Three Lessons of Revolutionary Love in a Time of Rage
by ted.com

(Sikh Prayer) Waheguru Ji Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh.

There is a moment on the birthing table that feels like dying. The body in labor stretches to form an impossible circle. The contractions are less than a minute apart. Wave after wave, there is barely time to breathe. The medical term: "transition," because "feels like dying" is not scientific enough.

(Laughter)

I checked.

During my transition, my husband was pressing down on my sacrum to keep my body from breaking. My father was waiting behind the hospital curtain ... more like hiding. But my mother was at my side. The midwife said she could see the baby’s head, but all I could feel was a ring of fire. I turned to my mother and said, "I can’t," but she was already pouring my grandfather’s prayer in my ear.

(Sikh Prayer) "Tati Vao Na Lagi, Par Brahm Sarnai." "The hot winds cannot touch you."

"You are brave," she said. "You are brave." And suddenly I saw my grandmother standing behind my mother. And her mother behind her. And her mother behind her. A long line of women who had pushed through the fire before me. I took a breath; I pushed; my son was born. As I held him in my arms, shaking and sobbing from the rush of oxytocin that flooded my body, my mother was already preparing to feed me. Nursing her baby as I nursed mine. My mother had never stopped laboring for me, from my birth to my son’s birth. She already knew what I was just beginning to name. That love is more than a rush of feeling that happens to us if we’re lucky. Love is sweet labor. Fierce. Bloody. Imperfect. Life-giving. A choice we make over and over again.

I am an American civil rights activist who has labored with communities of color since September 11, fighting unjust policies by the state and acts of hate in the street. And in our most painful moments, in the face of the fires of injustice, I have seen labors of love deliver us. My life on the frontlines of fighting hate in America has been a study in what we’ve come to call revolutionary love. Revolutionary love is the choice to enter into labor for others who do not look like us, for our opponents who hurt us and for ourselves.
In this era of enormous rage, when the fires are burning all around us, I believe that revolutionary love is the call of our times.

Now, if you cringe when people say, "Love is the answer ..." I do, too.

(Laughter)

I am a lawyer.

(Laughter) So let me show you how I came to see love as a force for social justice through three lessons.

My first encounter with hate was in the schoolyard. I was a little girl growing up in California, where my family has lived and farmed for a century. When I was told that I would go to hell because I was not Christian, called a "black dog" because I was not white, I ran to my grandfather's arms. Papa Ji dried my tears -- gave me the words of Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith. "I see no stranger," said Nanak. "I see no enemy." My grandfather taught me that I could choose to see all the faces I meet and wonder about them. And if I wonder about them, then I will listen to their stories even when it's hard. I will refuse to hate them even when they hate me. I will even vow to protect them when they are in harm's way. That's what it means to be a Sikh: S-i-k-h. To walk the path of a warrior saint. He told me the story of the first Sikh woman warrior, Mai Bhago. The story goes there were 40 soldiers who abandoned their post during a great battle against an empire. They returned to a village, and this village woman turned to them and said, "You will not abandon the fight. You will return to the fire, and I will lead you." She mounted a horse. She donned a turban. And with sword in her hand and fire in her eyes, she led them where no one else would. She became the one she was waiting for. "Don't abandon your posts, my dear." My grandfather saw me as a warrior. I was a little girl in two long braids, but I promised.

Fast-forward, I'm 20 years old, watching the Twin Towers fall, the horror stuck in my throat, and then a face flashes on the screen: a brown man with a turban and beard, and I realize that our nation's new enemy looks like my grandfather. And these turbans meant to represent our commitment to serve, cast us as terrorists. And Sikhs became targets of hate, alongside our Muslim brothers and sisters. The first person killed in a hate crime after September 11 was a Sikh man, standing in front of his gas station in Arizona. Balbir Singh Sodhi was a family friend I called "uncle," murdered by a man who called himself "patriot." He is the first of many to have been killed, but his story -- our stories barely made the evening news. I didn't know what to do, but I had a camera, I faced the fire. I went to his widow, Joginder Kaur. I wept with her, and I asked her, "What would you like to tell the people of America?" I was expecting blame. But she looked at me and said, "Tell them, Thank you. 3,000 Americans came to my husband's memorial. They did not know me, but they wept with me. Tell them, Thank you." Thousands of people showed up, because unlike national news, the local media told Balbir Uncle's story. Stories can create the wonder that turns strangers into sisters and brothers.

This was my first lesson in revolutionary love -- that stories can help us see no stranger. And so... my camera became my sword. My law degree became my shield. My film partner became my husband.

I didn't expect that.
And we became part of a generation of advocates working with communities facing their own fires. I worked inside of supermax prisons, on the shores of Guantanamo, at the sites of mass shootings when the blood was still fresh on the ground. And every time, for 15 years, with every film, with every lawsuit, with every campaign, I thought we were making the nation safer for the next generation.

And then my son was born. In a time ... when hate crimes against our communities are at the highest they have been since 9/11. When right-wing nationalist movements are on the rise around the globe and have captured the presidency of the United States. When white supremacists march in our streets, torches high, hoods off. And I have to reckon with the fact that my son is growing up in a country more dangerous for him than the one I was given. And there will be moments when I cannot protect him when he is seen as a terrorist... just as black people in America are still seen as criminal. Brown people, illegal. Queer and trans people, immoral. Indigenous people, savage. Women and girls as property. And when they fail to see our bodies as some mother’s child, it becomes easier to ban us, detain us, deport us, imprison us, sacrifice us for the illusion of security.

I wanted to abandon my post. But I made a promise, so I returned to the gas station where Balbir Singh Sodhi was killed 15 years to the day. I set down a candle in the spot where he bled to death. His brother, Rana, turned to me and said, "Nothing has changed."

And I asked, "Who have we not yet tried to love?"

We decided to call the murderer in prison. The phone rings. My heart is beating in my ears. I hear the voice of Frank Roque, a man who once said ... "I’m going to go out and shoot some towel heads. We should kill their children, too." And every emotional impulse in me says, "I can’t." It becomes an act of will to wonder. "Why?" I ask. "Why did you agree to speak with us?"

Frank says, "I’m sorry for what happened, but I’m also sorry for all the people killed on 9/11." He fails to take responsibility. I become angry to protect Rana, but Rana is still wondering about Frank -- listening -- responds.

"Frank, this is the first time I’m hearing you say that you feel sorry."

And Frank -- Frank says, "Yes. I am sorry for what I did to your brother. One day when I go to heaven to be judged by God, I will ask to see your brother. And I will hug him. And I will ask him for forgiveness."

And Rana says ... "We already forgave you."

Forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgiveness is freedom from hate. Because when we are free from hate, we see the ones who hurt us not as monsters, but as people who themselves are wounded, who themselves feel threatened, who don’t know what else to do with their insecurity but to hurt us, to pull the trigger, or cast the boat, or pass the policy aimed at us. But if some of us begin to wonder about them, listen even to their stories, we learn that participation in oppression comes at a cost. It cuts them off from their own capacity to love.

This was my second lesson in revolutionary love. We love our opponents when we tend the wound in them. Tending to the wound is not healing them -- only they can do that. Just tending to it allows us to see our opponents: the terrorist, the fanatic, the
demagogue. They've been radicalized by cultures and policies that we together can change. I looked back on all of our campaigns, and I realized that any time we fought bad actors, we didn't change very much. But when we chose to wield our swords and shields to battle bad systems, that's when we saw change. I have worked on campaigns that released hundreds of people out of solitary confinement, reformed a corrupt police department, changed federal hate crimes policy. The choice to love our opponents is moral and pragmatic, and it opens up the previously unimaginable possibility of reconciliation.

But remember ... it took 15 years to make that phone call. I had to tend to my own rage and grief first. Loving our opponents requires us to love ourselves. Gandhi, King, Mandela -- they taught a lot about how to love others and opponents. They didn't talk a lot about loving ourselves. This is a feminist intervention.

Yes. Yes.

Because for too long have women and women of color been told to suppress their rage, suppress their grief in the name of love and forgiveness. But when we suppress our rage, that's when it hardens into hate directed outward, but usually directed inward. But mothering has taught me that all of our emotions are necessary. Joy is the gift of love. Grief is the price of love. Anger is the force that protects it.

This was my third lesson in revolutionary love. We love ourselves when we breathe through the fire of pain and refuse to let it harden into hate. That's why I believe that love must be practiced in all three directions to be revolutionary. Loving just ourselves feels good, but it's narcissism.

Loving only our opponents is self-loathing. Loving only others is ineffective. This is where a lot of our movements live right now. We need to practice all three forms of love. And so, how do we practice it? Ready?

Number one ... in order to love others, see no stranger. We can train our eyes to look upon strangers on the street, on the subway, on the screen, and say in our minds, "Brother, sister, aunt, uncle." And when we say this, what we are saying is, "You are a part of me I do not yet know. I choose to wonder about you. I will listen for your stories and pick up a sword when you are in harm's way."

And so, number two: in order to love our opponents, tend the wound. Can you see the wound in the ones who hurt you? Can you wonder even about them? And if this question sends panic through your body, then your most revolutionary act is to wonder, listen and respond to your own needs.

Number three: in order to love ourselves, breathe and push. When we are pushing into the fires in our bodies or the fires in the world, we need to be breathing together in order to be pushing together. How are you breathing each day? Who are you breathing with? Because ... when executive orders and news of violence hits our bodies hard, sometimes less than a minute apart, it feels like dying. In those moments, my son places his hand on my cheek and says, "Dance time, mommy?" And we dance. In the darkness, we breathe and we dance. Our family becomes a pocket of revolutionary love. Our joy is an act of moral resistance. How are you protecting your joy each day? Because in joy we see even darkness with new eyes.

And so the mother in me asks, what if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but
the darkness of the womb? What if our future is not dead, but still waiting to be born? What if this is our great transition? Remember the wisdom of the midwife. "Breathe," she says. And then -- "push." Because if we don’t push, we will die. If we don’t breathe, we will die.

Revolutionary love requires us to breathe and push through the fire with a warrior’s heart and a saint’s eyes so that one day... one day you will see my son as your own and protect him when I am not there. You will tend to the wound in the ones who want to hurt him. You will teach him how to love himself because you love yourself. You will whisper in his ear, as I whisper in yours, "You are brave." You are brave.

Thank you.