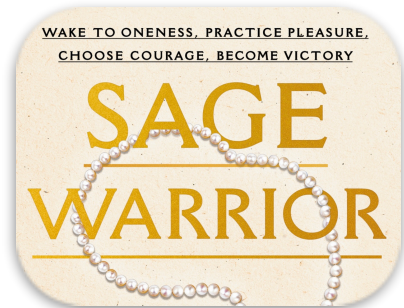


# Sage Warrior

Wake to oneness, ... (a summary by Pat Evert)

*The world we have known is ending. **A new world is wanting to be born.** What is needed now is for survivors of trauma and witnesses of crisis to see ourselves not as victims, but as **pioneers of a new way of being human.** We can become sant sipahi: sage warriors. The warrior fights. The sage loves. It's a path of **Revolutionary Love.***



## • Introduction

Authoritarian forces are gaining ground, poverty and inequality, and just when we need to come together to solve these problems, algorithms are decimating our shared sense of reality, driving us farther apart. I was raised in the Sikh tradition. It is one of the world's great wisdom traditions. The Sikh tradition began half a millennium ago in the land of Punjab. In the year 1499, a man named Nanak is said to have disappeared into a river and emerged three days later with a revelation of Oneness. **We can all taste the truth of Oneness**, and when we do, we are inspired to care for one another, and fight for one another. Perhaps what was most powerful about Guru Nanak is how he distilled the mystical heart of all the world's wisdom traditions into **its essence: love**. All of us can become sages: Sing a song of love and practice what you sing by serving others. Today there are twenty-six million Sikhs worldwide, and countless interpretations. What follows is mine. The sage is someone who loves deeply. You cultivate wonder for others and the earth and wake to Oneness. The warrior is someone who fights for humanity, including your own. You choose courage in the face of crisis. The warrior fights; the sage loves. It's a path of Revolutionary Love. **All of us are part of the One**. You are a part of me I do not yet know. And that means **no one is outside our circle of care**. There are no monsters in this world, only people who are wounded. **This era is revealing the sweet labor we are called to participate in to birth a new world. And so, my name for this era is the Great Transition**—the convulsive birthing labor that precedes the world that is wanting to be born. If we show up with our whole hearts, what future generations will inherit from this time will be not our trauma but our courage, born of joy.

**You are the link between past and future.** With the earth under you, and waters around you, with ancestors behind you, and the children of the future before you— May you find the wisdom you need to be brave with your life.

## **PART 1: WAKE TO ONENESS**

### **• THE FIRST SIKH: THE STORY OF BIBI NANKI AND GURU NANAK**

Both Bhagats and Sufis declared that **all people could commune with the Beloved**, and those at the “bottom”—women and poor people and trans hijras and people born into low castes, including all those called “untouchable”—were **beloved, infinitely worthy**. Every evening from then on—as the call to prayer pierced the sky from the mosque—a stream of people poured into Nanki’s house, Hindus and Muslims alike. He was saying: **There’s no *me* against you. We are part of one another**, and everything is part of us. It didn’t matter whether one was Hindu or Muslim or anything else. One must not sleepwalk through life. **Awaken people to Oneness**. The blessed tree where **her brother disappeared and was awakened**. For fourteen years, he sat here and meditated before dawn. Bibi Nanki was a mother left to raise her children without Guru Nanak. The years passed. When Guru Nanak set out on his first udasi—odyssey—he returned once after a long stretch of years. But he did not stay home long. He set out on a second and third udasis and traveled widely before he returned. Nanki provided the musical instrument through which to sing. In doing so, **she cleared the path to his awakening**. For the nineteen years he was away.

A devotee had gifted them land on the western bank of the River Raavi. They could found a settlement on the land and grow a community together. His followers had heard his instructions: Live a householder’s life. Don’t hide away in the forests. **Taste the truth of Oneness**, then return to your daily labors: Till your fields. Raise your children. Cook. Sweat. Sing. Serve all as your kin. After his child-rearing, now her husband wanted to live a householder’s life with her.

### **• JOURNEY TO SULTANPUR LODHI**

*Ik Onkar*. It’s the first statement in scripture, the primary truth, the poetic utterance of Guru Nanak. **Ik Onkar means: Oneness, ever-unfolding**. It is the Oneness that always is, whose expression is unfolding through time and space, **blossoming forth in wondrous multiplicity. All of us are part of the One**. There is nothing beside the One and nothing outside the One. Which means there is no essential separateness between you and me, you and other people, you and other species, or you and the trees. You are no more or less worthy. You can look at anyone or anything and say: ***You are a part of me I do not yet know***. The idea of our essential Oneness does not belong to one tradition: It’s a truth that echoes through time and across culture. The One cannot be cleaved apart into good and evil. *Ik Onkar* is the sum of all that is, ever in motion. Creation and destruction and change. Oneness is not sameness. We are different in our colors, genders, orientations, fluencies, stories, histories, and struggles; **we are infinitely plural**. Guru Nanak’s vision of Oneness is rooted in deep humility in the face of real and profound diversity. Guru Nanak emerged from this coming-together. His understanding of Oneness springs from multiplicity. So too, *we* are a mosaic people. Indigenous people and immigrants, colonizers and colonized, rulers and enslaved, perpetrators and survivors, and the marbling of peoples and histories and tongues from all corners of the world. Guru Nanak taught: *See no stranger*. Oneness is not simply an idea to hold, but a truth to experience with one’s whole body. *Only through the body do*

*we awaken.* The seemingly ordinary moments of wonder. They are not incidental. They are actually portals into the sacred nature of things. They are tastes of the truth that we are part of everything, everywhere. You may awaken in big dramatic ways, but it won't hold unless you **embrace waking in small ways**, again and again. Each moment presents a chance to awaken—to die and be reborn. Do I want to become more free? Do I want to love a little more? Do I want to awaken?

**You are already a sage.** The first step to surfacing the sage within you is to embrace the present moment. Say softly: ***You are a part of me I do not yet know. Let a layer of separateness fall away.*** We are part of Oneness, ever-unfolding. To be undone by awe.

## **PART 2: BEFRIEND THE BODY**

### **• THE CLEARING: THE STORY OF MATA KHIVI AND GURU ANGAD**

“Lehna has the same light and the same ways,” the Guru announced. “From now on, Lehna shall be known as Guru Angad.” Fifteen days later, Guru Nanak merged with the One. Kartarpur erupted in wails of mourning. Mata Sulakhni, she, too, had had a husband who left her alone with her children for many years while he served a distant calling. *Without fear. Without hate.* And **the only way to transform her fear was to befriend it.** Seven years later, her husband was anointed to lead. Guru Angad returned to his wife, Mata Khivi, to come home: Guru Nanak’s wife and sons would lead Kartarpur; Guru Angad would light the Guru’s lamp in Khadoor. There would be no struggle for power. They would live into Guru Nanak’s vision of harmony; they were one body after all. The families of Khadoor prayed and worked alongside one another respectfully. What if everyone was required to eat together as a family does? What if we made it so delicious that shedding caste to be together felt good in our bodies? Guru Angad built a langar hall—a great outdoor kitchen—complete with a well. At the end of the meal, Amro emerged with bubbling bowls of kheer. Everyone broke into wide grins as they saw the rice pudding, as if they had all become children again. When Mata Khivi blew the conch, the Sikhs of Khadoor arrived astonished. Was this to be a daily occurrence? Guru Angad was already there, seated not on a throne but on the floor with his people. Next to him was a young family who had come to them as low caste. On the other side of them was a high-caste Hindu. Across from him, a woman who was Muslim. **And they were eating together, as a family (regardless of caste).** Mata Khivi drew her daughter close. She explained that her body was bleeding, and that it was good. “Your body is sacred,” continued her mother. Amro married a kind young man. Mata Khivi presented her daughter with a special wedding gift: the pearl mala that Mata Sulakhni had given her. Bibi Amro sang while she churned the milk: *Filth transforms into gold if one finds true wisdom. Even what we detest transforms into gold when wisdom finds us. We are part of one body; there are no bad parts. Not outside us, not within us.*

## • JOURNEY TO KHADOOR

First, sit for langar, then join the people. It became a core practice, as essential as the worship. **To live the truth of Oneness, befriend the communal body.** And there was no more direct path to that communion than feeding and serving each other. This was a time when people from a high caste would not eat from the cooking vessels or hands of a caste considered “low.” It resembled how racial segregation functioned in the United States when laws separated people based on race, and white people would not swim in the same pool or eat at the same table or drink from the same fountain as Black people. Throughout the world, the most effective caste systems and social hierarchies kept people apart when it came to the most intimate exchanges—living, eating, loving—and enforced those rules with brutality. Langar was embodied protest. Radical and subversive. **High caste people ate from the hands of low-caste “untouchables,” and vice versa.** They were training their bodies into a new way of being, undoing millennia of conditioning. **They became new in the act: equal, and equally beloved.** Langar was more than a rebellion: It was a practice for an alternative world of solidarity, dignity, and humility. Mata Khivi ran langar for *four* decades, under five Sikh Gurus. This is the spirit of langar. You are part of one greater body. Any Sunday morning in the United States, you can go to a gurdwara near you, and you will be welcomed to langar. Every gurdwara around the globe has a langar hall, open to all and always free. The food is healthy and vegetarian. You will be served.

**We are born seeing no stranger. But we are then thrown into a world of hierarchy, and it's only a matter of time before it starts shaping how we see things.** By three years old, we can tell that light skin is socially privileged over dark, and that some people are assumed to have more worth than others. Over the centuries, a fifth social category was declared, lower than even the Shudras. They were called “untouchable” and were relegated to jobs considered menial and polluting: making shoes, cleaning latrines, handling the dead. They were not permitted to drink from the same cup, live in the same part of the village, marry, or even touch those higher on the social order. In the United States, too, formal racism is abolished, but white supremacy still structures our institutions, permeates our policies, and shapes how we see. Every moment of life becomes an opportunity to practice. Mata Khivi took the way she loved her children out into the greater world. **Her langar hall was a site of literal nourishment for body and soul, a place where people practiced being a family.** As more of us are endangered, we will need to be braver and more reckless with our love. Bibi Amro, became the first Sikh woman on record who knew how to read, write, and lead. Oneness means that all parts of the world are beloved, and so are all parts of ourselves. We must learn how to befriend our own bodies. **Loving all parts of ourselves increases our capacity to love all parts of the world.** Do I love all of myself? What parts of myself have I sent into exile?

The body of the world contains many parts. **All are part of the One, and the One is beloved. There are no bad parts of the world, only human beings who are wounded.** Explore what it feels like to love all the parts of you. What would it look like for everyone in that space to feel at home, nourished, and equally beloved?

### **PART 3: PRACTICE PLEASURE**

#### **• THE ASCENT: THE STORY OF BIBI BHANI AND GURU AMAR DAS**

He found what he had spent his whole life searching for. Bhani looked into her father's radiant face. Guru Angad had asked him to found a new settlement three kilometers from Khadoor on land gifted by a wealthy merchant. It was called Goindval. He had always uplifted the women in his family. Guru Angad placed a coconut and five paisay at the feet of Amar Das and bowed. She never imagined he would be chosen to lead. Guru Angad proclaimed:

*Amar Das shall be the honor of the dishonored the strength of the powerless the home of the homeless the hope of the hopeless the support of those who have none*

Guru Angad, had retired. Bibi Amro wept. Bibi Amro's father was not gone; he was part of the Oneness that always is. Mata Khivi visited Goindval from time to time at the invitation of Guru Amar Das, who rejected the widespread practice of ostracizing widows. Jetha was a fine young man, but he was an orphan boy. He came to serve Guru Amar Das when he was twelve years old, his hands coarse from roasting black chickpeas. Bhani was the youngest child of the Guru, and the most adored. "Bhani is nineteen now," Mata Mansa Devi remarked casually to Guru Amar Das that evening. "What kind of husband do we want for her?" Guru Amar Das said, *The one like Jetha is Jetha himself*. The Guru smiled. "Why not him for our Bhani?" Bhani shook her head. She was to serve her father, not give in to her desire. The Guru said, his eyes twinkling. ***Don't lose what you've found.*** Guru Amar Das commenced the ceremony. The Guru was singing his epic song of divine joy. Her body's desires were not polluted or wrong, or even banal. Her father was saying: Your desire is sacred! Her desire was beautiful; her pleasure was good. More than good! Her pleasure was a pathway to the One. Emperor Akbar had come. Instead of punishing them, he offered a gift: five hundred bighas of land to the Guru's daughter, Bhani, on the occasion of her wedding. Bhani went with her husband. But her spirit dimmed. They returned to Goindval to live with Guru Amar Das, and to serve him. It was unheard of: A bride lived with her husband's family, not the reverse! **But Jetha wanted Bhani's light to burn bright, even if that meant breaking all the rules of the world.** In releasing his daughter, the Guru found her again. In letting her go, he gained them both.

#### **• JOURNEY TO GOINDVAL**

I (Valarie) fell in love. Papa Ji was crushed. The person I found was not raised in our faith. Papa Ji saw my desire as a betrayal. "Isn't the one light in all of us?" I cried to Papa Ji, trying to win his blessing. "What of your children?" he countered. We debated for hours, as if the heart could be persuaded by bullet points. Finally, on his deathbed, Papa Ji looked up at Sharat and me, and he blessed us. He asked for forgiveness and blessed us both. My grandfather never got to see how in his letting me go, I found one who made me the wisest woman I could be. "Guru Amar Das wrote the song of joy, the Anand Sahib. We were in the room where Guru Amar Das meditated. I was teaching them about anand. I found a corner, pulled my dupatta over us, and my daughter nursed, playing with my shawl like a canopy. I relaxed. I peered under the cloth and locked my hands and smiled at her. Her eyes rolled back; Ananda was in *anand*."

**Pleasure is sacred.** In other words, **pleasure is what God feels like.** The Sikh wedding ceremony is literally called a “transport into divine ecstasy.” **The whole world you see is the form of the Beloved.** The Beloved’s form is all you see. Everyone sang Guru Amar Das’s song of ecstatic joy. It concludes every service. It was pure pleasure, in the body, without apology or shame. Now, in my forties, I am on a journey to reclaim that kind of pleasure in all parts of my life. My body carries the scars that come from endometriosis, sexual assault, police brutality, racial violence, and decades of self-hatred. But I am tired of speaking from the wound. **The solution is not to slay the enemy, but to return to love.**

#### The Five Great Pleasure Practices:

*Music* is the lifeblood of movements for liberation, inner and outer. When we *dance*, we feel free—our bodies that feeling of ease and release and freedom. The purpose of dance is not self-expression but self-actualization.

It always astounds me: We can reset our nervous system with three deep *breaths*.

*Substances*: anandamide—a scientist actually named this compound after anand, the Sanskrit word for ecstasy. **Nearly all of them are available to us all of the time**, no matter our resources: We can sing. We can dance. We can breathe. We can taste. **Joy is our birthright.**

*Sensual pleasure.* Know what it’s like to be free—and satisfied. *Any* pleasure practice engaged thoughtfully—breathwork or music or dance, sensual pleasure or substances—can usher you into the same field of light. What feels good in my body? Being aware of crisis does not mean our bodies need to be *in* crisis all the time. If we are to become the ones who rebirth the world, we must be able to weave pleasure practices into our lives as regular and reliable channels for release and renewal. It takes courage to take those moments of beauty and freedom—and **bring joy into your daily life, not just for yourself but for the people around you.**

In moments of pleasure, we taste and embody the world we want for everyone. Make pleasure a practice. Use all your senses. **The sage embraces pleasure practices as channels for union and connection**—with oneself, with others, and with the One.

## **PART 4: BUILD SOVEREIGN SPACE**

### **• THE INNER THRONE: THE STORY OF BIBI BHANI AND GURU RAM DAS**

Bibi Amro was a leader now, one of twenty-two revered leaders of the Sikh world. Her appointment reflected Guru Amar Das’s **commitment to liberation**. He forbade purdah, declaring that women should never be forced to veil their faces. He forbade sati, condemning the horrific practice of forcing widows to burn alive on their husbands’ funeral pyres. And he forbade kurrimaar, the practice of killing female babies upon birth. No matter who you were—Muslim or Hindu, high caste or low, rich or poor, woman or man, gendered or not, married or widowed, child or elder, dark skin or light—you drank from this well as one people. Bhai Jetha kept toiling and was to be the next Guru. The Guru Gaddi ceremony was held in their garden courtyard in their home in Goindval. All



twenty-two leaders of the masands attended. Guru Amar Das announced: “My light has gone into Jetha! He shall now be known as Guru Ram Das.” *Servant of the Beloved*. Bibi Amro cupped her little cousin-sister’s wrist and asked her to close her eyes. When she opened her eyes, she beheld the most beautiful pearl mala she had ever seen. The mala was infused with love. Guru Ram Das said “*Let’s go*.” They were going to go live on the land that Emperor Akbar had gifted her. They called it Guru ka Chak. *Home of the Guru*. In time, Guru Ram Das doubly secured the gift from Emperor Akbar by purchasing the land from local farmers. He expanded the pool of water to create a great sarovar, sacred waters where people could drink, bathe, and pray. Guru Ram Das composed hundreds of new shabds that danced on people’s lips, and the people renamed the town after him. It was now Ramdaspur, also called Amritsar. Guru Ram Das stepped down and gestured for Arjan to sit on the throne. Bibi Bhani’s husband was dying from an ailment neither of them understood, and that was unseen to everyone else. She had taken the news stoically, planning the Guru Gaddi ceremony with her husband carefully. Arjan, her youngest child, only eighteen, was now the leader of the Sikh world. He was now Guru Arjan, fifth in the House of Nanak. On the journey back home to Ramdaspur, Bibi Bhani saw a leper colony south of the city. She stayed and lived in the leper colony to serve and tend to the ill. She put water to their lips and crushed herbs in their hands. She wept with them, and sang with them. In the great city of Ramdaspur, the young Guru Arjan labored tirelessly to build his divine abode with the same steadfast care and devotion as his father. “This abode shall be known as Harmandir Sahib,” announced Guru Arjan. *Home of the Beloved*. “Harmandir Sahib is for all of us!” said Guru Arjan. “It is open in all four directions, welcoming people from all backgrounds, beliefs, and places.”

#### • JOURNEY FROM GOINDVAL TO AMRITSAR

Today the city of Amritsar is the heart of the Sikh world. It is home to the most revered sacred site, Harmandir Sahib, also known as the Golden Temple. A shining golden palace floated on deep blue waters. The abode stood serenely, timelessly, radiating light, its reflection dancing in the water like a vision that did not fade. It was tradition to walk around the sanctum clockwise, to prepare the heart and mind. Thousands of people come every day from around the world to bow before the Guru Granth Sahib—the canon of Sikh poetry treated as our living teacher, our Guru. Our audience with the Guru lasted...ten seconds. **You can always return to the sacred. Until you realize it’s all sacred.** If we are all part of the One, then there is no space that is *not* sacred. But these sojourns mean nothing if we are not also entering that space *within* us. I can step into any landscape I have known or ever imagined. I built this Throne Room in my mind over time. Every time I visit, more of it comes into view. It is limitless. Here, no one is ushering me out. I can stay however long I need. No matter where I am in the world, I can come here, and I am home. Here, in my sovereign space, I am all my identities, and so much more. My sovereign space is a realm of rest and pleasure, wonder and magic, beauty and serenity. I go to my sovereign space not to escape the pain of the world, but **to see that pain from a higher place**—and choose how to respond. In my sovereign space, I gather courage. Accessing a space of freedom within us is how **we return to our fullest humanity**. It generates vitality, energy, and imagination to reshape the world around us. Our ancestors went into that space of freedom inside them, and from that

bright space, they sang, they danced, they marched, and they insisted on their worth. Guru Arjan built Harmandir Sahib as a magnificent abode. Since then, it has been destroyed repeatedly by those who have wanted to annihilate or punish the Sikh people. I will never forget standing inside the gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, just a few days after the horrific mass shooting of Sikh Americans in 2012. I watched them roll up their sleeves and sing our ancestors' prayers. They washed the bloodstains from the carpets, repaired the windows shattered by bullets, and painted the sanctuary anew. They didn't just restore this sanctum—they expanded it. *You can gun us down; you can spill blood in our sacred waters. But you cannot destroy us. We are sovereign. We are one.* We touched the sacred water, and I sprinkled some on my son's forehead.

**You can build sovereign space inside you—a space of rest and freedom that is always available to you,** no matter what is happening in the world or your life. Every time you visit your sovereign space, adorn it and let it expand. **It is a refuge that offers you energy to be courageous with your life.**

## **PART 5: REST IN WISDOM**

### **• The Songbird: The Story of Mata Ganga and Guru Arjan**

Guru Arjan's travels lasted five years, punctuated by brief visits home. Ganga has birthed a child! His name is Hargobind. Bibi Bhani stared at the poison. First the cobra let loose in the room. They thought it was an accident. Now this. She always thought the threat would come from the outside. But it was her own son's rage that had exploded into the unthinkable. Instead of bristling at the disrespect, Guru Arjan sang his uncle songs of praise. **Guru Arjan would not respond with aggression: He would melt the hardened heart.** In the old house in Goindval, Bibi Bhani, who was sovereign in her soul, melted into the One. Mata Ganga thought about how the labor of dying mirrored the labor of birthing. How one must breathe deeply enough in order to push and, ultimately, transition. Bibi Bhani's final words echoed in her: **Rest in wisdom.** Guru Arjan had compiled the shabds, including more than two thousand of his own, into one great volume, and organized them by raags, musical signatures traversing a dazzling range of emotional and spiritual moods. **The Aadi Granth was born.** After the Aadi Granth was installed on the throne, Guru Arjan and Mata Ganga betrothed young Hargobind to a girl named Damodari; when she came of age, they would live together. They sheltered and fed an enemy of the emperor. "A summons from Emperor Jahangir, Treason." Guru Arjan said, **See no stranger; See no enemy.** There was a clearer voice now, the one that Bibi Bhani saw in her, the one of wisdom, and she had only to rest in it. She whispered: "Listening to the wisdom of the Whole I come close to the Infinite," Guru Arjan finished: "Oneness in every breath All pain disappears." Mata Ganga buried her face in his chest and let her tears flow. Guru Arjan was saying something about how bodies are temporary, and to prepare Hargobind to lead. In the morning, Guru Arjan began his journey to Lahore to confront the Emperor. They killed him. Killed her husband, Guru Arjan. He had gone to that place deep within him where the hot winds could not touch him. Even in the fire and burning sand, he was with the One and part of



the One and immersed in the love of the One, and that is the only way he could have sung, repeatedly: *Your will is sweet to me*. Mata Ganga roared, *Prepare for succession*.

#### • JOURNEY TO AMRITSAR

Shouts of jubilation filled the air. They carried the Guru Granth Sahib—the sacred volume of musical wisdom—adorned with marigolds and little sparkling lights. They crossed the bridge to a special resting chamber for sukhasan, walking the same path Guru Arjan had that very first night when he put the Guru to rest. It was a tradition repeated every night for hundreds of years. I am going to step into the Throne Room inside me, my sovereign space. A woman is seated on the throne. She shimmers. She is here and not here. Her hair is long and black and swirling around her as though floating in water. Her eyes are soft and serene. She is dressed in royal blue silk robes studded with stars, flowing down to the river. She is regal. She is letting herself be seen for a moment. I call her Wise Woman. I know only a fraction of her; she is inexhaustible. She is infinite, yet here she appears. She does not need my worship, only my stillness. She swaddles and comforts me. She mothers me. I am safe here. In the old days, he used to sit on the throne and tell me all sorts of things. Like: *You're not enough. You should be afraid. Get afraid. Get small*. It's so easy for the Little Critic to rule our consciousness. **We need him; we just don't need him in charge**. Say to him: *"You're a part of me I don't yet know."* Guru Arjan sang, "I see no enemy; I see no stranger." Can we see no strangers or enemies *within* us? In 1606, Guru Arjan was arrested, tortured, and sentenced to death in Lahore under the order of Emperor Jahangir. The execution of Guru Arjan was earth-shattering for the Sikh realm. The moment Sikhs could have disintegrated and disappeared. Yet we found a way to survive. His equanimity under torture demonstrated how to relate to pain. Guru Arjan composed the Sukhmani Sahib, the Jewel of Serenity. The first Guru to suffer egregious pain in our ancestral memory is also the one who gave us our greatest song of inner-peace. What if we all could do that? I have heard the Wise Woman's voice during the most painful events of my life—police brutality, sexual assault, chronic pain, racial violence, illness. If I can lift my gaze for just a moment to her radiant face, I see her watching me. **You are not your pain. You are much vaster than that**. My sense of self expands: I am the one inside the pain—feeling all of it—and the one watching the pain. I am animal and divine, and both are equally beloved, one not higher than the other. I imagine that Mata Ganga, too, found **a way to rest in the wisdom within her**—even after her husband was tortured and martyred, and an Empire wanted her and her son dead.

Wisdom resides deep within you. The most beautiful and loving place you can imagine—and rest here. Listen for a few moments. **The deeper your capacity to love all parts of yourself, the deeper your capacity to love all parts of the world**. The sage rests in wisdom; the warrior speaks and acts from that loving wisdom.

After the execution of the fifth teacher, Guru Arjan, the community fought with literal swords for its survival. The Sikh tradition supports a pragmatic nonviolence: In a violent world, make choices that minimize harm. Force is justified "when all other means have failed."

## **PART 6: ACTIVATE POWER**

### **• The Choice: The Story of Mata Ganga and Guru Hargobind**

“You are unlike any Guru before you,” whispered Mata Ganga. “What do our people need?” “Power,” he said. On the day of the Guru Gaddi ceremony, hundreds gathered in nearby Daroli. Mata Ganga stepped forth with her son. A hush fell over the people. Hargobind stood tall in a royal blue warrior’s dress. “*Power in the world,*” called out Guru Hargobind. “*Power within.*” He named these swords Miri Piri: *Inner and outer power.* This was a departure of the highest order. *A Guru who donned swords? A Guru who called for arms? Would this boy-Guru lead them to their deaths?* On the appointed day, Mata Ganga went outside before dawn. Before her stood thousands and thousands of Sikhs, as far as she could see. They had horses—and arms. Guru Hargobind raised a mighty army. Word spread of the warrior-Guru who would defy an Empire. **There were no monsters in this world.** Only those human beings who forget the one light, and those who embrace it. “What will you do?” she asked again. “I will go to the Emperor as my father did, as a sage warrior.” One morning the Empire came for her son. She stirred as her son walked into the clearing and let himself be arrested, quieting the roaring crowd. She stirred as her son was taken to meet the man who killed his father. And when the soldiers were finally gone the streets were filled with wails.

There were fifty-two prisoners in the cell—Rajput kings, all rulers of kingdoms who had rebelled against the Emperor. Some had languished in this cell for many years. Guru Hargobind introduced himself as the sixth Guru in the House of Nanak. The young Guru closed his eyes and sang the song of Bhagat Kabir that his mother had taught him: So, who is good and who is bad? The Guru’s song filled the cell. The darkness took on a strange sheen, and the air started to vibrate and breathe. *Not the darkness of the tomb. The darkness of the womb.* The prisoners began to sing with him. Hundreds of Sikhs, led by Baba Buddha Ji, had marched from Amritsar to Gwalior. The Sikhs did not need weapons; **their power was in their numbers, and in their song.** Weeks turned into months, and months into seasons. Every season, a new procession of Sikhs marched from Amritsar to Gwalior. Guru Hargobind turned sixteen years old in the prison. “I choose to pardon you,” roared Emperor Jahangir for all to hear. Emperor Jahangir could not afford unrest from the villages that flanked his most prized, impenetrable prison. “**I will only go if you also release the fifty-two kings you imprisoned with me,**” Guru Hargobind said. “You can release only those who can hold the hem of your cloak,” said the Emperor. He would lose no more than three or four prisoners. Guru Hargobind stepped forward. Not bent in rags, but standing gloriously, as he was the day he arrived at the fort. He was wearing a cloak—the most splendid cloak anyone had seen. The cloak spread behind him in an ever-widening rainbow, until the hem could be seen. The cloak had fifty-two tassels. Holding onto the tassels were the fifty-two kings, resolute and joyful, no longer prisoners of Gwalior, **walking from bondage into freedom.** “The people saw you refuse your freedom. They took your message to the nearest village, and the children went from house to house, gathering all the fabric they had, and the families worked through the night, weaving and working their hands for people they did not know.” “Why?” **You showed them a sage warrior does not leave anyone behind.** Guru Hargobind mounted a horse and began the journey home to Amritsar, alongside

Baba Budda Ji and all who camped at the fort. They stopped in the the villages and towns on the way. New songs danced on people's lips: The true Guru frees us from bondage. We are liberated in life! When Guru Hargobind reached Amritsar, the people shouted his name in jubilation. **A sage of limitless love. A warrior who leaves no one behind.** The people called the day of his return, the Day of Liberation! It was time for Damodari to live with them as his wife. Mata Ganga conducted two additional marriages for her son. Guru Hargobind also married Nanki and Mahadevi. She who had spent her life focused on her only son, was surrounded by three daughters-in-law. The pearl mala had passed through the hands of the great women who led the House of Nanak: All of them had to overcome obstacles to find wisdom within them. All of them had to fight for their freedom.

#### • JOURNEY TO AMRITSAR, CONTINUED

Spiritual and temporal power are connected. When we take another's life, we are also taking a piece of our own humanity. **The Sikh tradition condones the use of force only when all other means fail.** We face a thousand Jahangirs, a thousand Gwalior prisons. **But there are millions of us who want a world of coexistence,** who know that justice and liberation and peace run together, who long for a shared future. Our potential is limitless—if only we activate our power. After Guru Hargobind's release, Emperor Jahangir left the Sikhs alone for the rest of his reign. It was the first case of organized collective nonviolent resistance in Sikh history. **Our most powerful way to create change is to *practice* the world we want,** in the spaces available to us. ***Who are we leaving behind? No one.***

There is a large window in front of you. Look through the portal: **It is the world where the harm that ails you is no more.** In place of the harm is something new: harmony and beauty. Now turn to the wisdom within you. There is one new thing you can do—one thing that is only yours to do—to **usher in that world right where you are. The sage embraces their vision of the world as it could be; the warrior steps toward that vision.**

### PART 7: HARNESS RAGE

#### • The Vow: The Story of Bibi Veero and Guru Har Rai

***Befriend your anger. Don't hold down your rage, or try to tame it. But don't let it rob you either.*** *Harness rage: Take hold of the reins and direct its course.* "Let the sage guide the warrior." Emperor Jahangir had died from too much opium and wine. A battle for succession ensued. Emperor Jahangir's youngest son murdered his older brothers, seized the throne, and called himself Shah Jahan, *King of the World*. Seven thousand imperial soldiers had marched to Amritsar from Lahore in the dead of night. They attacked Lohgarh Fort, *the Castle of Iron*. They were on their way to the Guru's residence, just east of the fort. They were coming for Bibi Veero. The soldiers found the banquet hall with the confections. They were feasting on the rest of her wedding sweets in the Guru's house. They were celebrating, shouting that they had taken the city! That

night in Chabaal, the villagers prepared a small wedding ceremony for the daughter of Guru Hargobind. Guru Hargobind's forces defeated the Emperor's armies, even though they were severely outnumbered. **But the battle was the start of a war. *Don't let your rage blind you to the One. The One who lives in everyone.*** In that famous story, Guru Nanak blessed the closed-hearted to stay where they were, to confine their cruelty, and the open-hearted to disperse compassion throughout the world. **Now faced with perpetual war, they were leaving behind their home**, the glory of Harmandir Sahib, and the great city their ancestors had built. Bibi Veero flicked the reins and rode to the head of the caravan, where a gold palanquin carried the Aadi Granth, their sacred poetry. She hummed Sohila. They carried their ancestors' wisdom with them. Guru Hargobind settled his family in the north of Punjab. Surrounded by thick wilderness, the land was difficult for any army to reach. On this misted northern land, Guru Hargobind built a new city and named it Kiratpur, *the Home of Praise*. Baba Gurditta's eldest son, Dheer Mal, stole the original edition of the Aadi Granth, the one that Guru Arjan had prepared with his own hand. Guru Hargobind said to his grandson, "In a world of violence, do less harm." The people needed a leader who held fast to the sage in the warrior. Six years later, Guru Hargobind departed this world with a warrior's send-off, and his fourteen-year-old grandson became Guru Har Rai, seventh in the House of Nanak. **Guru Har Rai made good on his vow to minimize harm.** Guru Har Rai did not send his warriors—2,200 Sikhs—into protracted battle. Instead, **he took his family and retainers deeper into the foothills** of the Himalayas, to a small obscure village. Over the next few years, the manji system that began with twenty-two masands under Guru Amar Das expanded to 360 districts across Punjab. The Emperor asked: Will you help us? Guru Har Rai lifted the hem of his jama and went to his great storehouse of medicines. "And so, we return cruelty with good." They saved the boy, heir to the Empire that had tormented them, without the expectation of anything in return. At thirty-one years old, Guru Har Rai was preparing for his succession. "The rarest plants in my storehouse will not cure me," he said as he gazed at the horizon. The choice of Guruship was by virtue but also hereditary: It was Bibi Bhani's wish that any hardship be absorbed by their family.

#### • JOURNEY TO KIRATPUR

**The Sikh ancestors chose to sing, no matter how dark it got. In Sohila, death is framed as a wedding day, a return to the Beloved, and the Oneness that always is.** A mystical song for practical courage. A way the sage prepares the warrior. Long ago, my Sikh sisters nicknamed me Veero, because it meant warrior. She was the first Sikh woman ancestor on record who was trained in both the sacred poetry and the art of defense. She was a true sant sipahi, a sage warrior. Rage is a healthy, important response to trauma and oppression. Especially if we are women or people of color or otherwise marginalized. The solution is not to suppress our rage, or to let it explode, but to process our rage in safe containers, like many of our ancestors did—singing, drumming, shaking, sobbing, dancing, running, whirling, wailing. *What information does my rage carry?* **The aim of divine rage is not vengeance but to reorder the world.** Rage, when consciously harnessed, is a force that connects us with our power to fight for others, and for ourselves.

In both my personal and activist life, **I have had to work to see the humanity in my opponents.** Now, I understand that my rage is loaded with information and energy. Only when I am safe enough and brave enough, I begin to wonder about my opponents and feel a desire to understand them. There are no monsters in this world, only human beings who are wounded. If my opponent starts wondering about me in turn, then a portal opens: A process of deep listening begins. In seeing the wound in our opponents, we do not relinquish our commitment to justice; we produce the possibility of reconciliation. It must have taken great courage for Bibi Veero to choose to see the humanity of the Emperor and his son; that act of love did not yield reconciliation in her lifetime. **But it left a pearl to empower the next generation.** So, too, I may not live to see the results of my labor in this lifetime. I want to see the birth of America as a healthy multiracial democracy where we see no stranger. I want to see our global community embrace coexistence so that war and genocide become relics of the past. There is little in oral tradition about Guru Har Rai, the seventh Sikh Guru. There was no major military action while he was Guru, and therefore, according to most history books, no standout accomplishments. Yet perhaps the greatest deed one can perform is to keep people safe. Let the sage guide the warrior.

There is no need to annihilate your rage, or be ashamed of it—or let it consume you. Your rage connects you with your ability to fight for what matters. **Listen. Notice what your rage is teaching you. You may be ready to see the wound in your opponent.** Invite the wisest part of you to step forth. Perhaps your labor does not require your opponent's participation at all. Let the wisest part of you lead you to the brave next step. **The sage prepares the warrior.**

## **PART 8: GRIEVE TOGETHER**

### **• The Plague: The Story of Mata Krishan and Guru Harkrishan**

She needed to focus on the only task that mattered: to care for her five-year-old son, Guru Harkrishan. “We all have wisdom inside,” Guru Harkrishan whispered to his mother. “That’s the real miracle!” Mata Krishan kissed her son’s forehead. News of the child-Guru who dispelled sorrow spread through the city. Large crowds of sick people flocked to the palace gates for an audience. Mata Krishan spaced out the sessions so that her son could run and play in the garden before he sat very still again, holding people’s hands and offering them medicines. She smiled as she imagined his legacy: the sage warrior who healed people with his hands. He wore a cotton satchel across his chest, filled with bottles of oils and herbs. He wanted to go to the people who needed these medicines the most, the ones who were too sick to come to him. Guru Harkrishan and his attendants filled wooden carts with medicines and food. He planned to take the practice of langar out into the streets where it was most needed. He was a sage who saw no stranger.

He was burning. She called out to the guard posted at her door. A doctor came and examined him. The child-Guru was stricken by the epidemic that ailed the city. The protocol was containment. Guru Harkrishan, eighth in the House of Nanak, **the one**

**whose sight dispelled all sorrow**, had departed this world at eight years old. *Who was the Guru now?* Pain rushed back into Mata Krishan's body—all the grief she had pushed down since her husband's passing. She had built a fortress around her heart to survive, but now her grief was a torrent, and she thought it would drown her.

• **JOURNEY TO KIRATPUR, CONTINUED...**

The ashes of Guru Hargobind and Guru Har Rai, the sixth and seventh Gurus, were spread here. In 1664, Mata Krishan brought her eight-year-old son Guru Harkrishan's ashes from faraway Delhi, so that he could return to *this* river. There is no afterlife in the Sikh tradition. No heaven and hell. Those realms come from a theology of good versus evil. There is only One. **We are part of Oneness, ever-unfolding, and so is everyone we have ever known and loved. Death is a return to the Oneness that always is.** A return to the energy and matter and mystery of the universe. We are part of that universe. The wisdom of ancestors, across time and tradition, is that grieving must not be done in isolation. **To bear the unbearable, we must grieve together.** This is especially true when we lose someone suddenly, violently, or unjustly. There is no fixing grief, only bearing it. In Sikh wisdom, the Divine is not any one thing. The One is *everything*. The Beloved is the sun and stars and earth and rivers. The Beloved is the mud and the lotus that blossoms from the mud. The Beloved is the creatures and their sweat and blood and dreams, and the tissue that connects all human beings on earth, and the galaxies spinning in the universes. The Beloved is past and future and present ever-unfolding. In an era of relentless crisis, I find "self-care" to be inadequate. No body can bear this much pain alone. I need *community* care: a sangat of sisters and brothers and kin willing to hold the grief together. You have only to say with your presence: ***You are grieving, but you are not grieving alone.*** We die to who we once were. **We are remade in the grief, rebirthed into something new.** We can remember Guru Harkrishan and his mother, Mata Krishan, together—his courage to grieve with others, and her courage to grieve him.

Your grief is not a sign of your weakness. It's a sign of how deeply you love. **A sage befriends grief; a warrior has the courage to grieve together.** Let some sparkles fall on you and become part of your body. **The sage embraces love in all forms;** the warrior lets that love make them brave.

**PART 9: CHOOSE COURAGE**

• **The Sacrifice: The Story of Mata Gujri and Guru Tegh Bahadur**

The mantle of the Sikh world was the last thing Gujri ever imagined at their doorstep. Bibi Veero rushed into their lives with her fiery will and asked them to choose between quiet comfort and a world of uncertainty. To stay in the freedom she had worked so hard to find, or risk it all to stand up to an empire? Tegh Bahadur—the youngest child of Guru Hargobind, who became the ninth Guru in the house of Nanak. After the ceremony, Guru Tegh Bahadur and his family traveled, looking for a place to establish the new center of the Sikh world. On their way east, imperial soldiers stopped their caravan on



the outskirts of Delhi and arrested Guru Tegh Bahadur. Ram Rai had him arrested for claiming to be the rightful heir to the Guruship after the child-Guru passed. Emperor Aurangzeb's reign of terror was under way—demolitions of temples, taxation of those who did not follow imperial order, detentions and interrogations and executions of anyone who resisted the regime. Gujri was forty-two years old and with child. She birthed her son in the wintertime and named him Gobind Rai. Her heart filled with hope: *This is the place we will raise our son and lead our people.* “Anandpur,” she breathed. *The City of Joy.* A full moon lit the mountainside and cast a shadow over the mass of people that moved toward them. They were pandits, Hindu priests, and they looked like they were about to collapse. They came a great distance on foot to ask for his help. “Will you protect us?” The stars had witnessed it all: the rise and fall of empires, the birth and death of civilizations, the prayers of people whose dreams were lost to time. Emperor Aurangzeb was one of a thousand faces of terror; his destruction had played out many times before. The next morning, Kirpa Ram and the pandits waited in the Guru's court. Guru Tegh Bahadur stepped forth in a royal turban and blue warrior's dress. He set out for Delhi himself. Before leaving, he placed a coconut and five paisay before his nine-year-old son and bowed. He sang:

**Do not incite fear in others and do not let anyone incite fear in you.**

The Emperor's armies forced him into an iron cage, imprisoned him in Delhi and tortured him for five days. They demanded allegiance to the Emperor and to his brand of Islam, but he refused. The Guru's three companions—Bhai Mati Das, Dayal Das, and Sati Das—were killed in front of him: The first was sawn in two, the second boiled alive, the third burnt alive. Guru Tegh Bahadur was beheaded in one blow. His lips recited praise of the Beloved even as his head rolled onto the earth. They were the words of his grandfather Guru Arjan: **Your will is sweet to me.**

Mata Ganga, too, had a son she had to shield. A son who would go on to don two swords and grow up to fight an empire and name his only daughter Veero, *warrior*, and his youngest Tegh Bahadur, *the Sword of Courage*. Guru Tegh Bahadur was the martyr **who gave his life for people who weren't his own, and, in doing so, made all people his people!** Gobind Rai poured his father's ashes into the River Satluj. Mata Gujri found two women waiting for her on the riverbank in Kiratpur. Mata Krishan, draped in her forever-white dupatta, stood in the same spot where she had poured her son's ashes into the river. Guru Harkrishan would have been nineteen by now. “I chose this,” said Mata Gujri. “This was *my* choice. No matter what came.” She thought: **The Guru made his body a shield.** *I will make my body a shield around my son.* Gobind Rai prepared to be anointed before all the people: Guru Gobind, tenth in the House of Nanak.

#### • JOURNEY TO ANANDPUR

We wove our way up to the mountain city Anandpur Sahib, the second-holiest city in the Sikh world after Amritsar, high in the foothills of the Himalayas, founded by Guru Tegh Bahadur. “Anandpur is named after joy!” I said. Today Sikhs remember Guru Tegh Bahadur as the second Guru martyred in Sikh history, for people who were not his own. To this day, he is known as “Srishti di Chadar!” *Shield of Humanity!* It was an act of deep solidarity. His sacrifice came from Guru Nanak's call to see all people as One. **Deep solidarity is rooted in love.** *I show up for you because I choose to see you as my*

*sister, my brother, my kin.* When Sharat can look after the children, I rise early in the morning, meet my parents outside, and we walk through the wetlands together, the stars spread over us. If I can go outside for just a few seconds and look at the sky, I can touch the sage in me. Tending to beauty is not escape: It is how we create the conditions within us to choose courage. “Only *you* know, deep inside, what it means for you to be brave with your life in this moment.” **If you wish to be brave with your life, you have only to ask: What does love demand of me?** And keep choosing that, even when it’s hard. **When we choose courage as a way of being, we know what freedom is,** even if we do not live to see it in the world, because we know it within ourselves. **Choosing courage is the most pleasurable way to be on this earth—alive, awake, and true to our heart.** Ultimately, courage is not a calculation of the mind: It is a choice of the heart. You must go to the sovereign space inside you and ask: *What does love want me to do?* Today you may be the one to receive the visitor. Tomorrow you may be the one to seek help.

Sage Warrior, Choose Courage... Your fear carries information. What does love demand? Listen. **The solution is not silence; it’s more solidarity.** Who can stand with you? Sometimes courageous action will be in the quiet contours of your life and relationships. Other times, it will be loud and public. Both matter. **The key is to make courage a practice.**

## **PART 10: BECOME VICTORY**

### **• The Surrender: The Story of Mata Gujri and Guru Gobind Singh**

The Guru fortified the city with a chain of fortresses like a necklace around them: Kesgarh, Lohgarh, Fatehgarh, Holgarh, and Anandgarh. He created alliances, marrying three times, and his partners were revered by the people. The court of Guru Gobind, tenth in the House of Nanak, was glorious. Before Mata Gujri spread thousands of people, more than she had ever seen in one place in her life—warriors and farmers, merchants and musicians, and families with children on their laps. They had all come, at the call of Guru Gobind, tenth in the House of Nanak, on this Vaisakhi Day. He called out, *Who among you will give your head for the Guru?* Slowly, a figure in the heart of the crowd rose to his feet. All eyes turned to him. “My name is *Daya Ram*.” *Who is ready to give your head for the Guru?* A lone figure at the front of the crowd stood. “Dharam Das,” he announced himself. He bellowed out again. *Who is ready to give your head for the Guru?* Another stood and introduced himself as Himmat Rai. Another man stepped forward. His name was Sahib Chand. Standing before the people were all five Sikhs. They were alive. But they had changed. Guru Gobind announced, *My five beloved ones.* The crowd gazed up in awe at the scene. This was not annihilation; it was rebirth. As they drank, Guru Gobind asked the people to **shed their old names that signaled caste and clan, and take on new royal names.** They would henceforth be known as *Singh and Kaur*. Singh means lion or warrior; Kaur means lioness, princess, or sovereign woman warrior. “Embrace one creed and **leave behind the hierarchies between you and mix freely with one another,**” Guru Gobind declared. “Drink from

the same cup. Eat from the same vessel. Feel no contempt for one another.” The Guru lifted his voice: ***All of humankind is one caste, recognize each other as one.***

The combined forces of the hill chiefs and the Mughal Empire waged all-out war on Anandpur. Guru Gobind Singh defended Anandpur valiantly, but the hillmen and the armies of the Mughal Empire eventually encircled the mountain city. Anandpur was under siege. Morale in the fort plummeted in the months that followed. Shortly after the desertion of the forty warriors, a message arrived from Emperor Aurangzeb. “Aurangzeb offers us safe passage out,” Mata Gujri told the children, “if we leave the city forever.” It was an ambush. The soldiers shackled Mata Gujri and the boys at the ankles and dragged them into a cold, stone tower. Mata Gujri watched as the children were once again asked to renounce their allegiance to their father and ancestors, to swear they were not Sikh anymore, and bow down to the Emperor as their only chance for freedom. Fateh stood on his toes to see his grandmother one last time, and Zoraver hugged his brother and began to close his eyes. The last brick slid into the gap - and they were gone. Mata Gujri closed her eyes, and her body lifted into the air. The wind rushed past as she fell into the heavens and into the stars.

#### • JOURNEY FROM ANANDPUR TO FATEHGARH

When Guru Gobind Singh learned what had happened to them, he wrote a letter to Emperor Aurangzeb. *You killed my family, you lay ruin to my city, you pursue me in the night. But you broke your oath to Allah. So, who does victory belong to?* **Guru Gobind Singh redefined victory—not what we produce but *who we are*.** On our travels, we decided to retrace the steps of Guru Gobind Singh’s youngest sons. We began in Anandpur and ended in Fatehgarh—from “the city of joy” to “the home of victory.” On Vaisakhi day of 1699 Guru Gobind Singh established the Khalsa as a spiritual community and concretized the sage warrior path. In the Vaisakhi story, the five beloved ones who volunteered that day, were all men. *Why weren’t any of them women?* The women ancestors in these stories gave their heads without title or recognition. As I hugged my daughter, I wondered: *Could they have imagined us?* These women gave their life and labor for a future they would not live to see. **The choice to love that deeply is - a surrender of one’s old identity and an embrace of a new way of being,** where you are no longer singular but multiple. The Vaisakhi story is also universal: It is a way to think about what it means for *all* of us to love and serve as sage warriors. It is an invitation to rebirth. After we visited the birthplace of the Khalsa, our next stop was the fort where Guru Gobind Singh’s family lived during the yearlong siege of Anandpur in 1704. Our next stop was the River Sarsa, where the Guru’s family and warriors were ambushed the night of December 20, 1704. “This is the River of Betrayal,” I said. “Here is where the Guru’s youngest sons were separated from their parents.” We reached the town of Sarhind, the place where Mata Gujri and her grandchildren were imprisoned in a cold tower. Baba Zoraver and Baba Fateh were bricked alive here on December 26, 1704. After their execution, the town was renamed after Fateh and became Fatehgarh, *the Place of Victory*. I realized that my children were almost the same age as Baba Fateh and Baba Zoraver had been when they were executed. This story has happened many times before. It’s happening now. Every day, we see promises of safe passage broken. Every day, we watch children killed in a rubble of bricks. Every day, we die of a broken heart. A thousand Fatehs and Zoravers. And every

day, we have a choice: Who do we wish to be in the story? *Are you ready to let go of this lifetime?* Each night, I practice dying. Each morning, when I wake up, it is a gift. A rebirth. I wake with my children and we say to each other:

I get to be alive.

I get to be alive today.

**I get to be alive today with you.**

Sage Warrior, Become Victory... **Who you are—not what you do—defines victory.** What was the hardest part of this lifetime? Notice how you overcame that hardship to get to the end of the day. Are you willing to embrace what you did in this life as enough?

## **PART 11: EMBRACE REBIRTH**

### **• The New: The Story of Mai Bhago, Mata Sundari, and the Guru Granth Sahib**

As the imperial army pursued Guru Gobind Singh across Punjab, the song of divine love he sang in the dark wilderness spread from village to village. “I am going to the Guru,” declared Bhago for all to hear. The people were frozen on the spot. Her brothers sighed. Her husband looked at his hands. Only her father held her gaze. “You will return to the battlefield.” Bhago addressed the men. “I will lead you.” The forty men who had abandoned the Guru vowed to ride with the woman warrior, and follow her into battle. A conch blew. The *Khalsa’s conch*. They had won. Bhago was stunned. Her forty warriors had inflicted so much damage that the imperial army retreated. Guru Gobind Singh was safe. The Guru took her back to camp and dressed her wounds. Bhago was the lone survivor of the Battle of Muktsar. Guru Gobind Singh told the people her story: the woman warrior who turned deserters into fighters, who saved the life of the Guru and the life of the Khalsa. From then on, she was honored by the name Mai Bhago. She donned her warrior’s dress and asked to become the Guru’s bodyguard. Mata Sundari had never seen anyone like her. A woman who knew how to sing and fight, mourn and live, weep and lead. “How?” asked Mata Sundari. Mai Bhago replied, *Ever-rising spirit—even in darkness, ever-rising joy*. The Guru set out to produce from memory the Aadi Granth that was lost in the river, with the help of Bhai Mani Singh. An assassin entered his tent and stabbed Guru Gobind Singh, and he breathed his last. “The Aadi Granth,” she whispered. *The sacred canon of musical poetry*. When Guru Gobind Singh created the Khalsa, he transmitted his sovereignty into the people. Now he transferred authority into the Guru Granth Sahib, the music and poetry that returned people to the wisdom of Oneness. Mata Sundari led the Sikh world for the next forty years. She maintained that **the everlasting Guru was not to be a person, but the Guru Granth Sahib, the fount of ancestral wisdom that lives in all of us.**

### **• Journey Home**

I have always loved the story of Mai Bhago. She was **the first Sikh woman ancestor who was not defined in tradition by her relationship to the men in her life**. She was not the mother of, or daughter of, or wife of the Guru. She was just Mai Bhago. A

woman who devoted her life to the path. When she led the forty deserters back into battle, she became the one she was waiting for. Yet Mata Sundari insisted that **the greatest authority on earth was not a person outside us, but the wisdom embodied within us**. I want to meet apocalyptic times in the spirit of Chardi Kala, ever-rising joy even in darkness. **I want to walk the path of a sage warrior—awake to Oneness, committed to love, ready to serve.**

When you witness suffering, **choose courage**. Go outside and let the beauty of the earth breathe into you, and ask: “Who do I want to be?” Do what love demands. And when the world feels like it’s ending, **embrace rebirth**.

### **EPILOGUE: BEGAMPURA**

A year after our trip to Punjab, I signed up to go on Kavi’s third-grade field trip to the Los Angeles River. We drove to a park in Glendale. All the children gathered on the grass. “When you think of the LA River, what do you think of?” the tour guide asked the children. “Dirty!” “Concrete!” “A trickle!” “Is it even a river?” “The LA River is thousands of years old,” explained the tour guide. It was called Paayme Paxaayt by the Tongva people who have lived on this land for thousands of years. The first accounts we have of the river describe it as a lush paradise filled with wildlife. The river was ancient and sacred, and the source of all life. But it was also wild and temperamental. It would meander widely, sometimes miles away from its earlier bed. Every few years, the river flooded, leaving wide swaths of destruction in its path. It turned the land into marshes and swamps for miles. In the early 1900s, settlers who built up the town had had enough of the sudden floods. In 1938, they began to pour concrete on the river. Literally fifty-one miles of concrete all up and down the river. Everything around the river began to die—the trees, and wildlife, and earth. There are sacred rivers right where we are. The sacred is all around us. And even when we think we have destroyed it all, we haven’t. Today there are sections of the LA River where life is growing back: There is rebirth. In a time when we taste ash every day, we can focus only on the destruction, or we can choose to participate in rebirth. The water connects us all. **Begampura means city without sorrow. It is a place without caste, poverty, or injustice. We can birth Begampura right here and now, starting within us.**

## ANCESTOR TREE

