a church and he bows his head and reverence and Sukhwinder, looks at his father and says, why are you doing that? Dad, we're not Christian. And Balbir Uncle looks at him and says, "God is everywhere."

Do you see him? He is chasing his nieces and nephews in circles around the couch and a massive tickle fight, he is cooking big meals for his brothers after a long day of work. And every single day he is calling Auntie Ji on the phone, racking up the phone bills. But it doesn't matter because he misses her so much. He loves her so much. And they made a plan to see each other in November for their 25th wedding anniversary. Do you see them?

He is watching the towers fall. And his heart is aching and He tells his brothers, I want to go there, I want to go and help with the rescue effort, and his brothers say you need some kind of skill or training to do that. But his heart keeps aching and then his phone starts ringing. And it

doesn't stop ringing. For Sikhs in our community, we're calling him, calling his brother, saying someone told us to go back home to our country, they're yelling at us in the street. And you see this is a moment where hate violence broke out on city streets across America against Muslim Americans and against our community and Balbir Uncle and his brothers. They remember the pogroms of 1984 in India. They remembered how racial slurs broke into bloodshed in the streets. And so his brothers, with Balbir Uncle, they went to the gurdwara to plan a press conference for Sunday, September 16th. To tell the nation that we were Americans who are hurting just like them.

Balbir Uncle called Rana Ji and said, "Don't go to work, it's not safe."

And Rana Ji said "Well, what what about you? Why are you at work today? And he says, I live in a safe area." These brothers, they loved each other so much, do you see them?

He decides to go to Costco on Saturday, the day before the press conference was going to be held and he was buying crates of flowers to plant in front of his gas station, and he saw a jar at the checkout line that said 9/11 Victims Fund, And he just emptied out his wallet, everything he had. And he calls his brother and said, you know, "Costco is out of American flags, and I, I really want an American flag to fly at my store."

And Rana Ji says, "Don't worry, I'll look for one for you. I'll see you later today."

Do you see him? He is standing right there. Planting flowers. I don't know if he saw the truck come around this intersection. Or the gun leaning out the window. But five shots rang out and Balbir Uncle fell right there. And bled to death, not knowing who shot him or why he was dying.

His killer, when arrested, said, "I am a patriot."

Do you see him? Balbir Uncle's story could have ended here. As so many stories do when one dies. But this was not the end of his story. His death was a beginning because of how he lived. After his death, I traveled to India to see Auntie Ji. To try to help tell their story, and Auntie Ji do you remember I came with this long list of questions she was dressed in white just as today, the color of mourning and I asked you I asked you just one question. I said, "What would you like to tell the people of America?" And I was expecting despair. They took your whole world from you.

But she said, "Thank you. When I came to America for my husband's memorial, they came out in the thousands. Christian, Muslim, Jew, they didn't know me, but they wept with me and cared for me, they loved me. Tell them thank you for their love."

You see, Balbir Uncle lived a life of such courage and love that it inspired his brothers to respond to his murder, not with fear or vengeance, but with a love without limit. And America did not hear the story. His story barely made the evening news, just like so many of our communities broken by hate. But the brothers told the local community the story of his life and the love that he lived, and it was enough to move thousands of people to come to see him not as a foreigner or terrorist, but as a neighbor, as a brother. And that did not stop the violence, but it was an act of solidarity that helped this family return to chardi kala. The Sikh spirit of chardi kala ever rising spirits even in darkness. Ever rising joy, even in hardship.

I have seen that spirit of chardi kala shines so bright in Rana Sodhi these last 20 years. Balbir Uncle's younger brother. After his brother was murdered, Rana Ji made a decision to dedicate the rest of his life to telling his brother's story to everyone he could. And he never stopped these 20 years. He decided that the best way to honor his brother was to continue his legacy and radiate that kind of love. And I will never forget Rana Ji watching you speak with Balbir Uncle's killer. And forgive him. And begin this process of reconciliation. You have taught us that forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgiveness is freedom from hate.

I was a college student when we met. Your story turned me and a whole generation of us into activists. Satyajit, Kiran, and so many of us who are here who have been here. And now I'm back here, and I'm a mother. And I brought my son to meet you for the first time. Because I wanted him to know our story. And so this is what I want to tell my son and all the children and young people who are here tonight who are hearing these hard stories and trying to make sense of them, this is what I want you to know, my love. We are not victims. We are survivors. We are teachers. We are warriors.

They can colonize us, they can try to kill us, but they cannot crush us because we are sovereign, we are Sant Sipahi, Sage Warriors. The sage is enraptured by the world as it is, and the warrior labors for the world as it ought to be. And so it's OK when those hard moments come, it's OK to feel that grief. It's OK to honor your rage. And then take a breath and remember that you are not alone. That Balbir Uncle is your ancestor. That his blood courses through your veins and his spirit radiates in your heart, and that if he could sing a song of a revolutionary kind of love, so can we. Like Black people and indigenous people in so many of our ancestors have on this soil long before we ever got here.

If we sing that song of love in one voice, perhaps we can get the nation to sing along with us. For this is what I know to be true. We need sound government and we need just policy. And the only way we will deliver a future where all our children are safe and free is if we, each of us, live

into a new way of being and seeing, leaving no one outside of our circle of care. We are ready. We are ready for a shift in culture and consciousness, a revolution of the heart.

Nā ko bairī nahī bigānā I see no enemy. I see no stranger. Can we see the world like Balbir Uncle saw it?

And so what if? What if we looked at his turban? He wore his turban as part of his faith, his commitment to love and serve all. What if we made the value that he died for, the value that Rana has lived for 20 years? What if we made that value of love, our North Star? What if we refuse to divide the world into us versus them individually, individually and collectively, and valued human dignity above all? Perhaps then you could see Balbir Uncle as your uncle. And my son is your son. As I see your beloved's as my own. That is how we build the beloved community. And that is the gift we can give our children. For 20 years from today. And 20 years after that, our children will come back to this spot, to this land, and they will remember us.

They will remember us, they will remember that we gathered in the midst of so much grief. And had the courage to sing a song of love. Sing it with me now, *Nanak Nam Chardi Kala Teray Banay Sarbat da Bhalla* in the name of Divine Oneness we find ever rising high spirits within your will, maybe grace for all of humanity.

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