



Gathering Around the Light – 20 years later

“Arson, Forgiveness, and Healing in a Post 9-11 World”

at Gobind Sadan, USA, 13 November, 2021



Twenty years ago, amidst a scene of hate-inspired destruction, people were touched, even transformed by the power of Babaji's message of forgiveness and the spiritual power present at GSUSA, embodied by the miracle of Siri Guru Granth Sahib ji, not only surviving the fire, but triumphing over the hatred. It's Light shining through the darkness.

Ralph Singh



People gathered to pray with us and recognize the healing power present.

The young daughter of a local minister exclaimed "Mommy, God must really be present here" when she heard the story (as quoted by Beliefnet). And that is still the story of Gobind Sadan USA, twenty years later that everyone who came experienced. God is really present here. Even those who had come for the first time, shared, "it feels like I'm standing on sacred ground.'

When the media had approached me (RS) the day after in the shadow of the burned out shell of what was home to our fledgling community, and asked whether we would rebuild the temple on this site.



Babaji put words on my lips that were carried around the world by the mainstream media, “this offers us the opportunity to rebuild a community based on love and understanding so this kind of senseless act is avoided, and when that happens, the temple will automatically be rebuilt.”

GOBIND SADAN, USA

Statement of Forgiveness

12-14-01

The following is a statement of forgiveness offered by **Baba Virsa Singh**, the founder of Gobind Sadan, transmitted through Ralph Singh for Gobind Sadan, USA. This statement was read at the Sheriff's press conference in response to the arrests of the 3 youths that set fire to our place of worship in mistaken retaliation for the September 11th attacks on our country.

"We have offered a prayer of forgiveness that the ignorance or hatred that led to this senseless act be taken away.

However there is a distinction between forgiving a person and forgiving the act they committed

There is no doubt that the act was terribly wrong – no matter what the motivation. Laws exist to hold people accountable for their actions – and we will not interfere in the process of law.

Yet we know God is all forgiving to those who seek His forgiveness. And the Sikh tradition like all others calls on us to forgive others (forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us) so they may seek forgiveness from God and learn not to commit acts of violence or hatred again.

For if we show hatred to those who act against us then how will they ever understand that God whom they can't see is forgiving. And out of our hatred we will only perpetuate the cycle of violence that exists in the world. By forgiving our enemies we have the opportunity to create peace."

Though the building was burned prayers from Guru Granth Sahib, the holy scripture which survived the fire, were being recited even as the announcements were made. Those prayers were for peace and love for all humanity so the hatred and ignorance which spawns these terrible acts will be overcome by love and forgiveness."

It is ironic that Sikhs would be attacked for the Sikh turban which distinguishes them stands for everyone's right to pray publicly or in private according to their own beliefs without fear of persecution. It also stands for Truth, Justice, and the values and character that are basic to America and all society, and is a standard to defend the rights of the poor and downtrodden. In India, Baba Virsa Singh ji celebrates all religious holidays at Gobind Sadan to teach people to respect each other and develops land to overcome poverty.

Just last month (2001) Gobind Sadan, USA held an interfaith service called "Preparing for Peace" to educate people about how to overcome differences and bring peace from different traditions.



And that's what happened. We saw the building rise and saw volunteers from many faiths and backgrounds join in the effort.



Tonight, we witnessed the Power unite a community! It was as much a celebration of those present and anticipation of what could and would grow out of Babaji's vision of God's House without Walls

People were attracted by what they'd heard and wanted to see whether it still exists.

These stories and teachings exist in all our traditions – love they neighbor, forgive us our trespasses, and in the words of Guru Nanak Dev ji whose birthday, Sikhs are celebrating around the world, "Everyone is part of our community, I see no one as an 'other'"

It's what faith is based on. But people are desperate to know whether faith can still be relied on in a world so divided and filled with hatred.

Can the power of love really still bring a diverse group of people together in community?

Last night the resounding answer was "YES!"



As 50 or more people, most of whom had never met each other, most of whom had never been to Gobind Sadan before sat transfixed as Joginder Kaur joined by Manjeet Aunty, Renu, Beeba Kanwal, Suresh Rijhwani, Jaspal and Satnam Kalra opened with Nam uniting everyone and recognizing our spiritual unity.



And as they heard the words from Suresh Rijhwani, “Welcome – this is God’s House Without Walls – we welcome everyone regardless of your background or religious tradition,” and the more they looked around and the more they listened to the talks and testimonies, the more the layers of worldly titles and positions fell away and we really became one community.



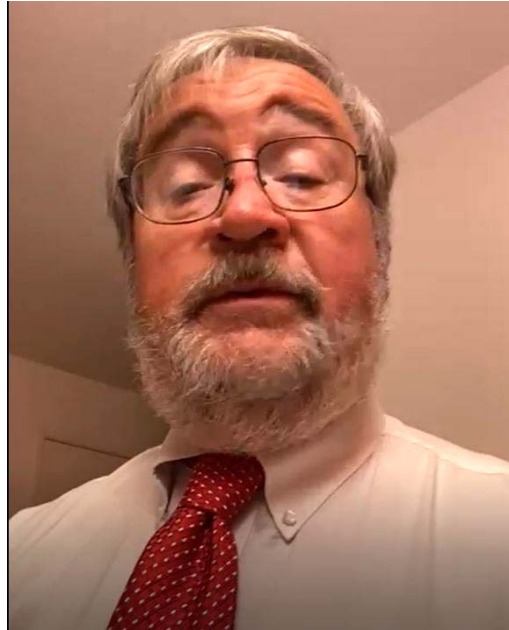
“At a time when our country and the world is deeply divided, let us gather and celebrate our shared values and commitment to making a better world for future generations, and look to the power of forgiveness, as taught in all our traditions, to bring much needed peace.” said Ralph Singh.

As Ralph led the gathering through the key landmarks of the story of forgiveness and healing, he shared the testimonials sent by those who might be considered unlikely candidates.



The ATF (leading Federal Law Enforcement Agency) **Senior Special Agent Henry Meyer served as the lead federal investigator** on the joint state and federal investigation. Special Agent Meyer who now serves with the elite ATF National Response Team in New Orleans, Louisiana, was hoping to join us in person but last minute changes forced him to send a video clip. Agent Meyer has stated that the level of forgiveness and healing shared by the community relative to this event has had a significant impact on his personal life and career. He was excited to return and celebrate with us in what he believes is one of the most successful examples of healing and community transformation following a hate crime.

In his brief message, he first expressed amazement that Guru Granth Sahib had survived, and then mentioned how the level of forgiveness allowed him to experience the teachings of his own Christian faith - "as a devout Episcopalian, I have always heard the words, 'love thy neighbor as thyself,' but it wasn't until I witnessed what the Sikhs have shown with the forgiveness in this case that I really experienced it."



Don Todd – the former Ass't District attorney (prosecuting attorney) on the case shared how Gobind Sadan's overwhelming concern, rather than retribution, was for the future welfare of the young arsonists and for their being able to rebuild their lives after they had served their sentences. Our lobbying for forgiveness greatly reduced their sentences. He went on to say that this has made him a better person, lawyer and judge. In his closing comments he reflected on the divisiveness in the world today. "Americans were united (after 9-11); however that unity was often expressed, as here, in hatred and violence against those perceived to be enemies of our country. Today, we are anything but "united"- socially, politically, economically and in so many other ways."

"If we are to have hope for our future, it is necessary to apply the lessons from these events and from the teaching of the Sikhs, and to live in peace, harmony and forgiveness."

Cassie Phillips, the young arsonist who has transformed her life with the support of our forgiveness. She is now a successful travel nurse and parent. Unable to get time off, she sent a letter (here are some excerpts)

"I can't thank this community enough for all the forgiveness and love given. Never in a million years would I have thought so many miracles and blessings could come from such negative acts. This loving kind community didn't only forgive me when I didn't know how to forgive myself, but they lead me to the light," These were the examples I needed in my life to grow! To keep it simple, when love is spread , love will grow. Sometimes the unkind people need kind people the most, and that was me 20 years ago! I feel like this has made a stronger community.

Babaji's message of forgiveness that Ralph Singh shared has carried over and touched the lives of many, as well as highly impacting my own. Gobind Sadan means "God's house without walls," everyone is welcome with open arms. Your power of forgiveness overcame the hatred, healed, and transformed my life. The most important message I could put out there for educators and parents is to teach your children about diversity, cultural difference, but most importantly, teach them we are all the same. Teach them acts of kindness, we are all in this together."



Our local area Presbyterian Minister, Tammy Nipper, who also serves as chaplain to the fire department shared how our response led her to go into the ministry, and that Gobind Sadan provides such a positive impact on the local community until today. She noted that the fire department still marvels on how the Holy Book survived unscathed. “The blessings stayed with me all these years. While terrorism struck here in Palermo, out of the ashes came blessings.”



The second part of the evening focused on Prevention, taking the lessons from being in spiritual community into school and public education through cross-cultural understanding.



“If Only We’d Know Your Story!” the Birth of Ralph Singh’s “Stories to Light our Way” and the Wisdom Thinkers Network



Multicultural – culturally responsive (sacred and secular w.i 1st Amendment)

**Help create an inclusive welcoming school culture
Affirm cultural identities**

Aligned with critical SEL competencies, Character Strengths – Helps w ACES and TIC

Integrated into CCS and Next Gen ELA to enhance literacy

Easily implemented – Easily Internalized

**Underscore that values and strategies are part of our lives - NOT a separate program
Enhances student and community engagement**

Ralph Singh introduced the topic with the story of how the boys wrote from prison “if only we’d known your story, if only we’d understood what you stood for, we never would have done this.” Out of that one line, Ralph has developed story-based curriculum for public and private schools, within and respecting what is commonly known as separation of church and state (the establishment clause of the 1st amendment). His landmark work of training teachers to use traditional stories, both sacred and secular, in their classroom and school social emotional learning and character development programs has been recognized both nationally and internationally as a simple way of helping children find their stories while learning the stories from other traditions. This has not only allowed them to understand our common values, but to be inspired to change the story of the world from one of conflict to peace.

As Cassie Phillips had stressed

“The most important message I could put out there for educators and parents is to teach your children about diversity, cultural difference, but most importantly, teach them we are all the same. Teach them acts of kindness, we are all in this together.”



The first to speak was Mark Lichtenstein, the former President of the Mexico, NY School Board, (the arsonists were graduates) who so wanted to take responsibility for the kids' actions that he accepted an invitation to travel to India with Ralph Singh to learn and offer his forgiveness to Gobind Sadan. Mark currently serves as Executive Operating Officer in the office of the President at SUNY ESF.

Mark shared how amazed he was to find the Sikhs suggesting that they felt equally responsible as they had not done enough to educate the local community about their values and practices.

He spoke of the need to impact the educational system and shared how he hoped Gobind Sadan could be a center to provide services to our struggling youth, stating the country needs: "A focus on our interconnectedness, and on service and education, should indeed be a focus on youth. As many young people are struggling. A focus on faith, spirituality, and service should be combined with a focus on youth.

Mark quoted Baba ji's teaching that service to all people is the essence of our interdependence. "We should transcend the barriers of sects, think of each other as fellow human beings first, and recognize each other as sisters and brothers."

He felt family and community guidance is essential, but our education system must play a critical role. "Educational institutions and local communities are places where promoting volunteer service to humanity must occur."



Other panelists included Donna Blake, the President of both the Oswego County and CNY school board associations – covering a 10 county-area in Upstate NY – from Oswego to Ithaca.

“After this gathering tonight, it was just a wonderful moment and everyone embraced the diversity. That does not happen everywhere. It has been a very contentious thing in many communities. One of the saddest things is that some of our districts would say, ‘why do we have to talk about diversity? Our community isn't diverse.’ We have to recognize that this education may have to start at the top before we can filter it on down to our children.”

Each added examples of how implementing a ‘policies’ of inclusion required us to move beyond simple engagement and deal at a personal level.



Derrick Dorsey, the executive director of the CNY School Boards association, who trains new board members and keeps them up to date on the key trends in education including diversity, equity and inclusion. “something happened in this community 20 years ago that left an impact and an impression on a lot of individuals. And we need to somehow spread that message of forgiveness. And it was mentioned by the Secretary in a loving community, and that's loving with Unity, because that loving community is with Unity, right? So how do we take that energy out of this space?”



And Dr. Malika Carter, the chief diversity, equity, and inclusion officer of SUNY ESF responsible for on campus shared wonderful stories that showed, “how we talk to people from when they are little to when they grow up, literally changes them. What I have seen here today is how we have talked to people after they have inflicted pain and sorrow has helped in their healing and development and as an educator, I appreciate that.”

Throughout the evening several other speakers shared the power and potential of Gobind Sadan.

Fred Fiske, the former editorial page editor of the regional newspaper, shared how it was possible to support Gobind Sadan’s positive message and not allow the story to descend into a community battle about hatred. “I feel like I’m on Holy ground. Always remember that your work is a blessing. The remarkable work of Gobind Sadan is needed more than ever. Because the ignorance that led to the senseless act of hatred here still persists.



Dave Pasinski, one of the most beloved spiritual chaplains and community activists in our area, likened Gobind Sadan and the evening to the co-vid vaccination. “Let the mask symbolize what Gobind Sadan and Babaji has taught us – “Keep out the horrors of hatred and let the Light of Love come through.” “We're being vaccinated with love and what's going to change is my intrinsic spirits. This vaccination is going to change the way I relate to the world. And the time will come and my whole spirit will be able to react without the mask but to be open and accepting of all. The Sikh people and Gobind Sadan provide a ‘booster for our spirit.’”



Dick Breyer, Professor at the Newhouse School and film maker of “North of 49”, had traveled to India with us to document the community’s healing around Babaji’s statement of forgiveness. He shared a favorite story from the first film screening. “When the lights went on, I found Ralph holding one of the arsonist’s sleeping baby. Til today, my students still remember that as the symbol of how we can all heal out of love.”

With all our differences, we came together to celebrate the One spirit which exists in all of us in all of nature and speaker after speaker shared from the depths of their being the joy of being part of a truly inclusive community where everyone's voices are honored. We actually showed we can model what inclusiveness means – not just to be respected - but to be honored – as expressions of what is holy! And everyone's gifts are recognized.

Tom Calobufo, the superintendent of the local Central Square school district, who had come for the first time, said he couldn't wait to be able to bring his family and children to experience this atmosphere. 'never before have our teachers been so worried about saying the wrong thing. I want our students to hear the message that was shared in this room – a message that we can be in a community of love despite our differences, all are welcome. That was the first message that the Secretary greeted us with.

20 yrs ago, we recognized a teachable moment and used Babaji's power of forgiveness to rebuild a community and help transform lives. People learned that Gobind Sadan, God's House without Walls, is not just a building but continues to welcome a diverse group of people – most of whom had never been together before to experience what it means to be a community of love where everyone and everyone's voices are respected – as long as we leave our hatred at the door.



Our friend, Madis Senner, whose books survey the most powerful sacred sites throughout NY State once again affirmed the “natural” Power at Gobind Sadan and shared that it is increased incrementally with the ongoing spiritual practice. No wonder Babaji had chosen this place and told us to focus on prayer and meditation along with developing the land to serve those in need.



So on this night, I watched something special happen that I’ve only seen in Gobind Sadan and in Babaji’s presence. Whenever someone would walk through the gates or enter His presence their egos would be stripped away and become like innocent children. Last night you could literally watch everyone melting as they were surrounded by the real power of God’s love. Now it is up to us to continuing building that community of love.



We owe a debt of gratitude to the great team work of the sangat. Despite the limitations of co-vid, which meant that a large number of GS sangat couldn't make the program, the preparations fell on just a few. But with Mji's blessings, Manjeet Aunty and Renu saw that the hall was sparkling and ready for the evening. Joginder Kaur's oversaw the food with, Baby and Yuvraj joined Suresh and Jaspal in bringing trays of snacks for the tea, and a delicious langar was prepared by Manjeet Aunty and Renu, Joginder and Satnam.

Surinder Bhatti (Chinda) saw that the chairs, tables, and a much-needed sound system arrived in time for the function.

And to Winny and Beeba who flew in all the way from Texas to help with both the filming and technology and Beeba to add her sweet voice to the kirtan.



Local media coverage links

[Ceremony Recalls 2001 Arson Attack on Sikh Temple Mistakenly Related to 9/11 Terrorists and Forgiveness that Followed | WAER](https://www.waer.org/news/2021-11-15/ceremony-recalls-2001-arson-attack-on-sikh-temple-mistakenly-related-to-9-11-terrorists-and-forgiveness-that-followed?fbclid=IwAR1Y99WYII9IX_JW_zqPsWOe-gH5SIdtS-OJ8R5pCfBhd4zKISVis0h66fc) https://www.waer.org/news/2021-11-15/ceremony-recalls-2001-arson-attack-on-sikh-temple-mistakenly-related-to-9-11-terrorists-and-forgiveness-that-followed?fbclid=IwAR1Y99WYII9IX_JW_zqPsWOe-gH5SIdtS-OJ8R5pCfBhd4zKISVis0h66fc

ABC affiliate

https://www.localsyr.com/news/local-news/focused-on-forgiveness-worshippers-reflect-on-the-sikh-temple-destroyed-by-arson-20-years-ago-in-central-square/?fbclid=IwAR1f0PZJoBWL2wQbUmiZ4O6u7AW3WF_FU8OVuYVMVxF302VBThLJCbTDu-E

Palladium times – print and online in Oswego County

http://www.oswegocountynewsnow.com/news/celebrating-the-power-of-forgiveness/article_182f7df6-471e-11ec-9234-2be5e79acd47.html

Rochester – Democrat and Chronicle –

<https://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/2022/04/04/sikh-temple-new-york-gobind-sadan-usa-arson-hate-crime-sept-11-community-love-forgiveness-end-hate/7166100001/>



Office of the President

Joanne M. Mahoney
President

November 9, 2021

Mr. Ralph Singh
Gobind Sadan, USA
134 Graves Rd
Central Square, NY 13036

To my good friend, Ralph and the Gobind Sadan Community:

This message is offered with sincere respect and optimism. I had the opportunity to share quality time with His Holiness Baba Virsa Singh ji, welcoming him to the City of Syracuse as a Common Council Member, and years later at his birthday celebration at Gobind Sadan USA in Palermo. These were deeply positive, personal interactions. It is in that context that I join with you in thought and contemplation at the "Gathering Around the Light Day" in honor of the remarkable healing and transformation that grew out of Baba Virsa Singh ji's powerful statement of forgiveness post 9/11.

His message, channeled through you and many others, turned an event based on ignorance into many teachable moments for personal transformation and community healing. His inclusive teaching allowed his followers – and many others – to forgive the children who mistakenly attacked Gobind Sadan, USA in November 2001.

His Holiness, during his many visits to Central New York, brought a vision of peace and social uplift. I can speak with first-hand knowledge of the inspiration he has been to all of those who have had the opportunity to be in his presence. As President of the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF), I am working to amplify His Holiness' message and Gobind Sadan's efforts to overcome hatred and ignorance, and to reach out and embrace every person as integral and equal parts of our collective community. This is based on a foundation of understanding—that we all will benefit from celebrating each other's gifts.

Please know that while I am not able to join you at this very important "Gathering around the Light Day" to celebrate the power of his message of forgiveness to foster compassion and build community, interfaith understanding, and harmony, I will be there in spirit.

Sincerely,

Joanne M. Mahoney
President



New York State Assembly Citation

WHEREAS, It is the sense of the citizens of the 120th Assembly district to honor and pay tribute to the individuals and celebrated events in our midst that play an integral role in fostering peace and a sense of community; and

WHEREAS, This 13th day of November in the year 2021 shall be known as Gathering Around the Light Day in honor of the remarkable healing and transformation that grew out of Baba Virsa Singh ji's powerful statement of forgiveness which turned an event based on hatred and ignorance into a teachable moment for personal transformation and community healing; and

WHEREAS, His Holiness Baba Virsa Singh ji so clearly exemplified the message of Guru Nanak Dev ji, the founder of the Sikh tradition, that "Everyone is part of my Community—I see no one as an 'other'." This inclusive teaching allowed his followers to forgive the children who mistakenly attacked Gobind Sadan USA in November 2001, out of post-9-11 hysteria, and to overcome the hatred and rebuild a community; and

WHEREAS, In the midst of the blaze, the Holy Scripture, Guru Granth Sahib, did not burn. This provided an uplifting message that the Light of Love triumphs over darkness and provided a beacon of hope to everyone far and wide; and

WHEREAS, While some have confused and targeted the Sikh community because of their distinguishing turbans and beards, we recognize that the Sikh community is among the most engaged and dedicated citizens of our nation, serving proudly with their turbans in government, police, military, in business and in professions of medicine and law, and agriculture. Distributing free food to those in need as part of their tradition; and,

WHEREAS, Their turbans stand for Truth, Justice, and to defend everyone's right to pray according to their own tradition without fear of persecution—the poor, the elderly, those we've ostracized—Sikhs stand to defend the common values that make this country great; and,

WHEREAS, Within every community of the State of New York, there are certain individuals who, by virtue of their commitment and dedication, command the respect and admiration of their community for their exemplary contributions and service on behalf of others; and,

WHEREAS, Baba Virsa Singh in his many visits to Central New York brought a vision of peace, displayed service to God, humanity, and the world community; and,

WHEREAS, Baba Virsa Singh chose Upstate New York to establish Gobind Sadan USA as his first center outside of India, which teaches the universal messages of all prophets and transforms people through love, faith, meditation, and service; and,

WHEREAS, At a time when our nation and much of the world is growing more divided and hatred of those who seem different is on the rise, we recognize Gobind Sadan's efforts to overcome the hatred and ignorance and reach out and embrace everyone as part of their community with the understanding that we all will benefit from celebrating each other's God given gifts; and,

WHEREAS, As a result of Baba Virsa Singh's noble aims and accomplishments, his followers established "Gathering around the Light Day" to celebrate the power of his message of forgiveness to foster compassion and build community, interfaith understanding and harmony by focusing on the common beliefs and spiritual principles underlying all religions: now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That I, Assembly Minority Leader William Barclay, on behalf of all residents in the 120th Assembly District, recognize the contributions that Gathering Around the Light Day provides to our community in conjunction with 2021 World Kindness Day; and be it further,

RESOLVED, That a copy of this citation, be given to Gobind Sadan in honor of the 20th Anniversary of Gathering Around the Light Day

THEREFORE, As a duly elected member of the Assembly of the State of New York, it is with great pleasure that I recognize and honor

The 20th Anniversary of Gathering Around the Light Day

Date: Nov. 13, 2021

In Witness Whereof, I Have Hereunto
Set My Hand and My Signature

William A. Barclay

Will Barclay
Assembly Minority Leader