



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 1: AMANDEEP SIDHU – FAITH, TURBANS, AND 9/11

Amandeep Sidhu

Within 24 hours of 9/11, that group of loosely connected young professionals. We had a handful of lawyers, a handful of law students, some of us that were in business, some of us that were going to go to law school. Some that were undergrad students came together and said, We've got to do something.

Phil Wagner

Hello from the halls of the Mason School of Business here at William & Mary. My name is Dr. Phil Wagner. I'm a faculty member of Management Communication, and I'm your host for our new podcast, Diversity Goes to Work. We've carefully curated content from some of the best and the brightest, both our own here at William & Mary and across the globe. To help you sharpen your approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion work. And since this is our very first episode before we really begin, we wanted to clarify a few things. First, this isn't your normal business school podcast. Throughout our first season, you'll often hear the casual conversation of two friends or, in many cases, the casual conversations of two strangers in the process of becoming friends. And those conversations will play out in our 35 to 40 minutes episodes. Though we hope our conversations will lead to better-formalized diversity and inclusion work, our goals are actually much, much smaller. We hope to shed a light on the humanity behind that work more than anything. To give us all a reminder that the often complicated and sometimes frustrating space of diversity and inclusion work is well worth our time. So forgive us if the conversations are a little awkward or clunky or don't quite sound as polished as what you might suspect. In our episodes, we'll cover everything you don't get in your standard D&I training at work, from politics to violence to size diversity to disability and beyond. We are unpacking the often uncomfortable truths that stand in the way of effective diversity, equity, and inclusion work. Throughout, we'll adjust the language we use, and we'll honestly probably say things wrong a time or two. That's okay. We'll often chat about the nuances of language in this work with our guests. After all, we're here to learn and grow too. Finally, we'll try to always be clear and not make assumptions about your knowledge on topics in this arena. We'll talk about diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, justice, peace, and beyond. Sometimes you'll hear us say all of those terms aloud. Other times we'll use some version of shorthand. You might hear us say D&I for diversity and inclusion or DIEO for diversity. Inclusion and Equal opportunity will try to be consistent and mirror the language used by our guests. But really, the language in this topic area shifts quite a lot, and old habits die hard. So give us grace as we go. Otherwise, buckle up because we're getting ready to do a

deep dive into the human lived experiences that shape and guide our diversity work in the world of work. Should be fun. It's truly an honor not only to kick off this episode but to kick off this podcast with such an engaged Alum of the University as we find ourselves looking back 20 years on the 20th anniversary of the horrible tragedy that is September 11th. Our goal today is to look back with a mindfulness of looking forward, and our guest today, Amandeep Sidhu, is here to share a little bit more about his journey post 9/11 and what that journey might mean for the future of inclusion work. Amandeep Sidhu is a litigation partner at Winston & Strawn in the firm's D.C. office. Focusing on regulatory and compliance counseling, state and federal government investigations, and complex civil litigation involving regulated industries. Aman is also the co-founder of the Sikh Coalition, which is going to really inform our conversations today. The Sikh Coalition is the largest civil and human rights nonprofit organization in the United States dedicated to protecting the interests of the Sikh community. Aman has led lobbying efforts in Congress regarding hate crimes, profiling, workplace, and public accommodation discrimination and also serves as lead counsel in an ongoing effort to end the U.S. military's presumptive ban on the service of Observant Sikhs and other religious minorities. In partnership with the Sikh Coalition and other organizational partners, his work led to a historic policy changes in the U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force that has opened the door to over 60 Observant Sikhs serving in the U.S. military. Aman, it's always an honor to speak with Alum of the College, but such an honor to speak with you given the prolific nature of your work. In reading your bio, I'm certain that I've missed something of importance. Care to patch any holes for us?

Amandeep Sidhu

Thanks so much, Phil. I really appreciate the introduction and appreciate the opportunity to participate in this podcast. Loved my time at William & Mary class of 2000. Going out into the world at that time as a consultant in Washington, DC, before I decided to go back to law school and was in DC when 9/11 happened. So you mentioned the Sikh Coalition. The origins of that organization came out of 9/11 just a year after I left Williamsburg and really was an inflection point. So certainly looking forward to this conversation and answering questions that you might have.

Phil Wagner

For sure, and we're going to center that timeline because I think it's important as we approach the 20th anniversary of 9/ 11 as well that we factor that into our conversation today. But before we begin and I know this is an impossible question. Okay, it's super impossible, but I think there are a lot of inflated or conflated misconceptions about Sikhism, with some folks relating it to Hinduism or others relating the turban to Islam. Can you briefly frame Sikhism for us, particularly as it relates to the global landscape of religion and culture? That's a difficult question, but we'll start there.

Amandeep Sidhu

Absolutely. So just right out of the gate, the word Sikh and it's pronounced sick in Punjabi. It can be pronounced seek in a sort of the Americanized version of that. And you'll hear both the

word Sikh means student or disciples. So Sikhism as a faith is a group of students that were constantly learning. And the Sikh faith arose in the late 1400s in what is now India. And what is the origins of sort of Punjab, which is now half in Pakistan, half in India. And it arose at a time when the dominant faiths in South Asia were Hinduism and Islam. And there was a caste system in the Hindu faith that created a tremendous amount of inequality in South Asia. There was a sense of inequality between men and women at that time in Islam that was also a source of concern. And the founder of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak he basically saw a vision for another path, right. That there is no wrong religion, that if you are a Hindu, you should be a good Hindu. If you're a Muslim, you should be good Muslim. If you're a Christian, you should be a good Christian. But to be a Sikh would be to believe in sort of absolute equality between men and women based on socioeconomics, that there's a belief in democracy and sort of representation. And so the faith arose again late 1400s, and sort of in this arc from 1469 to 1699, there were ten what we refer to as living gurus or teachers who essentially came up with the faith. And in 1699, Guru Gobind Singh was the 10th and final living guru. What he said, as he was coming to the end of his life on Earth, was there'll be no living guru behind me. The compilation of the teachings of not just those Sikh gurus but also prominent Hindu and Muslim Saints of the time were compiled into our Holy scripture called the Guru Granth Sahib. And that would be the reference point for the faith. And it is about 3000 pages of poetry talking about how you have a relationship with God. That you do good things on this Earth, that you treat other people well, that you are part of society, and that you either for you know you do your best in this life on Earth. And then the idea of reincarnation is certainly part of the Sikh faith that you move on to the next phase, which is sort of that oneness with God. But what Guru Gobind Singh also did in 1699 was gave Sikhs a very unique physical uniform and identity. And that's really where a lot of the confusion comes from. So I wear a turban. I have an uncut beard. My beard is very long down to the middle of my chest, but it's groomed, and I use gel and hairspray, and I press it, and it's groomed in a way that makes it look the way that it does. Underneath my turban, my hair is in a bun, and that comes from the idea that your hair is a part of your body that you don't destroy. So the first symbol in that identity of the Sikh uniform is uncut hair. All of these symbols start with the letter K or kaka in the Punjabi language, so we sometimes refer to them as the five K's. Kesh is Uncut hair, and then it's worn with the turban covering it. The next is Kangha, which is a small comb symbolic of keeping yourself in neat appearance. So my hair is long, but it's not open and matted. It's tied up in a bun, and it's cut nicely. The turban is optional for Sikh women, so you will occasionally see Sikh women wearing a turban, but otherwise, they may wish to wear a small headscarf may not wear that all the time, maybe just for religious services. Third symbol is a steel bracelet called the Kara, and this is worn on your dominant hand. Really, as a reminder of your responsibilities to the faith. It stems from being worn as a form of defense mechanism during battle. That you would wear this almost as armor with multiple bracelets on your arms to protect yourself from a sword's blow. And it's worn again as this reminder of your faith. You're going to go and reach to steal something or do something bad? It's a reminder to say you have this obligation of the Sikh to be better. The fourth is called the Kaccha. It's a special kind of boxer short that quite literally was worn as a practical reality as Sikhs in the 14, 15, 1600s went out to battle. People didn't wear underwear. So they wore the Kachera as a practical piece of that uniform, but also as a reminder to live a responsible and measured life,

but also that you don't have to be anesthetic and go into isolation in the woods to be religious. You should be a contributing member of society. You should have a family that you should be engaged and involved in your community. And then the final is a sword worn very much as a practical reality of needing to defend not only the Sikh faith but also other minority faiths from oppressive activity. During that time period where there really was an effort to forcibly suppress the Sikh faith and other minority religions. The Kirpan was raised as a defense, and it remains as part of the uniform again as a symbol of defending equality and democracy, and justice. And so those five symbols together are the uniform, the most visible of which is the turban, and that's where clearly a lot of confusion arises. The turban is worn culturally in South Asia and in the Middle East. It is worn by some members of the Muslim faith. It's worn in celebratory events by Hindus at weddings and other ceremonies, and growing up, born and raised in Virginia, born in Norfolk, grew up in Richmond. My parents were the first Sikh family that came to Richmond, and at that time in the 70s, 80s, you know even into the 90s, most of the questions were around the exotic nature of the turban and the occasional you know, is your dad a wizard? And that really evolved with the first Iraq war and then very dramatically with 9/11, where there was just an association of the turban with terrorism.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Amandeep Sidhu

And so that's sort of that story arc of the identity and how it ties to the current realities.

Phil Wagner

And that's such a great over. I mean, that was significant. You packed a mean punch in that explanation. It's so helpful, I think, to set the stage for where we're going in this conversation. And I want to get to the post 9/11 discourse in just a second. But I had the opportunity to review a piece you wrote for the National Law Journal, where you talk about being the first observant Sikh. And thank you for that correction in pronunciation. That's helpful, too. Just up the road in Richmond, right. And now you're one of just two turban-wearing professionals, I believe, as an equity partner at Winston. You're also the first turban-wearing partner at an Am Law 100 firm, the first in U.S. history. Talk to us a little bit about breaking those barriers professionally. There had to be ebbs and flows as culture progressed, right. As we had a different understanding of brown people, of turban-wearing people, it couldn't have always been easy.

Amandeep Sidhu

Absolutely, you know, so growing up in Richmond. Certainly, there's a history of racism and connection to the Confederacy, and it's a tough place. That's where my folks decided to settle and because they were the earliest sort of settlers of the Sikh community in the Richmond area. I grew up sort of under the shadows of both my mother and father being advocates out of necessity. And so I remember going to Lions clubs and church groups and other forums with my dad, where he was explaining the Sikh faith. There's no form of proselytization in the Sikh

faith again, going back to that idea that there's no wrong religion. It was purely out of education that we're a member of the community. We have this unique identity. Let's dispel myths, and let's help people understand. I had older mentors of mine who were in high school or college who came and helped me do those types of presentations when I went to school. To help understand why I looked the way I do and present that to my classmates. I'm the oldest of three brothers. My youngest brother is nine years younger than me. Ajay was an elementary school student as I was finishing high school and heading into college, and so going and speaking to his class and explaining why he wore a small, you know, under turban as a kid and helping him navigate what could otherwise be a scenario where there's bullying and teasing and all the other things that have unfortunately been part of the upbringing of young Sikhs. So for me, as I came to William & Mary starting high school, coming to William & Mary, there were a handful of Sikhs. Turban-wearing Sikhs who had come before me. So I was very fortunate that I had a couple of friends who had been in the William & Mary community before I arrived as a freshman. And so there was at least some level of familiarity amongst the student body and faculty and fraternity and great community, and so that helped. But it was still sort of like every moment was an opportunity to educate. And when I went to D.C., I was at a consulting firm for the DoD in very conservative environments, traveling to naval bases in the middle of suburban Illinois and Air Force bases in Georgia. And in that military environment, every moment was an opportunity to educate. But my perspective always was I'm happy to talk, I'm an open book, I'm happy to ask questions, but just by virtue of my presence as someone who is American in every sense of the word, but has this unique identity as a Sikh, that that that my presence alone is an education. That this is someone who looks different. But it's certainly not any different from me, and probably has very similar lived experiences that I have. In 9/11, again, was sort of this incredible tragedy and inflection point that sort of forced that conversation in so many different ways. And so I don't want to get ahead of you on the questions, but going to your specific question, sort of being the first, it was just sort of my experience, right. I played basketball in high school for one of the prep schools in Richmond. I was the first turban-wearing Sikh to go to that high school. The first turban-wearing Sikh to play in the Virginia Prep League. And there were games where referees came to me and said, you can't wear that thing on your head. And so we had to take that challenge up to the board of the Virginia Prep League and get their clear and unwavering commitment that this was absolutely fine. So that issue didn't arise again. And then you flash forward to law school. I went to University of Richmond. I was the first Sikh SBA President of the President of the Student Bar Association. And so it just was sort of part and parcel to who I was. And so I went to a clerkship at the Virginia Court of Appeals. First Sikh there. And when I came to McDermott Will & Emory, which was the firm I came to right out of my clerkship. A handful of observant Sikhs in big law. And when I made partner in 2013, it was at a time when there literally was not another turban-wearing Sikh partner at any large law firm in the country. So Am Law 100 is the hundred largest law firms in terms of numbers and revenue in the country. And I was the first. And when I moved over to Winston & Strawn as an equity partner, I became the second equity partner. So one of my friends, who I mentored when I made partner at McDermott, went on to make partner in his firm and then was elevated to equity partner a few years later, which was amazing. And he became the first, and I became the second. So it's

groundbreaking, but it's also sort of just the way that I've operated as I've navigated my professional life.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, in that piece, you talk, you have this quote, you said my diversity unmasked I had no choice. And so, this becomes part of just the normal rhythms of identity work for you. But those rhythms had to change post 9/11, and we're sort of dancing around this. But I'd love to sort of go there now—point-blank. 9/11 caused number one, a lot of tragedy, a lot of inflection, a lot of good reflection. But it also led us to where we are now, where there has been historically since 9/11 this sort of like systemic fear of brown people, broadly speaking, and particularly those with visual markers, like a turban. Can you speak to how you've navigated conversations, what 9/11 did to shift those conversations, and how you've brought that education framework in the conversations post 9/11? That's a really thick question, but I'd like to really park there because I think it has significant implications for the diversity work that we do in the post 9/11 era.

Amandeep Sidhu

Absolutely. I mean, again, backing up before 9/11 growing up in the South, I faced discrimination, both directed at my family, directed at me, verbal harassment, physical fights that broke out. All this is before 9/11. I've experienced that kind of horrible experience as someone who is different and who has faced that kind of discrimination and bigotry. And even with that context, 9/11 was just so profoundly different in how it felt. So I mentioned that I worked for a DoD consulting firm at the time of 9/11. I lived in Arlington, Virginia. I worked in Old Town Alexandria, and so my route driving to my office quite literally went past the Pentagon on Route 110. And that day, I got in the car, and I turned on the radio. And there were discussions about the first plane hitting the World Trade Center tower in New York. It wasn't clear that it was a large plane. There had been a minor incident a few years earlier with a small two or three-person small jet that hit a building in New York. So I thought, oh, this is horrible but didn't realize the gravity until I walked into my office and I came upstairs, and everyone was gathered in this big meeting room that had this T.V., and we were watching the first tower on fire and smoke coming. Before and I just driven past the Pentagon. And before it was even reported on the news, we could look out of the window. We saw smoke coming from the Pentagon. We were that close that we could see the smoke coming in the distance. And then second tower was hit. You know cell phone service was horrible. Email was still working, and everyone was freaking out just as Americans, right? That's why this experience was so horrible. Is that first and foremost, as Americans, we experience the most significant tragedy in a generation happening right before our eyes. But as we're processing that horrific tragedy as Americans. I was seeing the emails coming through on the Yahoo group in New York and the Yahoo group in California, and the one in D.C. In the Sikh community, of elderly Sikh man attacked with spiked baseball bat in New York and position fired on the spot in Cleveland, Ohio, and people chased down the street. And so the people pulled off of planes. And so the immediate thought around violent hate crimes, employment discrimination, profiling, and everything else in between was just swirling in my then 21, 22,

23-year-old brain right. I was a year out of college, and we sat around and tried to contact family. And again, cell phones weren't working. So we got through on email to tell my family in Richmond that I was okay in D.C. And I had a lot of friends that were in New York, some of whom were down near the World Trade Center. We found out later it was within a day or two that one of our good friends from college was actually in the World Trade Center and died. And so that was sort of the experience as Americans. We were just crushed. But as a Sikh, we realize things are just getting worse. It's just getting started.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Amandeep Sidhu

So it was sort of this multi-faceted attack on every fabric of my body. And I drove home that day. I drove right past the Pentagon on 110. And as I was driving, you know it's sort of poetic in the most tragic way, someone tried to drive me off the side of the road. And so I was driving my car. A pickup truck pulled up next to me. They started waving their arms and yelling epithets and swerved their car, and I pulled over, and I was safe. But it was just sort of a very, very clear wake-up call that this is just going to be so much worse than anything we've ever experienced. And so I went back to my apartment and, you know, I watched the news. And I cried, and I talked to my family. But within 24 hours of 9/11, again, that group of loosely connected young professionals, we had a handful of lawyers, a handful of law students, some of us that were in business, some of us that were going to go to law school, some that were undergrad students came together and said, We've got to do something.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Amandeep Sidhu

We don't have an ACLU or an Anti-Defamation League, or an NAACP for the Sikh community. We just don't have that, and we need to create it. And so, we came together and created a database on September 12 to start tracking these incidents of hate crimes and profiling and employment discrimination. And within a week of 9/11, had come under the banner of an organization we called the Sikh Coalition. And initially with the idea that we were creating a coalition of all these loosely organized groups around the country of young Sikh people who wanted to make a difference. And so that really was the birth of the Sikh Coalition was in the hours and days after 9/11.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. It's not lost on me that there's this competing notion of identity and, of course, that's intersectionality at work. But on one hand, fully American, like full-blooded American, right, working through the same grief and processing mechanisms as the rest of the country, yet immediately othered in that same context. Right. So you can't be a part of that healing process fully because you're being sort of pushed out, at least at that point, maybe by fringe groups.

And we know that that's escalated since then. I want to park here just a little bit and think about instances of violence specifically. And, of course, we can't lump all cultures together. But as of late, particularly in the last two to three years, random or intentional acts of violence against communities of color against Asian Americans against Sikhs has seemingly ramped up. And I'm wondering how that violence specifically impacts who you are as a professional. I know your work is, of course, fully professional, but there's an activist bend to it as well. Right. What you're doing as an inherently human rights function is that where the violence leads you? I'm just curious how it shapes your professional endeavors because you don't get the opportunity to just clock in nine to five and forget the world that attempts to other you or directs violence towards you. How does that shape your professional experience?

Amandeep Sidhu

Yeah. I think that we think about again these moments of inflection, and 9/11 was absolutely one of those. And then I think, undoubtedly, that the death of George Floyd was this really significant inflection point for our country for the conversation about race and police and discrimination, and that doesn't just extend to those limited pockets. It's extended into the corporate world and into the academic spheres. It has shifted the conversation in a way that I had not previously seen right like 9/11 was a shift in the sense that this happened. But it didn't change the conversation about how do we be more inclusive? It was how the hell do we avoid our people getting killed and beaten and fired and pulled off planes? And so, for me, I alluded to the fact that I've experienced violence and bigotry, and I've been the victim of hate crimes. I've been the victim of being chased and attacked by people because of the way I look. I've been pulled off of a plane during those months after 9/11 because I fit the profile.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Amandeep Sidhu

Quite literally, the words that were told to me was that I fit the profile of the people who did bad things in our country. And as I traveled with my team with the DoD security clearance badge on my belt. And so you know, for me, you mentioned the idea of that unmasking or inability to cover. You know, in the diversity, equity, and inclusion conversation that happens professionally, there are these the idea of being your authentic self at work. The idea of covering that as people of color are their mechanisms that we use to cover our identity and speak in a certain way in the workplace and a different way at home or wear certain clothes outside of work and not in the workplace. And I think the reality for members of the Sikh community because we have such a visible, unmistakable, and, you know, not removable part of our identity with the turban. Is that we can't really use those mechanisms. This is who I am, and this is who I'm going to be in the workplace and who I'm going to be outside of the workplace. And I do feel an affirmative obligation to be an open book and to answer the questions whether they're good, bad, or stupid. I guess there is no stupid question. But I don't take any question from anyone, whether it's in the workplace or outside with a fence. I want to

engage in that conversation. And if I can change one heart and one mind or ten or 20 or a thousand or whatever my impact can be, that's positive impact.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Amandeep Sidhu

And I want to make that change. But I also think that as we've had the conversation over the last year, in particular with the black community in America, I've only experienced an infinitesimally small fraction of what the black community has faced in this country over time and every individual's lifetime. But it does help me see what that experience looks like.

Phil Wagner

Right.

Amandeep Sidhu

And I just think that for someone to sort of walk-in someone's shoes, that's how you start to understand how bad it's been and why a community might feel oppressed. And a community might feel a level of injustice. And a community might feel like things have not been fair because they haven't. But when you have not experienced any of those bad things in your life, it's very hard to wrap your arms around that.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, there's so much to unpack there, but I keep coming back to the fit-the-profile conversation, which I think is where a lot of the anti brown sentiment post 9/11 has come from. Yet random white guy picks up a gun and shoots up a warehouse. And I don't feel that the majority population experiences that same sort of fit the profile of discrimination. A lot of that goes back to aesthetics, right. And so, aesthetically, you present in a way that is bound to elicit some type of response, particularly for those that are looking for it. I'm wondering, has the conversation grown since 9/11? I mean, we like to think that we're doing better now, right? We are so progressive. We are so inclusive. Have the conversations shifted in a positive way? Are people more accepting of the aesthetic place of the turban and some of the other Sikh identity variables for lack of a better term?

Amandeep Sidhu

There is no question that we are in a profoundly different place 20 years after 9/11. And the conversations we had in those years after 9/11, every meeting with a lawmaker, every meeting with an agency, every meeting with folks from the White House or at the state level, wherever we were, in whatever environment. The baseline education level of like needing to explain the basics of the Sikh faith before we ever got to any of the substance that was what happened. And now there really is like, at least in most of those environments, a baseline understanding.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Amandeep Sidhu

And the laws have evolved in a way where it has become more adapted to the fact that we have a very diverse country and that includes members of the Muslim faith and Hindu faith and Sikh faith and other faiths where people are going to look a little different, and things are going to be a little bit different. But the way that that conversation has shifted has been through just a very concentrated and strategic level of outreach and education and lobbying, and the Sikh Coalition is one of those organizations. There are many others. And quite frankly, it's the allied organizations that also have started to and not started for now almost 20 years made the Sikh community a part of their conversation. So we're talking about the broader Asian American Pacific Islander community. The Sikh community wasn't necessarily a part of that conversation before 9/11. It was sort of a fringe and isolated piece. And those organizations were some of our first and most powerful allies after 9/11. The fact that the allyship with the black community, the allyship with the Muslim community. One of the things we did very deliberately after 9/11 as an organization with the Sikh Coalition and me personally is that we never said we're not Muslim. That was never the defense. And that would have been the easy thing to say. Is to say

Phil Wagner

That's so good.

Amandeep Sidhu

we're not Muslim. Why are you coming after us? But it wasn't just that we're not Muslim we are Sikh. But it is absolutely not okay to be attacking the Muslim community. This was not an act committed by a community. It was an act committed by fringe extremists that happened to consider themselves to be affiliated with that community. And as you alluded to, every community, whether it's white, brown, black, has elements that are going to commit bad acts and that cannot be attributed to the entire community. And one of the things that George W. Bush did very soon after 9/11 that made a difference was that he came out very publicly and he said, We're going to protect the Muslim American community. This was not an act that was committed by an entire community, and it's not okay. And that tone that was set at the top, it did diffuse right. There were still people that were shot and killed. There were still people that were brutally beaten. But it could have been a lot worse if the tone was not set in a way that it was at the top and carried down. And the difference, sadly, for the last four or five years, is that the tone that was set at the top of the last administration was one that just fueled the flames and empowered those that had these thoughts sort of under the surface and had been either intimidated by or diffused by having a black President for eight years. They, all of a sudden, were in power. To say and do whatever they pleased. And that's why you've seen such a significant uptick in hate crimes and violence against people of color in the last four years.

Phil Wagner

Again, so much to unpack there. And I'm struck by how gracious your framing is. I mean throughout all of the instances of violence and oppression and just the day-to-day rhythms of working through the world while Sikh. There's an incredible graciousness in your response and in your narrative recounting here. And I want to shift the conversation a little bit in response to that because it's really important to me that we don't look at any community that faces oppression through a victim lens. I don't want to just frame this as wow, your life is hard, it is hard because there's so much, I think, valuable opportunity to learn from your experiences and from your faith. And that's really the goal here, too. You speak from that place of grace. And I can't help but wonder if that's mapped on. I know that it's mapped on to the values of your faith. And so, as we start to part towards the end of our conversation, I'm wondering if you can share a little bit more on the potentials of Sikhism for informing our approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion work. What can we learn from principles or tenants of your faith to really do to go out and make the world, I should say, a more inclusive place.

Amandeep Sidhu

Thanks, Phil. One of the reasons we have this identity as Sikhs is that we are considered to be ambassadors of our faith. Ambassadors of those concepts of equality and justice and accepting of communities regardless of their origins. And the turban itself was worn as a beacon, a crown in and of itself was a rejection of some of the inequality that existed, right? It was worn by royalty in South Asia at the time. You had a caste system, and in Sikhism, one of the concepts that came about in 1699 with that creation of the Khalsa, the sisterhood and brotherhood of Sikhs. And the adoption of this identity was also the fact that every Sikh man received the name Singh S-I-N-G-H, which means lion, and every Sikh woman took the name Kaur K-A-U-R, which means Lioness or Princess. And that by taking on those names and giving up your surname, you were giving up your caste, and you were taking on a name that denoted equality. That everyone would have the name Singh, everyone would have the name, Kaur. And that shifted to middle names, and some of that class identity has come back. My last name is Sidhu, which it ties me to a region of Punjab. That's a farming community. But my middle name is Singh, but many and a large majority of Sikhs take just the name Singh or just the name Kaur, a sense of that equality. This idea of a Langar or a meal at the end of our services on Sundays or in India, you know, every day. Everyone sits on the floor regardless of your social or financial station. You sit on the floor during the religious service equal to one another. You cover your head out of respect. You take off your shoes out of respect. You eat a meal sitting on the floor out of respect. The meal while there are no dietary restrictions in the Sikh faith. The meal that's served is vegetarian, so everyone can come. And regardless of your religious practice or your dietary restrictions, you can come. And so people that travel in India or travel to larger cities in the U.S., they can just go to a gurdwara, a Sikh place of worship and receive a free meal, because that's just sort of the way that they've operate. And so you see all these tragedies that are happening around the world with earthquakes and flooding and tsunamis and everything that's going on in India right now with the farmers protests outside of New Delhi challenging some of the oppressive laws that are impacting farmers primarily in Punjab and around the country. You see these Langers, these open meals that are happening there to provide resources and support to people who have been displaced or facing tragedy or

homeless or whatever their experience is. And so that spirit of the Sikh faith is one of engagement. And there's an idea of Chardi Kala, like the idea that you are constantly in a state of overwhelming joy to do something good in this world. And so that idea, it really permeates like members of the Sikh faith. And so, it's not a unique thing to the Sikh faith. There are people across the world and across the faith community that have similar excitement about just doing good things in the world. But that is sort of baked into being a Sikh. And so, you know, for me, I'm not a victim. I'm absolutely not a victim. I remember after 9/11 sitting on my cellphone and watching the news and actually crying and thinking, what are we going to do? And that lasted one night, and then after that it was, what are we going to do? Because we need to do something. And for me, deciding to go into the corporate world and spend time my career now in the big law world. That wasn't a foregone conclusion that I would either do that or I would be successful doing that. But in and of itself, it became a challenge that I'm going to be a trailblazer by virtue of me being here. And if I'm able to make it, someone behind me is going to be able to make it. And I'm going to be able to mentor those folks that are coming up behind me, and I do. So that they are not the first. Right. One of the people that was one of my earliest mentors and friends that became a lawyer is Gurbir Grewal, who went to William & Mary Law School. And he was a 1 hour when I was a first-year in college, and we knew each other from before we were friends and became much more close while we were together in Williamsburg for three years. He was the first person who I looked to say, okay, a big law firm might be an option because he had done it. I didn't know any lawyers, but I knew one. Should I do a clerkship? He said yes. He went on to be a federal prosecutor and then a state prosecutor. And he's now the attorney general of New Jersey.

Phil Wagner

Wow.

Amandeep Sidhu

He is the first turban-wearing Sikh attorney general in U.S. history. And so when I look to those people like that that have just been trailblazers in their experience and him being in that position, it sends such a strong message of acceptance. Such a strong message to say, the top law enforcement officer in the state of New Jersey who oversees every aspect of law enforcement in that state, wears a turban and beard. Wears it proudly. Doesn't hesitate to speak about his identity but also to speak about the values that are extended by that. So, you know, Juneteenth celebrations, LGBTQ celebrations, Asian American Pacific Islander History Month, whatever it has been, it's someone with a turban conveying the sense that these things are important to us as Americans and for him New Jerseyans. And so, anyway, that's sort of been my mode of operation throughout my life.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. And there's something I think, so inclusion focused about Sikhism from what I understand. And I could be wrong because I'm not a part of the community, but the purpose the goal of Sikhism, unlike many other organized religions, is not to cultivate converts, right?

You're not trying to steal from the Christians to add to the Sikh pile, right? The goal is to encourage deeper faith exploration in authentic ways for those people. Correct.

Amandeep Sidhu

That's absolutely right. Yeah, no, it's a faith that is the fifth largest religion in the world. They're about as many members of the Sikh faith as there are members of the Jewish faith globally. But in ultra-small minority. In India, it's less than 2% of the population, and it's more than billion people. So it's still a lot of people. But it's a small minority. In the U.S., they're about 500,000 Sikhs. And then you've got pockets around the world in the U.K. and in Canada and Australia and New Zealand and Africa. And so you have Sikh community around the world, in the diaspora. But, yeah, the purpose of the faith is not to grow the numbers per se but to spread the message.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Amandeep Sidhu

And the message is that there's a way for us all to get along. There's a way, and it's acceptance. It's accepting of the fact that people are different and they have different ways of living. They have different ways of having a relationship with God. And if we don't respect that, then we're going to have a world plagued with violence and discord.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, and you tee us up well for what is my final question of today. The inclusion focus, the goal of cultivating authentic relationships, and really the centering of mentorship. I think it's highlighted well in this conversation. And so I'm wondering for my final question, knowing that mentorship sort of just flows from you, it's a natural extension of your faith. I'm wondering if you can offer any helpful words or insight or mentorship to those listeners who might find themselves in the place that you found yourself in 2000, right. In the pre-stages of becoming an unsuspecting trailblazer. What advice do you have to give those folks resilience to go out and make the changes when it's tough when the conversation isn't always friendly towards diversity and inclusion? What advice do you wish 21 year old you had before going out and changing the world like you have?

Amandeep Sidhu

Well, thank you and for overstating the impact that I've had, but I appreciate it, Phil. For me, if I look back, the path that I've taken was not by design. I didn't sit down when I was 18 and say, I'm going to go to William & Mary, and I'm going to graduate from William & Mary, and I'm going to go to law school, and I'm going to get a clerkship. And I'm going to go to big law firm, and I'm going to be a partner in seven years. And I'm going to do all this. That was not the conversation that I had. It was I'm going to figure this out along the way because my parents were immigrants. They came to the U.S. in the 70s. They both were in the science and medical community. That was all they knew. And so, for me to decide to walk the law school

in and of itself was a very unique path to go down because they didn't know any lawyers. I didn't know any lawyers. The only thing they were familiar with was sort of the worst stereotypes of lawyers. There's a funny story of when I graduated from law school, I had accepted my clerkship, and I was getting a pro bono award from the Virginia State Bar, and my judge was sitting with my dad in the back of the room, and my father leaned over and said, you know, when Aman decided to go to law school, I was really not sure if he was going to do something good in the world. And my judge leaned over, and he was like, I think Aman's going to be okay. For me, as I embarked on that path, I was both tragically but also fortunately able to be part of the group that created this organization, the Sikh Coalition. I knew that that was something that I was deeply passionate about, and it was just a natural extension of what I had grown up doing as just my day to day on an education and outreach. But I also sort of had this alternate vision of, like, I want to make it. I want to do it in this corporate law world. And I think there's something that I can achieve there and an impact that I can have and expertise I can gain, and important work I can do when my health care and my sciences practice. But how do I make it all work? And again, not by design. But I was really lucky that I was able to frame this pro bono component of the work that I do in private legal practice. And so, I brought in the Sikh Coalition as a pro bono client of my law firm. We did a ton of work around hate crimes and profiling, and bullying in schools. And in 2009, we partnered with the Sikh Coalition to lead out on an effort to end religious discrimination in the U.S. military. And that could be an entire hour separate podcast. But I will just very briefly say that Sikhs had served with turbans and beards in the U.S. military for most of the 20th century. In the early 1980s effectively, there was a ban on all religious identity. So yamakas, beards, turbans, hijabs, everything was banned, and some communities were more organized, and the Jewish community was able to challenge and legislatively change the policy. The Sikh community was a little bit newer and smaller in the U.S., and so that ban effectively persisted. Until 2009, we had two clients who came to us and said, we're being told we have to shave our beards and take off our turbans to continue our service. What do we do? And we were able to put together a campaign that included media and lobbying and legal and everything else in between and get them accommodations. And then another guy behind them in 2010, and in 2016, we had to litigate a couple of cases. But in 2017, the Army changed their policy. So nine years after the launch of the campaign, the Army opened its doors, and now there are 70 turban-wearing Sikh service members in the U.S. Army. The Air Force followed suit, and we're still working on the Marines in the Air Force. But I've done that all from the perch of this corporate legal environment. And I've done it as a pro bono lawyer. And so going to your question on like what my advice is. Is that as you're cultivating what you're going to do professionally, right. If you're going down the track of business or academics or law or medicine or science, whatever it is, that may be your soul and life profession, and that's great. But if it's not, if there's something else that sort of makes you tick, there's a way to integrate it right. There's a way to find balance. And in particular, in the last few years and in the last year, even more specifically, where the awakening in a corporate world of what's possible in terms of corporate social impact is so high that find a way to balance that. And that's just generally good advice like balance what you're doing in your day-to-day. That's paying your bills. That's keeping your life sustainable. If there's something else, make sure you find a way to integrate that into your life because it can be deeply rewarding. And for me, it's been the work of. The thing I'm most

proud of is the pro bono work I've done with the Sikh Coalition because I know that that impacted not just people's lives but the trajectory of history in this country.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Amandeep Sidhu

The first two observant Sikh men. We got them into West Point in 2017, and they just graduated from West Point.

Phil Wagner

Wow.

Amandeep Sidhu

That wouldn't have happened if all this legwork hadn't been done. It wouldn't have happened if we didn't have the resources that came together to be able to do that. And so don't underestimate the possibilities of what you can do, you know, across different buckets because there's a way to do it.

Phil Wagner

Wow. I'm so inspired by all that you shared today, and again, there's so much to unpack, and I appreciate that because I think it will give our listeners a lot to think about in so many ways that I think can inform our approach to diversity, equity and inclusion and work. Thank you. It's all I know how to say right now because I think I'm still processing and learning from your approach. I think it's just incredibly balanced and mature, gracious, and thank you so much for sharing so openly. Thank you for your candor. Thank you for going to very vulnerable spaces and sharing some of the experiences post 9/11. It has truly been a pleasure to speak with you.

Amandeep Sidhu

Thanks so much, Phil. I really appreciate it.

Phil Wagner

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