

Interview with Kameron Smalls

00:00:03**SPEAKER_PSK**

This is prabhdeep singh kehal. Today is June 28th, 2023. I'm interviewing for the first time Kameron Smalls. This interview is taking place in Madison, Wisconsin, virtually, while Kameron Smalls is in California. This interview is sponsored in part by Jakara and is part of the Storytelling and Settlement through Sikh LGBTQIA+ Oral Histories Project. Thank you so much for joining me today. Just for transparency's sake for anyone who's listening, we both know each other.

00:07:00**SPEAKER_KS**

We do.

00:49:00**SPEAKER_PSK**

So this is a wonderful, beautiful moment for us to get to come together and just talk about you. And I'm so excited to do it. [shared laughter]. So to set us up for the rest of our time today, we're going to start the conversation a little bit broad. When you think back to your experiences of growing up, tell me a little bit about what comes to mind for you. To you, are there common stories, smells, or relationships that come to mind that help you describe growing up?

00:01:28**SPEAKER_KS**

The very first thing I think about is sickle cell. Is hospitals and having a chronic illness. My mom, it's like all of that at once, really. After having a stroke, there's a lot of my childhood I don't remember. So I will have to ask my mom a lot of times. Recently when I was watching, after I saw The Little Mermaid, the one with Halle Bailey in it, I remember The Little Mermaid being one of the very few Disney movies that I really, really liked. I had the bedding, the sheets, and so I went and asked my mom about it. It made me ask my mom, "What did I like as a kid?" Because a lot I don't remember. And she immediately was like, "Sports." And I was like, "Oh.

Watching or playing?" She was like, "Both." I was like, "Okay." Those memories started rushing back. But, I mean it's true. I was playing sports for as long as I can remember. And there was always this sort of like, my childhood seemed like a childhood of polar opposites in some ways because I had this chronic illness that meant I was not supposed to be able to do a lot of the things that I did as a kid. I was in a hospital quite a bit, definitely more than the average kid, but a lot less than the average person who has my illness. And so I always thought I was like, really blessed, like really lucky in that way. And every time I wanted to try a new sport, my doctor was like, "I don't think, I don't know." And my mom never said no. She never hesitated. She was like, "What do you want to try? Okay, let's do it. How can we manage this? How can we make this happen?" And you know, by the time I got to be a teenager in high school, my doctor stopped saying, "I don't think you'll be able to do it." He was just like, "Let me know how it goes." And so that's what I remember of my childhood. Is like a childhood of opposites.

But everything is sort of impacted by having sickle cell, having this chronic illness. But having a chronic illness that was definitely at the time, you know, late 80s, 90s, early 2000s, very much considered a Black disease. And growing up in the suburbs, like middle class, in a Black family, like the only Black kid in my private school, the only Black kid in my suburbs, like, being very different from the people at my church I was raised in a very Christian family. Went to church every Sunday, Bible study every Tuesday. So there are like these like, sort of pillars, like these core, like fundamental things about my childhood that I do remember. So even though I don't I don't remember a lot of details, I know like, Christianity was a big influence and sickle cell and advocacy work for sickle cell was a big influence. And because of that, I started to understand race at a very early age. Even though I didn't necessarily have the language for it. I did understand it. Same thing with going to private school in the suburbs and predominantly white spaces. So that's kind of what I think back when I really think about my childhood. I might not have like the details, but I definitely have the broad strokes. And whenever I talk about it with my mom, she kind of confirms them and fills in those blanks for me.

00:04:47**SPEAKER_PSK**

Thank you. And when you say that your childhood, for you, is that, what age ranges would you, if you had to, throw onto that, you know? And you also mentioned after your stroke, there was certain things that you couldn't remember before it. So where in your childhood did that fall?

00:05:06**SPEAKER_KS**

So for me, my childhood is anything before I moved away for college. So I left home at 17 to go to Xavier University in New Orleans, which is 3,000 miles away from Bay Area, California. So that's childhood for me. Like that's what I sort of considered childhood. Even though like yeah I was technically still a kid and my mom always had this sort of almost mantra, like "You can make your own decisions when you're grown and you're grown when you're taking care of yourself." And so I was such, I was so in a hurry to just be grown, you know? I was like 17, bye, I'm gone. I knew I wasn't staying home for college. I was like, I'm so in a hurry to be grown. So that's childhood for me.

And then in terms of my stroke, it's weird because there are things that I. There are like flashes and glimpses that I will remember or I can recall that are before an age I should probably be able to remember. But then there are things that like, I don't remember at all. Like I really don't, I used to go to Disneyland every year as a kid. My biological father used to take me. I don't really remember any of those trips. Like if it were not for pictures, I wouldn't remember. And I was definitely old enough. I was in elementary school, in junior high. And I don't remember really any of it. I remember looking at pictures and being like, oh, I remember that outfit, but I don't remember that trip to Disneyland at all. I remember I took that friend with me. She was my best friend in first grade, but I don't remember that trip at all. So the stroke was in, and luckily it was a pretty minor one and I did recover like 90 something percent. That was in 2015. But the thing about sickle cell is that because it's a blood disorder and it's sort of characterized by a lot of like complications with your blood and circulation and things like that, even if you don't have a stroke, a lot of people with sickle cell have memory problems. Have like cognitive functioning issues because, you know, you can have these sort of almost like micro strokes, right? Like if your brain is just not getting enough blood flow or proper oxygen, or if you're having these little mini attacks over and over and over throughout your whole, you know, your life, that can affect you cognitively anyway. So, you know, like memory issues are not, and cognitive function issues are not like really uncommon for us.

00:07:26**SPEAKER_PSK**

And thank you. When you're thinking about. You said a few things that I want to sort of like touch on and follow up on. One is that you mentioned growing up in a Christian household and that being a big touchstone for you. Was that some, could you share a little bit about what you mean by that? And in what ways that continued after you were 3,000 miles away from home?

00:07:51 **SPEAKER_KS**

Oh, yeah, for sure. So my parents were, my mom was raised Christian. My family's from the South, right? So they're all from Arkansas. My mom was, I think, maybe the first sibling born in California. She's the youngest of five, I think. And I think she might have been, I know she was born in California, but I know some of my uncles were born in Arkansas. And I say that just to say like, Southern Baptist, like Black Southern Baptist, that was my family, right? And so that, so even though I was raised in California, there were still very much the foundations of like Black Southern Baptist in how we were raised and like the food that we eat, like and all of those things. And I've come to realize that Christianity for my family has very much been about survival, which I imagine it is for a lot of people, right? A lot of Black people, especially. But with my granny being not, not far at all removed from slavery. You know, not having really a formal education because she was, you know, descendant of sharecroppers. And like, that wasn't a thing. I mean, I remember, like, I don't remember specifically, but it was just a reoccurring thing that I heard throughout my life that my mom wanted one kid so that she could afford to send that kid to private school. So that kid could have the best possible education and then go to college. And she wanted it to be a daughter. She wanted one kid. She wanted to be able to afford me to have a great education. It was something that was so important for her because that was something that she wanted. And you can almost see this, like us getting closer, right? Like my granny, she got to the third grade and then like my uncles got a little bit further. And then my mom was able to graduate high school and then got her AA, right? And then I was able to get my BA. Like, so you sort of see this very intentional setting up of like for the next generation, which I'm, you know, incredibly grateful for. But Christianity plays a large part in that, in that, you know, a lot of the rules that we live by, a lot of the way that we lived our lives had to do with whether things were right or wrong based on Christianity.

We went to church every single Sunday for as far back as I could remember. I was so involved in the church, which in a lot of ways, I am really grateful for this sort of like religious foundation. I am. As much as I feel like

I have a little bit of religious trauma thanks to Christianity and the way that it was like practiced, I still am very grateful for that foundation because something that I've experienced that the statistics say sort of all the time is like, religion can bring you comfort, right? And that was something that I needed growing up, being sick, being different from the other kids, like having near death experiences that were very traumatic, dealing with medical trauma on a regular basis, being, you know, dealing with misogyny before I could understand misogyny, like before I had the language to name it. You know, like Christianity really helped me a lot in those in those times. So I am grateful for it.

But I mean, it, it was everything like my, to this day, my stepdad who is I was, I was raised, my parents got divorced when I was 14 months old, my biological parents. Then my mom got remarried when I was about three or four. And so my stepdad's been in my life for for that long. And he got, so I'm gonna try to make this brief. My stepdad got shot on, the night he dropped my mom off after their first date, he got shot. So he had this sort of like life epiphany, like, oh my god, life flashing before my eyes. So he got heavy into church is what happened. And then they start dating. And so now he's like, "Oh, I promise God, if I don't die, I would go to church," you know, or whatever, whatever moment he had with God, definitely brought my family in it. Because my granny, she went to church, but she wasn't like she went to church because it was what you were supposed to do. You know, she went to church every Sunday, because that's what you do. That's what Black people do in the south. "What do you mean you don't go to church? So you're worshipping the devil?" [laughter] Like, that's it was like the only two options. It was like you go to church every Sunday, women wear skirts, and you are whatever, or you're worshipping the devil. Like, that's the only option. So I feel like when my stepdad came into the picture, that's when it wasn't just church to be going to church. It was like we were involved in church. We were. He was I mean, he was never a deacon because he didn't technically want the responsibility. But he's very much considered an elder. He's very much, you know, called up to the front sometimes to do this or to make this announcement. But he was very, very involved. He's in, he still is. He still is very much a trustee of the church. And so our little family was very known. You know, and so I was mindful of how I presented and like how I dressed and what I did and how I behaved in church and that I was involved in. So I was like very, very involved in the church step team, in this activity.

And our church did do a lot for the community, which I will, again, is something I'm really, really grateful for. I don't see a lot of churches doing that, not Christian churches, at least. Which is interesting, because I think that's

part of what led me to Sikhi later. Because most Christian churches, I've found, will talk the talk or say whatever. Like, there are some neighborhoods even in the bay where you'll find a church on every other corner, but then the neighborhood and the community is just like, trash. Like it's just in dire straits. Whereas the community where our church was, everybody in that community knew if you needed anything, you go to that church, they will take care of you. We had a pantry, we had a closet, we had whatever. We were there every week giving stuff out. Like yes, proselytizing, of course. But also there was community work without the direct proselytizing too. Like there was just very much involved in the community. And that was a big, big thing for my mom, even outside of Christianity. That's just who my mom is. My mom is a person who will start a coat drive in winter because the news said it's going to be extra cold this winter. So she wants to start a coat drive. Like that's just who she is. "Oh, you need a shirt? One second, you can have this one." Like, and then now she's standing there without a shirt. You know, like, like people say that about their family members, but I've seen my mom do stuff like that. Like that's who she is. And that's who my church was. I don't really think they're like that anymore. But that's a different story.

00:14:15 **SPEAKER_PSK**

Another day.

00:14:16 **SPEAKER_KS**

Yeah. But the leaders of the church at that time, that's who they were. And that was my life. Like that's how I grew up. Like, you do for the community. If you have more, if you've been more, you know, blessed, if you're more fortunate, you share that. Like you are supposed to spread that abundance. Like you do take care of people.

So yeah, that was that was that was a lot of of my and that's also where I sort of was able to like revel in my Blackness, like safely a little bit more safely, right? Like, not fully. Because even there – because I was so different, because I had grown up in predominantly white spaces, I was definitely reminded that I was different. Like, you know, I wasn't like a regular. I wasn't like a regular Black kid or whatever. But it wasn't terrible. It was more intrigue. It was more interest. It was more, what shoes are you wearing? Like, what are Vans? Like, what? What do you mean? Like you skateboard? What are you listening to? Can I listen to that? It wasn't you

know, it wasn't so much. It wasn't all terrible. But church is where, church is why I feel like even though I grew up in predominantly white spaces, I still I never questioned my Blackness. I never felt like not Black. I always knew who I was that and just you know, everything in my house was Black. Santa was Black, like, you know, all that stuff. But church did that for me.

00:15:44**SPEAKER_PSK**

Church did that for you. And then you said, you said the service part of your, of being in church, is partly what led you to Sikhi. And then at the same time, you also said, well, that means that at some point, you found, Sikhi found you, you found Sikhi. When did the, how, how did your church experience lead you to that? And then when did that happen? Like, was that before you left for college after you left for college?

00:16:16**SPEAKER_KS**

So I went to Christian school my entire life. They were private schools, but they were also religious. So they were either Christian, Lutheran, Catholic, from preschool to university, right? So I've only ever been in religious-based schools. Which comes with a lot of required religion courses, right? And I went to Xavier University, not because it was a religious school, but because it was an HBCU that really specialized in sending Black students to medical school, right? They're ranked number one for sending Black students to medical school, graduating pre-med students. And that's what I wanted to do at the time. And so it just happened to be a Catholic university, the only Black Catholic university in the U.S..

So it just turns out I end up now in a Catholic university. And I do think all of this happens for a reason, because even though I changed my mind about being a doctor, I had already fallen in love with the school, decided to go to the school anyway. There at the school, theology courses were required. I started learning more about Christianity, not just what I was taught, but like really studying and learning and history and translation, things that they never touched on in church, right? Like, I was led to believe, like, God himself wrote this book. Like, you know, he typed it up, and then he hand delivered the Bible like that that, you know. And then I get to, to university, and it's like, "Oh, no, this person wrote this. And like, there was translation." And I'm starting to like, really think about stuff.

I think this is what's interesting, like, my church, the church I grew up in theory was like, perfect, almost. And in praxis was very close to it, like doing everything that they say church is for and supposed to do, except when it came to queerness. Right? Like, that was the I grew up hearing, like, "You carry your wife's purse? You, when your wife tells you to hold her purse right quick, you you you you hold it? Like what? What man does that?" Like, I grew up hearing that. Like, that's a weird thing to point. You know, like now mind you growing up, I didn't know I was queer. Like, I knew gender wise, I now say like "I was always queer." Because I was always a tomboy. I was always like gender nonconforming, didn't have name for it, didn't have labels for it. Didn't know. But because I'm pan, had been attracted to the opposite gender, the opposite sex. So this sort of like compulsive, hetero, you know, heteronormativity, heterosexuality, I didn't really know I was queer yet. But I knew some of the things that they were saying was just like rubbing me the wrong way. I just wasn't feeling it.

So I get to college, I take theology classes, I start learning, I start studying, and then my niece comes out, at the time as gay. 14 years old.

00:19:08**SPEAKER_PSK**

And your age difference at this point is just

00:19:10**SPEAKER_KS**

I am. Yeah, well, I think we're about seven years apart.

00:19:15**SPEAKER_PSK**

Okay.

00:19:17**SPEAKER_KS**

Something like that. Because I'm just finishing up college. I think this might have been like 2007. I went to I went to university from 2005 2009 is when I graduated. So this is probably 2007. And my niece comes out, my mom texts me about it. And in my mind, I'm like, oh, finally. Like, mind you, we've watched this child grow up. We've had conversations about this. We've had conversations about this child, putting on a do rag and pretending it's hair, putting on a Superman cape and pretending it's a dress, right. And so finally, oh, good for them. And my mom is reacting in a way that makes me not recognize my mom. I was like, "I don't even know who you are. Like, if somebody would have told me you were to react, you were to respond and react like this, I would have called them a liar." And I was so disappointed, but also so shaken up by how she responded. And I think at that time, I had already started like, discovering my queerness, not really completely sure like who I was, but I had already started like, thinking about those things. So I'm pretty sure that was probably on my mind. So I don't remember exactly. But I'm pretty sure that was like kind of in my mind, too.

But the way that she was responded was just so not her. And I kind of realized in that moment, like, "Oh, one Christianity has a chokehold on us. If you're responding this way, because you feel like you're supposed to." One. And two, "Christianity doesn't seem to be vibing with queerness. And I don't know if that's going to work for me." And even though I was it wasn't really about the queerness. It was about it. This is how I thought of it in my head. Christianity, this thing is making my mom behave in a way that is not her. In a way that I do not recognize. And she keeps going back to Christianity. It seems like this is the thing that's making her behave. It was like a drug almost, you know, like, it's like, it's like when I when I watch like, intervention or like other shows when it's about addiction, they say like addiction has a hold on them. And they don't even recognize their child anymore. I felt like I didn't recognize my mom. And it just seemed like Christianity was the cause, was the root of it. And so it made me think and stop and like reflect. And I finally had to tell my mom, like, "I'm really confused about your response, because you're pretending like we did not see this coming, right?" And then I will, I will sort of like fast forward a few years later, that same niece, I'm saying niece now, at the time I was not saying niece, but the same niece would come out as trans. Okay, so that worked out, like, and I will probably get to that in a second. But it kind of just confirmed, like, I made the right decision about leaving, because that is what was the catalyst for me leaving. There were other things that happened. But it was just like the perfect storm of things. I had taken these theology courses that already made me start questioning things and being like, wait a minute, this is not what I was taught. And then I was asking questions of my pastor and of my stepdad, the two most, you know, supposedly knowledgeable people, elder people in the church that I could trust. And

their answers were *so* not satisfactory. It was basically on it was it was a level of it is how it is like. You know, you don't need to understand everything. Oh, that doesn't work for me. That's not going to work for me. And on top of that, it's making you treat these people that you love these people that you raised in a way that you would not otherwise. Okay, this isn't going to work.

And something that I also contributed to it, what I what I mentioned earlier, when I got to school at 17, I immediately tried to find a new quote, unquote, church home, right? That was like, I was heavily kind of like pushed, "Get out there, find a church home. Find a church home." Because the theory that, the thinking is, if you find a church home, and you stay in the church, you won't get turned out, you won't get lost in the sun, you know, you'll stay on the straight and narrow. Well, I did try to find a church home. The problem was every church, the church I came from had set the bar so high in terms of doing things for the community. And, you know, being laid back in terms of how we dress. When, like a lot of churches say come as you are, but they don't really mean that like they say come as you are, but then they don't look at you with a side I like as you come down the aisle to your seat. My church was generally like genuinely not like that they were like, "Hey, you're back! like, What's up? Come sit up front with." Like, they were just, it's, it's the church you want it to be minus the homophobia, right? Like, it's like the church you want to be but with a sprinkling of homophobia, right? Which so.

So I tried to find a church home, but everything was falling short. Because I was noticing things. I was experiencing what other people were talking about: pastors in the in the pulpit with expensive jewelry on and like, all this high tech stuff and like driving fancy cars. And I will never forget being in church one Sunday and the pastor mentioned something about one of the congregants needing to stop going to college because they couldn't afford it anymore. Like they were so close to finishing their degree, but they couldn't, they couldn't afford to finish it or something like that. And I think they were trying to like sort of like crowdfund, you know or you know. And my mind was like, timeout, timeout, I'm confused. I'm confused. You just said they need how much to finish. And you're standing in the pulpit wearing this and you're driving this car and this church looks like this and it has this much money. I don't understand because when my church, we just met in the in like Grand Lake Theater when we needed to when we outgrew our church building. If a, if a congregant, we would never have a congregant that close to finishing their degree, needing that amount of money, and and then have to

drop out of college. It would not happen. My church would have been like, we will figure this out. I don't care if the church has to write a check. Like, that's just how they were.

And so all of those things sort of combined, kind of led up to, I don't think I don't know if Christianity is for me. I don't know if this is going to work for me. And then the thing with my mom and my niece happened that. And I was like, goodbye, like, I'm not doing this. I was very, very protective of my niece at the time. And I just I, I was like, I can't do this. And that's what made me leave. And I left. But I knew I still believed in God. I knew based on my life experience, like there were just moments in my life, especially having a chronic illness, especially being near death multiple times. There's really not anything anybody can say to me to not make me believe in God. In a higher power, because of the things that I've experienced. I totally understand why somebody wouldn't or why somebody might be agnostic or atheist, I get it. But I would have to laugh at myself if I, if I tried, if I said I was atheist. So that's, that's what led me to leave Christianity. But I knew I wasn't leaving God, you know. Like I was like, Oh, I'm gonna just do the like spiritual but not religious thing.

But because of how I grown up, and because I'd had, because church had been such an integral part of my upbringing. And it wasn't enough. It wasn't enough for me to just be like this solo person on an island believing in God. And that's when I started the journey of trying to find a different religion. And I tried in a bunch of different religions for size. And long story short, I ended up taking this random quiz online, like, "What religion should you be?" and they had a list of like, every religion I've ever heard of. And I took this quiz. And Sikhi kept coming up in the top three. And I kept ignoring it because I was like, "Sikhi, I think that's like, that's like the brown folks with the turbans. No, no, that doesn't, that can't be." And I just kept ignoring it. But then the other two were like, Universal Unitarian, it was like, basically, like, "You just believe in God and anything goes." And I was like, "That's not what I'm looking for." And finally, I stopped and I was like, "Okay, let me read. Why does it keep saying Sikhi is like, right for me?" And I read it and was like, I don't think this is true. Let me read a different source. Because it was just so perfect. It just was like, everything that I was looking for. And I've said this before, but like, it was like, somebody designed a religion for me. You know, it was like, God was like, "I got you. Hold on one second." All right. And then like, here, here's this religion. Cool. And then I was like, "Oh, cool, cool, cool. This works." And then my the next pause was, "Are there any Black Sikhs? Oh, God, I don't want to be the only Black one again. I can't do this. I cannot go through this again. Like I do not." I just left my HPC. You I have now discovered what it is like to be in an environment where I don't have to

constantly like fight like, you know, or worry about racism or misogyny. I was like, "I can't do this again. I'm not doing I'm not going to be the only Black person again. I'm not." And luckily, I'm not. But that was the first that was my first that was the only thing that was like gonna stop me at that point.

00:28:14**SPEAKER_PSK**

Wow. I'm just sort of, I'm taking in how much, how many seismic shifts you had in your life, all before finding Sikhi. Or you know, it coming across. And in the way that you talk about it, it almost seems like every single seismic shift, if we use the phrase that I'm using, was like, dislodging you from something. What would you say, if that sounds right, what was it dislodging you from?

00:28:44**SPEAKER_KS**

I think dislodging is a good word because something that I don't know if this is, I don't think this is an AAV thing. I really don't. But I do notice like a lot of Black people will say like, we'll say like, "Oh, Christianity has a chokehold on the Black community." Like we say it all the time, right? But that's really what it felt like, right? And it felt like these seismic shifts, as you're saying, was just sort of like shaking me loose from this thing. This life that I thought I was supposed to have, right? Because at that time, I saw my life. Like I saw, you know, growing up in the church, they tell you what your life should look like, right? So like you should definitely go to get an education, you know, some of that stuff was overwritten by what my mom very much like, instilled in my life.

But for context, I will say this, and I think, I I think a lot of people will relate to this. I will, I usually will ask, when I'm trying to describe my mom or explain the context of my upbringing, I will say like, "Do you know how like first generation people or children of immigrants describe their parents, you know? How like, they're really hard on them, they're really strict, and they're like, you know, blah, blah, blah, blah. I'm like, okay, that's my mom, except she's not an immigrant. Like she's just a descendant of slaves. And she just has a very clear idea of what she wanted for the next generation for her child." You know, like, it was like, she was the first one in her family to be like, "Y'all are cool with what you have, and the status quo, and that's good. That's good. But that's not enough for me. Bye." You know, and so she kind of like branched out. And I'm saying that to say, like,

my childhood was very, like, very involved. My granny complained a lot about me being too involved, having too many activities. I mean, I had more community service hours than I could count. And I did every sport. And I was in like, young entrepreneur, this, and I was in this program. And I was like, I was just the most well-rounded kid in the Bay Area. And through all of that, I still like, thanks to Christianity, I still had a very clear idea of what my life should look like. And I should be married by this age. I should be married to a man by this age. After I get my degree, I get this job, and I do this, and I do this, and I do this.

And again, like you said, a lot of these seismic shifts started happening. And I think it started with me having to come out to my mom as an aspiring musician, which is much harder than coming out as queer, which is why I gave the context about my mom is kind of like first gen, you know, like how first gen kids talk about their parents. Telling my mom I didn't want to be a doctor anymore was like, it, the only thing that was, no, it was actually scarier than telling her I wasn't a Christian anymore. Because telling her I wasn't a Christian anymore, I had already made up my mind. Like, telling her I wanted to do music professionally, or pursue a career in the arts was so much scarier, because of how my childhood had gone up until that point. She had spent thousands, Tens of hundreds of thousands of dollars on my education up until that point. On preparing me to go into medical school and to be a doctor and to like, my life was set up. And Christianity was the framework for that, for that life.

And so, yeah, I think seismic shifts is, is great, is a great description because those seismic shifts sort of like loosen that chokehold that Christianity had on me. And in a lot of ways, you know, I tell my mom, like, really, it's your fault. Like you set this up in ways like you unknowingly set it up for me to leave Christianity. Like you really emphasize, you know, critical thinking and thinking on my own and not letting other people, not following people are doing things just because I was told to. And questioning things. And like, you sent me to these schools where I had to be, learn about Christianity on a deeper level. And like, really, this is your doing. And I think that's true. I think those seismic shifts just kind of loosen that chokehold that Christianity had on me.

And it allowed me to. Because it was scary. It was nobody else was leaving Christianity. Nobody else was questioning Christianity. Not out loud, at least, in the way that I was. Nobody around me was. And I felt very much like alone in doing that. And like I said. Like coming from a family, which I have heard a lot of people say this, where if you're not Christian, you must be worshiping the devil. Like there's they can't even imagine

that there are other religions. They're like, "Well, yeah, there are other religions, but those are wrong. Like, I mean, why would you want to," you know, like "That's just how it is. Like Christianity is the way the only way it's the truth. So if you're not doing this, you're not going to heaven. And if you're not going to heaven, you're going to hell. And so if you're going to hell, you must be worshiping the devil." And I really, those seismic shifts helped loosen that chokehold that that had on me. And once that chokehold was loosened, oh my God, the world opened up, right? Like the comphet [compulsory heterosexuality] sort of became less of a thing. And I was sort of able to question myself and like question, "When I was really close to that one friend, maybe that was actually a crush I had on her." Like I was, I was able to think about things that I wasn't before because of this, like this, this chokehold that Christianity had on me. So yeah, seismic shifts is perfect.

00:34:20**SPEAKER_PSK**

Wow. I'm. So much wonderfulness that you shared and I'm just, I don't think I've ever understood so clearly what someone means when they're like, I was more afraid of telling my parents I was gonna change, you know, from doctor to something else in your case, music, than I was about like other aspects of coming out. Cause that wasn't my case. I was definitely afraid, but I also lied about my profession until like I had to tell them otherwise. Um, but the comparison that you're making. Because you're saying that that career was also consistent with, you know, the spiritual worldview that you had been raised in. And like they had been, what, they'd just been so integrated in your life. So you mentioned, you know, having to tell your mom about that. And then comparing that to coming out later with your sexuality.

00:35:10**SPEAKER_KS**

Yeah.

00:35:11**SPEAKER_PSK**

What, how, what led you to each of these coming outs? I'll go ahead and just frame them that way.

00:35:18**SPEAKER_KS**

Um, so yeah, so we got the first, the first coming out was, “Uh oh, I don't want to be a doctor anymore.” Um, and that was. I, I always say, I discovered my purpose about nine. I remember, and it's very interesting. Oh, I don't know. That kind of just made me emotional. I don't know why. But there's a lot of my childhood I don't remember. But I do distinctly remember when I felt like I realized my purpose. I was nine years old, I was in the hospital, I was at Children's Hospital Oakland. Um, and it was around the time that I was like very, very sick and like not supposed to live. And, um, I had questioned why, you know, so for people who don't know about sickle cell, sickle cell is very much characterized by like a lot of pain. Um, you know, doctors and researchers have said it's more painful than, uh, uh, childbirth or heart attack. Right. Uh, for those people who will never experience childbirth. Um, and you have this pain like throughout your life. Um, and I remember being in the hospital and trying to remember why I wasn't as sick as most kids. Like I was sick and I was sort of questioning why sometimes. But my mom was always good at sort of like reframing things and being like, “Yeah, but you know, it could be worse. And it could be this and it could be that.” And I'm, I'm, you know, my mom's not perfect, but she definitely was the perfect mother for me. She was definitely the person that I needed growing up with this illness. Right. Because I was able to look at it and I sort of said like, “Well, maybe I have this illness so I can sort of understand and relate, but I'm not as sick so that I still can like be an advocate for it.” Like that was my nine-year-old brain trying to make sense of what was happening. And I sort of still kind of believe that a little bit. But regardless, it led me to feeling like advocacy was my purpose. This is what I should be doing with my life. And initially that was going to be via medicine. I was going to be a doctor. I was going to be a research scientist. I was going to be the one to find the cure because I was nine and I didn't know any better. And when I sort of settled in like, “Okay, I think this is my purpose,” things sort of started to get clearer for me, even at nine.

And again, like I said, my mom made sure I was involved in everything like that included music. Like again, this is *her* fault. Like she introduced me to me, like she's not big on music, but she introduced me to music. My biological father is really big into music. My stepdad is really big into music. Music was like, it was my drug. It was like my therapy. It was, you know, I've been doing, I've been learning music since fourth grade. But I mean, I remember begging my dad in the first grade to take me to a Patti LaBelle concert. And he was like, “You are not old enough. You are not going to be allowed in the venue.” And like me trying to like, “You can hide me. Like I have to go. Patti LaBelle is coming.” Mind you, I'm not that old. But I, you know, again, both my dads are 15 years older than my mom. So they are a bit older. So like all the music I was begging for as like a four-

year-old, you know, it was like The Temptations and like all this stuff. And I just wanted to be *that*. I just wanted to do this thing that made me feel good. It just sort of made me forget about like the pain of sickle cell, the complication of this, like when I was in that moment.

And then I f'd around and found out like I had a little bit of musical talent. And after that, it was over. I was like, "Oh, oh, I could, I could be a *part* of this. Oh, it's a wrap." So I kind of slowly just fell more and more in love with music, still thinking I would do the like doctor thing. And then I got to high school and I ended up doing this program. Like this, this sort of program slash like record label run by youth. And the feedback that I was getting from other people was the first time – because I wasn't sharing it with really with anybody outside of like my music class and stuff like that. But that was the first time I was getting feedback from other people like, "Oh, you're good. Like, no, like you're actually good. Like you should, you should really try to do this." Like adults, other, like my peers, like people from the Grammy Academy, I was meeting with them and like, and I was getting that feedback. And I was like, "Oh God, oh God." And it kept getting more and more real. And I was like, "If I do this, I'm going to have to tell my mom at some point." And I don't remember the question at this point. What was the question?

00:40:02 **SPEAKER_PSK**

You're totally fine. I was just asking you about what led to your experiences of coming, of each of the coming out.

00:40:11 **SPEAKER_KS**

Right. Okay. So that's what happened there. Long story short, after I realized I wanted to do music and I was working with this program, I was performing. I had my very first performance. We had been trained by the Grammy Academy. I had been going to the studio, all this on the sly. You know, I told my mom it was just some other program. It was It was a music program, but I didn't tell her I was doing the music but I was helping some other kids. And had all this stage performance training and blah, blah, blah. And then I had my very first show. And who's in the audience, my mom's coworker. But I didn't know it at the time. So she ended up calling my mom and being like, "Oh my God, Kameron was so great." And my mom's like, "What like, what are you

talking about?" That's kind of how I kind of got thrown out the closet and kind of had to admit like, "Yep, yep. I've been doing this behind your back." And it's funny because like about a week ago I texted my mom and I said, you know, "You owe me. Like I was, because really I was a good kid. I was a square kid and the stuff that I was worried about, like I'm freaking out over telling you I'm doing music after school. Like that's, that's how I'm spending my time. Like not drugs, not like with a boy or, you know, and some, you know, like all the things I could have been doing. And I was scared to tell you, I was at this youth program doing music." And so that's how that came out.

In terms of my queerness. I never really came out. And I think, I think part of why I never came out officially as queer is because I had already had to come out as like an aspiring musician and then a non-Christian. And at that point, and it's interesting because I was most terrified for the first one. The second one, when I came out as like, "I'm not Christian anymore". I'll never forget that either. I was in Delaware at the time. I had just moved up there. I had already decided a while before that, but I was, that's when I told her. After I moved up there. And that was tough. That was scary, but I was so sure in my decision. I was so confident in my decision. I was much more confident in that decision or much more secure. I won't say confident, I was much more secure in that decision than I was in my aspiring musician goals. And so I knew it was going to be tough. I knew I was kind of nervous. I was worried about what she was going to say, but I also knew that there was nothing that she could say to make me change my mind. Because I had done all the thinking and talking it out. And like, this was, this was the only right answer for me. And there was nothing that she could say. And so I kind of just had to. And with my mom, I know sometimes I just have to like, stand my ground. And be like, "You can say what you want to say, but like, this is what it is." So, you know, and just to kind of like remind her, like, this is still my life, right? Like, "I love you and I appreciate you, but this is my life and this is my decision." And so that's very much how I did that one.

And then by the time I realized, like, it was about two years after that, that I figured out my queerness. Cause at that point I knew I was some type of queer, but didn't understand. I was like, am I gay? Am I straight? Have I been lying to myself? Because again, pan and bi were not options for me. Like nobody was saying those words. It was just gay or straight. And you've either been lying your whole life or, you know, whatever. And so when I finally realized bi/pan and that's who I was, I was like, "Oh, okay, cool. Yeah. I'm not doing that coming out thing again. I'm not doing that again. This is who I am. People will find out when they find out." And I just like

started living life. I would post things on social media like I would about anything else. And if it was about this gender or that gender or whatever. Or if people were confused, they could ask questions. I think most of the people in my life got it pretty quickly and pretty clearly. I don't remember too many people asking me questions.

I think I will never forget the first time I had to admit that I was queer. Somebody who's my mom's coworker's son, who is gay, sort of like assumed I was queer based on my social media like postings. And was just like confirming like, "You identify as queer, right?" And in that moment, I remember my breath catching and being like, "Oh God, it's here. Like this is the first time somebody's like asking me directly." And I was like, "Am I going to lie? Am I going to be open and honest?" And I feel like that was the moment that I was like officially out, right? Because I didn't say, "Yeah, but don't tell anybody," or "Yeah, but you know, I'm not out," or I was just like, "Yep." And I knew that with his close connection to my mom, she could find out very quickly. Or maybe she won't. Or maybe he'll post something on social media. I just knew at that moment, "Okay, it's official now." And that feels more like an official coming out than anything else.

And I remember the first time I told my mom was, I was in the hospital. I think I was actually in a psychiatric unit, to be honest. And she was leaving. And I was like, "You know, I'm like bi, right? Or pan." Or I don't remember what I said, but I think I was just like, "Basically, gender is just really not a factor for me." And she was like, "Okay, all right." But I also think in that moment, I mean, she was literally visiting me on a psych ward. I was like on a 72 hour hold. I do think that that was probably the least of her worries at the time.

00:46:31 **SPEAKER_PSK**

Yes.

00:46:32 **SPEAKER_KS**

So, you know, she left, I don't know what happened. But in retrospect, I was I was like, "Maybe I shouldn't have sprung that on her like on the way to the elevator." But that's when she found out. And then I think like a year later, something we talked about it. And she gets it to the point where she's just like, "I know not to," she knows not to have any expectations. And in so many words, not to be surprised. And I think that's where they are right

now. Yeah.

00:46:07**SPEAKER_PSK**

Thank you for all of that. I also want to like, in that, in this, that storytelling you were just doing, it was also, you know, you said that you were getting emotional unexpectedly. So I also wanted to like, just if you hadn't had a moment to take a breath yet, I wanted to give you a chance to take a breath.

00:46:24**SPEAKER_KS**

Yeah, I did. I did. I think it might be why I kind of lost my way there for a second, but I did. I had to like, I had to really think about it. I'm not a hundred percent sure why. But I think part of it was just like, knowing that there's so much of my childhood I don't remember. I do sometimes wonder why certain things are so vivid in my memory. You know, it's, it does make me wonder sometimes. And I think that was just one of the things where I'm like, "Why do I remember this so important?" And it makes me think. Because I've always felt like knowing your purpose was important. And I don't know now if it's better to know your purpose. Well, anyways, we won't get in there, but yes, thank you. I, I, I, I did. I,

00:47:11**SPEAKER_PSK**

Good. The other thing I wanted to recognize is that, somehow your mother's coworkers were involved in both of those coming outs, right?

00:47:20**SPEAKER_KS**

What the hell is going on? Like, that's wild. Like I didn't, I didn't realize it until I was telling you like how the connections were. And I was just like, what the hell? But you know, the other thing that's wild is this is the same person, the guy who was like, "You're queer. Right?" And I was like, "Yeah." It's the same person who was like, "You should perform at San Francisco Pride." Like, "I'm helping, I'm volunteering this year. Send in this and send in this. I'm submitting you to perform." And that's how we ended up performing on the main stage of San

Francisco Pride in 2012. Cause this guy was like, "I'm submitting your music. I think you should perform." And we just, we were like at the end of another tour at that time. And, but yeah, that's, it's wild. It kind of came full circle at that point, but yeah.

00:48:07**SPEAKER_PSK**

I think that actually what you just shared, I have two very broad questions for you that I would like to ask and feel free to hop into either one. Because you sort of mentioned both of these at times. So I kind of want to try and pull, pull them together or pull them apart, depending on how they come to show up in your life. You've, you've mentioned how in some sense, both Sikhi and your, I don't want to use acceptance, but your, "Yeah, This is what I am. This is who I am." Around your queerness happened around the same time. And they happened after your music coming out. I'm just going to use that phrase. That's a lot of change to happen in a short time period of any life. Right? But you also mentioned a strong impact of your church, your people, your family, the people at Xavier. Moving around a lot. So I'm just wondering for you, as you're thinking about the communities that were a part of these seismic shifts in your life, or like moving you along. Who comes to mind? Like who are the big figures or like small figures as you're sitting here thinking about it that, led you to queer communities, that led you to Sikh communities, that led you to both, that led you to spaces of Blackness where you felt whole and even more safe?

00:49:37**SPEAKER_KS**

Yeah. I think one of the first times I felt like really safe, uh, but not just safe from like. You know, although you can never really fully be like safe from like racism or white supremacy. But sort of like safe in, in, in, in terms of, yeah, you get it. Just going to an HBCU for the first time. And that, that, that was one. Because while I was also like safe for the first time, it also put some things into perspective for the first time. It made me realize some things for the first time. And I know that that experience is not uncommon because I had these conversations with my peers while in school, right? Where we, we all sort of had this epiphany. Like, "Wait, you were the smart Black kid at your school? You were the smart, Oh, I was a smart Black kid in my school." Like, and you come to an HBCU that is very academic focused, that's very. You know, like a lot of HBCUs can be, you know, they're sort of characterized by like the football team and the marching band and the whatever

else. We don't have that. Like, it's a very nerdy HBCU. Again, it's very focused on sending people to medical school. It has a college of pharmacy. We don't have any sports teams. We got like a basketball team, a tennis team, maybe track. And we have Greek life. We don't have marching, but we don't have any of that. So it's very academic focused. It can be very competitive in that way. And so everybody there was the smart Black kid at their school, right? Like either, either they went to a Black school and they were one of the like gifted ones. Or, they were in predominantly white environments, and they were the smart Black kid in that way. And so we came together and we had this like, "Oh, snap. Okay, we're out here." But the real realization was like, "We're not special." And what I mean by that is like, you know, I grew up, I got compliments about being articulate about how articulate I was. And how well spoken I was, not realizing like those were microaggressions and thinking they were compliments, but then sort of realizing that sometimes when I heard from some people, it didn't feel good. And I couldn't figure out why. And then I started having these conversations with my peers. And I'm like, "You got that too? Okay, yeah, that was kind of weird. Okay." And then And then we start to realize like, happening. That was one of the first times I really felt like safe, but also seen and started really understanding a lot of what was happening and had happened already.

Um, the other thing I will say is that I fully 100% believe birds of a feather flock together. Like there's you cannot tell me otherwise. And here's why. I had no idea I was queer growing up. Didn't start to really think about it, experiment, whatever until college, right? Despite that, the friends that I hung out with in high school have all since come out as queer. In college, okay. I had my little group, you know, especially being an introvert, you have your group. We had our group. We were weird, we were different. We didn't do a lot of parties. I had my group. Almost everybody, every one of them has since come out as queer. None of us were out as queer or talking about queerness while in school. And now there's only like two people who are straight, right? Like that's a birds of a feather flock together. Like I, I don't, I cannot explain it, but why are all my friends queer? I didn't seek them out like that. You know, like there's just something about that. Um, I feel like it's, I don't know if it's like an energy thing. I don't know, but there's something. I mean, the priest at my Catholic high school came out as gay, after I left, like. Uou know, like the guy who helped me when I almost got like suspended and expelled my senior year. And he was like, "You know, I see something in you. I'm going to help you out." Like he came out as gay. I'm like, "What is happening here?"

So I'm saying, I'll have to say like, *those* were like the spaces and community and people. Even though we weren't having these direct conversations. Because again, this was early 2000s. You know, um, queer discussions and queer conversations were not where they are right now. Um, and especially at an HBCU, at a *Catholic* HBCU, at a Black Catholic HBCU. Um, we weren't, we weren't talking about queerness like that. Like you had queer folks there. Like you had a couple of people who were open. You had a few people who were in denial. Um, you had some people who were like on the down low, like still closeted. But like that was, you could count them. Like you could name them. Like even now I could. I mean, here's what I think is, is, is really interesting. The guy, the guys that like, even the guys that we dated while we were there, not all of them, but even *they're* like queer. Right. Which makes sense because I'm like, I'm more masculine presenting. My friend is more masculine presenting. The two guys we dated are now out as gay. What is happening? Like, that's what was happening. Even though we were doing this sort of of like comphet, like thing. Um, and I don't know about them. I can't speak for them. I know for me, I genuinely was not thinking about queerness until I got to college. Until I started to be like, "What are these feelings? Like, what is this thing that I normally feel for somebody I have a crush on, but that's not a guy. Like what is happening?"

So even though I was more masculine presenting and a tomboy my whole life and I played sports. And like, I was probably a stereotype in a lot of ways having played softball, um, like that being my main sport, I still had no idea of like, that I was queer. And so all of those things are what helped me through each like phase of that process. Right. It was the people in my life. Um, and especially with my queerness. I was able to have conversations.

Like, so, so those are some of the key players, right? Like the people that I went to school with, at Xavier, um, being able to like, bounce things. Um, I had an ex who was really instrumental in that, um, sort of like queer awakening understanding of my own sexuality and orientation. Um, and the other thing that that ex helped me with was sort of like confirming my gender. And the reason I say that is because growing up, I was constantly told what girls do and shouldn't do. And women do and don't do this. And blah, blah, blah. This is woman. This is not. And I was not those things. And so I constantly felt like people were telling me that I was not a woman. Or telling me that I was not a girl, or at least at the very least I wasn't doing it right. And so, the more I started to hear about like trans, I was like, "Do I think I'm trans?" And I never felt like it. Right. But like, I kept getting these messages of "You are, you're not doing it right. Or you're not a woman. Like you're not." And then I

remember my ex jokingly said something like “Little boy,” like called me like, “Little boy.” And that was because her ex who was also masculine presenting liked those like male pronouns and like, “sir.” And I didn't like the way it made me feel. And I remember like freezing and being like, and then she said it again says something like, “Little boy” or something like that. And I was like, “I'm not a boy. Like, I'm a girl. Like, I don't care how masculine presenting I am. This is who I am. Like, I'm not a boy. I'm not a man.” And I don't know if, I might have snapped or something. Because like, the way that she looked was kind of like, “Oh, shit.” Like, like, she very much thought she was doing something helpful or like, cute or like affirming. And it was not for me. And I'll never forget the first time somebody used like they pronouns, even knowing my pronouns were she her. This was another ex actually, who was like, using they pronouns for me. And I was like, like, “My pronouns are ‘she,’ ‘her,’” like, “Don't do that.” Like, “Don't like, there's nothing wrong with that that pronoun. But that's not that's not my pronoun.” Like, and those *those* things, even as much as like, they didn't feel good helped me confirm that I wasn't tripping. Like, no, I'm a woman, like, I'm a girl. Like, you can tell me all day long that I'm not doing it right, or that it doesn't look how you think it should look. But like, I know who I am. So those are very instrumental in my like, sort of identity and figuring myself out.

And then when it comes to Sikhi, like when it comes to like, my Blackness, that as a whole. Everybody from the Christian church to my own family to folks at the HBCU, although I will say my friends at Xavier were probably the most instrumental outside of my immediate family in making me feel safe to explore like ideas of Blackness that were different than what society was telling us they were and things of that nature. Actually, my yearbook quote for high school, it was a quote that my friend told me, which is like, “Don't call yourself an Oreo,” like, “Just because you're not the stereotype of what, you know, society says Blackness is does not mean you're an Oreo.” And like, he sort of corrected me on that. And that's, to this day, it's in my yearbook. Because I sort of just been like accepted, like, “Well, I'm an Oreo. That's what they say I am. So it's fine.” He was like, “No, you're not like you're still Black, like you liking this, this and this does not mean you're white inside. Like that's not, that's not how it works.” And that was the beginning of my like, really owning my blackness and like, not letting anybody define it for me. Or tell me what it is or what it isn't, or what it can and can't be. So I will say he's also out and gay and married to a man. I think everybody in my life is just queer now.

00:59:18 **SPEAKER_PSK**

Blessings.

00:59:19 **SPEAKER_KS**

And then Sikhi. Right? That's how I feel. That's how I feel. And then for Sikhi, that journey was sort of solo. I had a band member at the time, my bassist was a theology minor. And I think it's funny because we, the number of people, I think people would be surprised, but the number of people who go into a theology program or a theology major or minor or some type of religious degree program or major minor and end up leaving that religion is not zero. It's apparently a more common thing than I realized. And I was talking about it with my bassist at the time, who went into a theology minor being like, because again, grew up in the church, Christianity has a strong chokehold on the family, this is going to make her parents happy. And then she was like, "I don't know if I'm a Christian anymore." Like, that's not how this was supposed to go. And so I had her to talk to about this with and I was like, "You too? Me too." Like, because again, it didn't seem like something you could talk to. Or *I* didn't feel like it it was something I could talk to other people about, like other Black people. Telling them, I don't want to be a Christian anymore. Because again, I grew up with, "If you're Black, you're Christian." Like, that's the that's the only option. Like, "There are certain religions for certain cultures and certain people. And that's how it goes. And so what do you mean, you don't want to be a Christian? You can't be anything else. Like, you could maybe be like Nation of Islam or like Muslim, but you seem you know, you know, you remember that from child-. I don't think you want to do that." Like, so I very much felt like alone until she kind of opened up and was like, "Yeah, I don't know either." And I was like, "Okay, cool. So we can have this conversation."

And *that* sort of gave me permission to do a lot more research on my own. And that's when I started that two year journey of being like, "What is the right religion for me?" Then once I found it, again, the first immediate thing I did was try to find other Black Sikhs. I went to a Gurdwara out here in LA. And not a great experience. Just not a great experience. I, I just, I was just like stared at the whole time. And like, I was like, trying to like, nobody was trying to talk. It was just like, unpleasant. And I was like, "Okay, this might not work." And then I went to a different one on a whim. Because at first I was like, "Oh, this isn't what." Because I think I went there like twice. And I was like, "This is not pleasant. This. I can't do this. Like, I'm not gonna be able to do this to do this every Sunday or every week or whatever." I went to another one. And it was so frickin diverse. Like,

actually, I think there's more white people there than anything. But there's there were Black people, and Asian people and like, brown folks. And I was like, it was everybody, and I was like, "Ah." And the woman who would end up becoming my mentor came up to me, and just immediately took me under her wing. This older Black woman, who turns out, has the same last name as me. Like same government last name. Who also looks just like my aunt, who is also from where my biological father's family is from. So we kind of think we're related, which is very weird. But she just took me under her wing. And it was so interesting, because I think she sort of like, I don't know if she sensed like some of my concerns. But one of the first things she told me, one of the first like stories that she told me, was that she'd married a Black Sikh man, right? Which, I feel like was sort of her way of being like, like, "It's possible." Like, you know, like, "You know, there are other Black Sikhs. Like you can do. I've been practicing Sikhi since the 70s. And my husband, you know, is Black and blah, blah, blah, blah."

And I'm grateful that she told me that story, because I immediately was like, "Okay, I can. This is possible." Like this thing that I want so bad, that feels like it's so right for me. The one thing that was holding me back was like, I don't want to be the only Black person again. Like, I can't. Like I *could* do it. But I was like, I can't do this. Like, I don't I don't have it in me right now. I don't have it in me to like, fight anti Blackness alone. Like, I just. I. It's like experiencing happiness. And then being told you can never experience happiness again. Because that's what it felt like going to my HBCU. It was like experiencing this moment of like, "Oh my God. This is what the world *can* be like. Like some people grew up like this." Like, you know, not having to like, rely on respectability politics to survive. Or like, you know, think about your every move and like, worry that this is gonna intimidate. Like just all the little shit that you deal with when it comes to like racism. I was like, "I can't go back." I was like, "Religion is supposed to be this thing that brings me comfort." Like what I'm looking for it to do. I can't do if I'm also constantly worried that I'm alone and that I'm going to deal with some anti Blackness or blah, blah, blah, or whatever. And so luckily, I had those people here at this Gurdwara. I mean, this is the best place I could have been to really discover and go on that journey. Was here in LA at this at this Gurdwara.

01:04:17**SPEAKER_PSK**

Wow. Talk about hukam. Just You know, the first two, the first Gurdwara let you down twice, which unfortunately, I'm sorry, you had to go through that. It's not a, it's not an uncommon experience for many people.

01:04:39**SPEAKER_KS**

Yeah.

01:04:40**SPEAKER_PSK**

What, if I may ask, you said you, it was a bit of a solitary journey, at least for a little bit of the figuring out what Sikhi was. Or how you came to understand it. What were, this one mentor you mentioned eventually was someone who was a resource. Or like someone who was supportive. Were there other things that, like, how *were* you learning? Because I feel like that's the thing that even like, when you're quote unquote, raised in a Sikh family, you still have to learn what heck it is that you're being told to do.

01:05:10**SPEAKER_KS**

Yeah, I think I felt like I was playing catch up for sure. Right? Like, and I constantly felt like I was like. Now the one thing I do sort of miss is. Like in Christianity, we have like, you have Sunday school and you have Bible study, right? And it's all ages, right? So from the time you're old enough to not be in the daycare or the nursery, you have your own Sunday school class or Bible study class. And I remember that being helpful for me just in getting accustomed to – whether it was traditions, or how we do things, or learning things, or having an opportunity to ask questions once a week, or in sort of growing up in that. And I do sort of miss that. Because I sort of look for something like that with Sikhi. And I found like, the only thing close was like for kids, right? It was like some type of like, camp for kids. Like even though there was a day camp or whatever. And I was like, “Well, I don't think they're gonna accept a 20 something year old. I don't think that's gonna work.”

So I had to really just dive on the internet. And then finally one day, I went, “Wait, are there queer Sikhs?” Because I was like, I know, I know what it says. I know, we know it says, “Equality of all people.” But do they

mean that? because that's also what my church said, but then said very like, shit that was rooted in toxic masculinity and homophobia. So like, "What is it in praxis, right?" And so the first thing I did was start looking up in the same way I did for Black Sikhs, start looking up queer Sikhs online. And that was how I found people. Like, you know, that was how I found Manpreet and other, other folks. And that was very helpful. It was mostly helpful in feeling like, or meeting and being in community with people who grew up in a Sikh family, who sometimes still had the same questions I had, or, you know, knowing that I still share some like commonalities with them. I didn't feel like so, like left behind. Or like I had like all of this catching up to do. Like I still feel like I had catching up to do, but it wasn't in the like, cultural things, right? Like a lot of that was just like, "Oh, you can do this, you can." Because again, I did have some not great experiences. And this is what made me like, look up queer Sikhs. Because at first, I was just like, I would, I would find see a Sikh online or something. And And I would ask a question, like maybe it was about a turban, or, "How do you tie this? Or how you do that?" And like people, once they saw that I was Black, that would inevitably impact their answer or whatever. And I was like, okay. "Who do I normally feel like?" I sort of asked myself, like, "Who is my community?" Right? Like, "Who, who's *my* people? Who are *my* people?" Because I'm like, *these* are not my people. I keep approaching *these* people. But that's not *my* people. Those are not *my* that's not *my* community. And I had to really think about. I was like, "Black queer community. That's, that's my people." And once I found *those* people, that's when things got really comfortable. I felt like a lot safer. I felt like I could do this.

And I was sort of, even though it was still sort of solitary, and that like, I did a lot of the reading and studying and learning by myself, I still had these people and these point of references to ask stuff, ask questions. My friend Ara, he's a good bit older than me, and he's not queer or Black. He's a straight Armenian man, but, a cis man, but he might be the Sikh that I'm closest to now. You know, and I do know that if I ever have questions, or whether it's like philosophical, deep stuff, or just basic stuff, I know I'm gonna get the answer. And here's what I've discovered that I think is true of pretty much any religion, nearly any religion is like: converts to a religion are always more, I don't know what the word like intense than people who grew up in the religion. And I think about that back when I was a Christian, and people would come in and get saved. And those would be like the loudest, most intense ones, like, they took the rules more seriously. And I found like the same thing is sort of true in like Sikhi, whereas in like a lot of like converts are like, really, really by the book. Whereas my friends who sort of grew up in Sikhi are more like, "Yeah, that's fine." Like you like a little bit more casual, or like relaxed with stuff. So I like having both, both because I can ask. And I know I will get the like, "This is exactly

what you know, like, this is exactly how it's supposed to be. Or this is the ruler, this is the guideline, blah, blah, blah, blah.” And Ara is really good for that. He's a great reference for that.

But yeah, I, as much as it was a solitary journey, and I think it still is. *And* I think it's one of the things that in some ways needs to be, I think, you know. Because my, for *me*, and what I need religion to be, is there for me when nobody else is. You know, it's that thing that I can go back to that I have that I, that I know, even when everybody's gone, if I have nothing else to lean on. Because that's what Christianity did when I was a kid. I won't say that's what Christianity did. I will say that's what my relationship with God did. And I think that's still true. I don't think it was Christianity that did that. It was Christianity that sort of introduced me and sort of let, you know, help foster my relationship with God. But I don't think it was the religion itself. And I think the same is true for Sikhi. Where I might have these people and these references that can help. But at the end of the day, it's, it's, it's a personal relationship for me, with God. And so it is a little bit more of a solitary journey. And I'm cool with that.

01:11:01 **SPEAKER_PSK**

Yeah, I was, as you were talking about it, in the moment, you said the thing about how converts can tend to be more intense about things. My I was like, I was thinking about how so many children of immigrants who are raised in Sikh families take so much for granted, partly because they can. They get the, the, they don't get questioned on their Sikhi. So they can just roll through it. You know, they show up eating langar, people are going to assume they sat in kirtan in Darbar Sahib and were listening and understood everything. They're not going to ask, “Oh, did you understand everything.” Those kinds of things. Or if you look like you're a little bit more of the Americanized child of immigrants, then they will ask you that. Or as I was, whenever my sister and I would go to Gurdwara, everyone would always compliment our Punjabi. Or on the flip side, if they weren't complimenting it, they would say how much it sounded like Punjabi from the village, because that's how we learned it from our parents and our grandparents, who still don't speak English. Or did not because three of the four have now passed. I'm getting used to using past tense for them, because it all happened in the last year or two.

01:12:14 **SPEAKER_KS**

Yeah. Gotcha. That's gotta suck.

01:12:20**SPEAKER_PSK**

And I'm like, wait, how does that carry over for them? But it was just reminding me of like, so much of the journey that you're talking about that is solitary. It, for me, it resonates for me, because even though I was raised in the faith, it wasn't until I took my own solitary journey with Sikhi, that. Or I took my own solitary journey as a Sikh, that I was able to see Sikhi.

01:12:39**SPEAKER_KS**

Mhmm. *Mhmm*. Yeah, okay. Yeah, yeah.

01:12:44**SPEAKER_PSK**

And everything you were saying just now, like sort of like reminded me of my own personal journey on that path of like. What it felt like from being quote unquote, within the community, being forced out, squeezing myself out, and then reinserting myself back in, but also being pulled into places I didn't want to be.

01:13:02**SPEAKER_KS**

Yeah, it's, it's a reminder that like, you know, any religion is made up of its people, right? Like you, you have the text and you have the foundation and, but as, at least when it comes to practicing it, it's made up of its people. And so I had to remember, it was, it was listening to people raised in, in the Sikh faith that helped me to sort of forgive Christianity. Or like sort of let go of this resentment that I had with Christianity, right? Like, you know, Christianity itself, well, I'm not going to go there. But it's, it's, it's the people, right? Like it's made up of its people. And that, realizing that I had, reflecting on my relationship with God and where it was, was the final, like, green light I needed to leave Christianity. Because as a kid, I did have a close relationship with God. Like, I

really felt like I did. I felt, I feel like I had to, just because of the childhood that I had. Being sick and, you know, divorced, family and blah, blah, blah. blah, blah.

But it was when I sort of realized like, this church hopping, trying to find a church and doing this and doing that, it's really impacting my relationship with God. Like it's making me sort of like have this resentment. And it was when I realized that my relationship with God was being impacted, my solo journey, that's when I was like, "Oh, this is not going to work for me. Like this has to go, right?" Like, especially with Catholicism, I think being in a Catholic university really helped because, you know, Catholicism is so many rules and so many sit down, stand up, recite this, recite that, do this, count this, that number of times. It's just all about like rules and like rituals and like so much so that like. And like the emphasis on it for some people can be so much that it's like, I think you forget why this rule is in place. Like you're forgetting why this ritual is a ritual. Like you're worried about the wrong things, right? And it was that realization for me that I sort of had gotten caught up in that, that was like, I don't know when the last time I just like talked to God. Like what, that's when I was like, okay, this isn't serving me anymore. Like Christianity is not only not serving me, if anything, it is harming my relationship with God. And that is not going to work because I don't know that I can survive in this world completely alone.

You know, I'm an only child. Like I have had siblings and step siblings, but I'm, I'm ultimately an only child. I was raised as an only child. My mom, she's not an only child, but might as well have been at the time. Even though her brothers have since passed. I was, I quickly realized if something happens to my mom, it's a wrap. Like I'm alone in the world. And so that's not going to work. Like that's not going to cut it for me. Like I won't survive that. And I had this very like clear understanding. Not like, I think like some people say like, "Oh, I won't make it if this person leaves." But I had this very, very clear understanding. Like if my mom or my granny were to leave this earth where I am now, I will *not* survive. And that, and I don't, and I don't even mean like monetarily. I don't mean like, I don't mean tangibly. I mean like I will not survive and that is not okay. So I have to figure this out. And that was when I was like, "Oh, I got to get my relationship with God right." Like I have to have something there. I can't, that can't just be my mom. I can't just rely on my mom and my granny for that.

And, and I am, I am, I'm very grateful that, that Sikhi came along because I very much do, I need that community. Like I need to be able to go to people, to bounce back, to bounce ideas, to soundboard, to. I'm, as

much as I am an introvert and I love like, you know, isolation and like solitary living and existing, like I cannot exist in the world alone. Like I won't, I can't survive in the world alone. Like, so yeah, I'm grateful.

And I, and I do, I do sometimes remind people. I try to like remind like fellow Sikhs who have grown up in Sikhi, remind them like, hey, you got some things that some of us don't have. While at the same time, not discounting anything that they may have gone through. Right. Because it's like, I get it. Like, I get it. Like that religious trauma or the things. This is something I was talking to Soorma about, which I think is okay for me, I mean, he's talked about this publicly a lot. Like the things that he's experienced as a gay man in, in Sikhi and in his particular space, like where he is in Texas. And I'm trying to remind him like, "Don't blame Sikhi." And as I'm telling him, "Don't blame Sikhi." It's like telling myself, "Don't blame Christianity." You know, like don't blame this thing. Like, I I don't know. Hopefully that makes sense. But I do, I do appreciate those, those reminders, appreciate those, those reminders, at least for me.

01:18:21**SPEAKER_PSK**

No, no, I, I appreciate you sharing that because it's definitely, it's it's part of this Sikh journey that we take and, you know,

01:18:33**SPEAKER_KS**

For sure.

01:18:34**SPEAKER_PSK**

See where it takes us. I it takes us. I have one last question for this, and then we'll move on to the final set of questions, which are just hopefully joy inducing. They're my favorite set to always talk about with folks.

You've sort of set up, not set up, sorry. You've talked about a lot of the different communities that have been important in different parts of your life. And also different spaces that you've lived in, right? You said your family at one point was from Arkansas. You were in California and Oakland. Then you were in college. Then

somehow you were in Delaware at one point. You know, like, so space and place has been very important to your journey it sounds like, I mean, to your journey. I'm curious, in that, in that context of just like moving around and figuring yourself out, what did you understand your gender and sexuality to be? Like, what, what, what, what, how do you understand it? Like, what is that to you? And what is that, how would you describe your relationship to different types of LGBTQIA communities?

01:19:38 **SPEAKER_KS**

I I didn't start thinking about gender and sexuality until adults started bringing it up out of "concern", right? Which I'm using gender and sexuality until adults started bringing it up out of concern, right? Which I'm using air quotes, because their concern was rooted in homophobia and queerphobia, as we know. And like I said, it wasn't until I started hearing. And, and, you know, to be fair, I won't like paint my mom as the same as much as I love my mom, and I'm like her biggest fan. My mom was the first person to police my gender, and policed it *hard*. I mean, like, hard. But also. Or I should say, *and*, my mom is the hyper feminine, social butterfly, local celebrity stereotype of a person. And I was the opposite of that in every way. And so constantly, like sort of giving me positive reinforcement when I was performing femininity. Which I did as a kid. I bounced back and forth, I did. I wanted to do both. But it was that rebelliousness that made me realize, like, it was the policing of my gender that sort of like made me hold on tighter to my masculinity, if that makes sense. Like, I felt like it was the thing I had to protect, because nobody else liked it, appreciated it, wanted it. Everybody thought it was bad. So I felt like I had to hold on to it. And it wasn't until I got to college, where that wasn't being policed anymore, that I sort of was able to be more fluid in that presentation. And I realized that's what I'd always wanted to do. But, you know, my mom wouldn't buy me boy clothes. I wasn't allowed to, like, she wouldn't buy me anything that was more masculine. If it was feminine, if it was girly, she'd pay for it all day long. So that means I spent all my money on those things. You know, jerseys that were too big, because this was the early 2000s. You know, like, but then also that came with policing my Blackness because she was trying to help me survive. Right.

And so there was the policing of like, you know, like I said, respectability politics were a huge thing. You know, you don't go out with your hair nappy, you know. I mean, I remember, like, I've pretty much been natural my whole life. But that was not a thing when I was natural. My mom did not understand it. She didn't understand

what locs were. Like, it was like, it was a thing. So my mom was the first person to police really like who I was. But the difference was, even though some of it was rooted in homophobia, I *can* look back and say most of it was rooted in love and concern and like safety and like, wanting the best for me. Wanting the absolute best life that I could possibly have. And her having already experienced misogynoir and knowing what was ahead.

Now the other adults in my life, I can't not say the same for. Even when I look back and I reflect that's not what that was. So when I was when I brought my friend to church, who looked white, but she was like actually Cuban and something else. I don't mean she wasn't white, but she was Cuban and something else. And I brought her to church. And we were like arm in arm. Just like linked, you know, like little like girls do. Like nothing wild or outrageous. And I started, I had this one person who was sort of a mentor to me, like questioning that. And I didn't even understand the questions at first, because I wasn't, I wasn't thinking about sexuality or gender or any of that. And she started questioning, you know, like, "Who is this friend? You guys are just friends?" I did not understand the questions at first. And so I'm answering them. And so that was like, really who sort of like police, like me and who I was first. The adults in my life. And the more I understood why they were asking those questions, the more it made me want to like push back. And again, be rebellious. And I don't know, in some ways, I'm sort of like grateful for because it did sort of make me like, have these conversations with myself and like reflect internally.

But the truth is, like, I was a late bloomer. Like I said, like, I was in the sports. I I said, like, I was in the sports, I wasn't, I didn't care about sexuality and gender and those things. And I would think about them from time to time. Like, am I not a girl? You know, I would do those things. But it was finally, when I got to college, but even in college, we weren't having conversations like that. Like we were, again, we didn't have the language. We didn't see anybody. We definitely didn't have the representation at the time. So our conversations were sort of surface level. And I'm like, imagining the words we use and remembering them, I mean. And I'm just like, "Oh, poor us." Like, we were kids, like, we didn't know any better.

But again, because we'd all found each other. And when I say we, I mean, my other like, peers and friends who ended up being queer and coming out. Because we'd found each other and we were able to have these conversations. You know, like I had a conversation with somebody who I believe is like now non-binary or trans. And, you know, at the time, we were both just tomboys, right? And the other girls in our circle didn't

understand us, you know. And I remember sort of like participating in this thing where we took the one friend to the mall. Because see for me, I wasn't, quote unquote, broken, because sometimes I dress like a girl, right? Like I knew that after college, if I needed to be a woman or present as a woman, I *could*. I could do that flawlessly. I could walk in heels, I could dress feminine, I did it, I showed up like that sometimes. But this friend did *not*, like this friend was like no heels, like hardcore tomboy. And so we, I remember us taking, taking them to the mall and like having them try on this stuff. And like, they were just like. And looking back, I'm like, "What the fuck were we doing? Like, why were we participating in this?" I don't know how uncomfortable this child was. And like, yes, they were playing along, but were we traumatizing them? Like, you know, like I'm looking back now, like at the time, it was like this fun thing, like, haha, dress your friend, your tomboy friend up in a dress and see how they, I don't know, I probably need to ask them about that. But I just remember when, when, because I still didn't understand like gender and trans things, because I only knew *my* experience. I only understood my experience. And it wasn't until I had an ex. Well, they weren't an ex at the time. I performed, I mentioned San Francisco Pride earlier. We performed there, I met somebody there, who, again, because I'm not, my queerness is not all the way like fully installed, like set up and operating it. This, this person comes up to me, and is hitting on me. But I just see this woman there, I don't realize they're hitting on me. And they're like, "Oh, I need your number." And like, they got my number through like pretenses of like, "I want to book you for my school," or something like that. And they start texting me. And then it took my bandmates being like, "I think I think she's flirting with you." And I'm like, "Oh, right."

Okay, long story short. Turns out, they're polyamorous. Introduced me to the word polyamory blew my frickin mind. And immediately I understood in that moment, that's what the F I am. I understood that I was polyamorous immediately, way before I understood that that I was bi, pan, queer in any other way. Because when they described it, it just made sense. It explained so much of my childhood, my high school years, my college years, my dating life. It explains so much. So that was the first thing. So I sort of had this like, awakening. They became this sort of like conduit to all things queer, right? At the time, they had a partner who was trans. And I think I said something like, "I just I don't understand the trans thing. Because what if," and I don't know, I said something like, goofy, like, "What if.." I don't even know what I said. But it, was it was, it was a reflection of my own experience, right? Like, well, "I don't feel like I'm in the wrong body, I just think people have the words or the language wrong" or something like that, right? And it just took that person, was my now ex, at the time who was like, "That's *your* experience, though. But that's not everybody else's

experience.” And something clicked. And I was like, “Oh, my God. Yeah, duh. Like, so that means that there are some people who experience gender, oh, shit.” Like, and I had this sort of like awakening. And I kind of just went head, jumped headfirst into trying to understand all things trans. Because it felt like the last little bit of like queer identity that I hadn't understood yet, right? Like, she had introduced me to polyamory, and had introduced me to, like, bi and pan, because they had identified as bi, and you were using she, they pronouns and all that stuff. And so I was like, playing around with bi and pan is like, “Okay, maybe that's a thing that I am. Definitely polyamorous.” And I think they were trying to figure out if I was also trans. And I think based on my response, they were like, “Yep, nope, not trans.” And I was like, “I don't get it.” Went headfirst into learning.

And so I did have these sort of like very instrumental people, like throughout my life that sort of helped me with that, like I had an ex. Really, it was it was that that one person that I met at San Francisco Pride, who kind of introduced me to all of these, this full world of queerness. And I think I still was in in denial a little bit about. I don't know that I was in denial. But it just, it was just so confusing before hearing the words bi and pan. Because I thought I had to choose one or the other. But that one took me the longest to sort of like come to terms with, figure out, accept, identify as, take on as an identity, was bi and pan. But polyamorous was immediate. I also knew immediately gender nonconforming, but I'm not trans.

And luckily, I, the way that I am, when I don't know something, I just go off the wall trying to learn everything I could possibly learn about it. Tumblr was a thing at that time, luckily. So I just started studying and learning anything I could about trans this, gender and blah, blah, blah. And I just was going ham. And then I moved back home. I was in Delaware at the time. I finally moved back home. I left Delaware because I couldn't do another winter in the Northeast. Moved back to California. And my niece, who I was not calling my niece at the time. Like the day after I came back, a year to the date of when I discovered what trans was and started learning about it, a year to the date my niece comes out to me as trans. Like the first person in the family, “I haven't told anybody.” And me talking about it and letting her know that it was okay, that this was a thing. That I am queer, blah, blah, blah. Sort of like gave her. So that was what I kind of was like, it was like a full circle moment for me. And I sort of felt like I was, in the same way that all these other people were that pivotal person for me, I could be that like that for her. And keep the circle going.

01:31:18**SPEAKER_PSK**

It was, so much of what I'm hearing you share about your life and how you tell stories about your experiences. Not only is there like such a thoughtful intentionality there, but there's also such a humility towards like, there's only so much you can control. And there's a certain level of just having to let go and be willing to follow the wind. Let the wind blow. And, you know, like a year to the day. Like had you had that question, had you gotten, had your niece come out to you a year before versus when she *did* come out to you..

01:31:55SPEAKER_KS

I mean, right? Like, I think about that. And mind you, this is the same niece, the same niece who when they came out at 14, when I was still in college, that prompted my mom to respond wildly. And I was like, "What's happening?" And that was sort of the catalyst for my, like, leaving Christianity. Same niece. Right? Like, like, it's just, it's just, it's. And this is the same niece that I watched from the time that she was one. And like, I told you the thing about the do-rag and pretending like it was hair. And it's like all of these things I needed. Because there's, there's just no way that I question, if somebody tells me they've known since they were whatever age, I believe them. Because I've seen it with my own freaking eyes. Like before a child has any conception of gender, this is what this child wants. This is how this child is behaving. And the only reason, and, and, and, and the worst part is like, I was part of the people who, who policed *her*. Who policed her gender, right? Because my gender had been policed. And I had been told that this is what is right. This is how it's supposed to be, you know? And I'd heard my parents talking and, and her mom talking, and they were just so concerned. It was like almost this like secret family meeting, like, "What are we going to do? Like, she's pretending this is a dress. Oh my God, she might be gay." Like, you know, like, mind you, gay was like the worst part. Nobody was even thinking about trans at the time. But like full freaking circle moment. And, and we, we did have that moment where I was like, "I am sorry. Like, I, I did some things I would never do now. I said some things I would never say now." Um, "You," I let her know that like, she is the reason that I am where I am in terms of like my, my religious journey, but also like my queer identity and journey.

And like, like I'm, I'm so grateful to her for so much. And, and really the only thing she did was just be brave enough to exist, you know? And like, and, and, and, and that's why I will, I will for, I mean, I'm going to advocate for anybody in anything anyway, like if it's right, it's right. And if, um, but yeah, the, the, the, the trans

community. Even though I like, I don't identify as trans, like it's, it was just, it was like the, um, it just was like when, when my queer identity came full circle, you know? Like it was like the, almost the last thing I discovered. Even though I think you're constantly still learning, right? Like you're constantly learning about things and like. You know, words are going to change and labels are going to change and you're going to learn and new things are going to come up. Like, I think at that time people were still saying preferred pronouns instead of just pronouns, like, right. Like things are constantly going to change and evolve. But that was like the last like fundamental piece of my like learning and growing and evolution of like, um, into my queer self was like learning about like transness and gender identity. Um, and yeah, yeah.

01:34:52 **SPEAKER_PSK**

Thank you. So I think this is, uh, you, speaking of so many things of your life coming full circle, this is also another conversational point that's now coming full circle to the last, last set of touchstone question that I have.

One thing, so much of what you've talked about, I don't, you haven't used these words before, but I, in the conversation, but I hear it. Sorry, I feel it echoing throughout the stories that you're telling. Um, so that's why that's where these questions sort of come from, is I would love to hear what you think about desire. What do you think it is? And to you, how is this different from intimacy if it is, or if it's even different from dreaming, if it is?

01:35:48 **SPEAKER_KS**

Um, my, my initial reaction is like intimacy and desire are different. I mean, I think there's probably a Venn diagram there in some ways. Um, but I do think they're different. Um, and it's interesting because when you said desire, my first thought was like sexual, sensual, um, sexuality, things like that. But when you said intimacy, my first thought was like comfort, love, family, like, um, safety. You know, like I've, I've, for me at least, like intimacy is only happening, it's only a factor, it's only a thing when I feel safe. When I feel, um. I mean, cause for me, so much of moving through the world is about safety.

Um, and, and, you know, it reminds me of when, when I think about like God, um. I remember somebody said, like, I can't remember where I was, or I don't know if I was like on the if I was like on the class or something,

but they were like, “When you think about God, like, what do you picture?” And they were using all these descriptors. And like, for me, I was like, and a lot of it had to do with like safety and comfort and love. And like, you know, like, that's what God is. And like, the thing that most reminded me of that, like that, that same feeling.

Well, first of all, when I think of God, when I think of like, just like the think of like, just like the powerful nature of like God, I think Black woman, right? But I think part of that is because the other side of when I think about God, I think about comfort and safety. I just think about sitting in my mom's lap, right? Like, my big grown 35 something self will still try to go sit on my mom's lap, right? And like, I think I'm like a half inch shorter than her, you know, but like, I will still try to sit on her lap. She's like, “You are *too big* for this.” And I'm like, “But you're not gonna kick me off. Like, what are you gonna do, though? Like, you're, you're not gonna tell me to get up.” And that's just like, that's, that's like, metaphorically, that's just, but also, I mean, I think literally, it's like one of the safest places I can be, right? It's like, my mom feels the safest, even in her flaws and imperfection. It's partly because I know that everything she did, she did because she loved me, and she wanted the best for me. Even the things that were wrong, right? And I know that I can trust her with my entire life. If I can't trust anybody else, I can trust my mom. And I don't trust like anybody else on the planet like I trust my mom. And thinking about it, which might sound weird, I feel like I'm sort of like saying my mom is God. I'm not saying that. What I'm saying is like those same sort of like feelings, if I have to like, reduce them down to things that I can feel and experience here on Earth and tangible things in the moment, that comes close. And so like, usually when I'm referring to God, I'm thinking, I'm picturing God, it's, it's a Black woman. It's like, like faceless, I can't really picture. But that's what I picture.

And I think part of that, you know, has to do with, you know, being told that you are created in God's image. But also me coming to like, learn self-love and learn how to love Black people and Blackness in a space, in a country, that hates Blackness so freaking much. Like, it is a, it's a task. It's a chore. It's a thing that you have that you have to learn is like how to love yourself, but also how to love, like your full self – like your like your full self, like your queerness, your Blackness, all that stuff. And I think God, yes, religion, yes, but also Sikhi, yes, has helped me do that. Which is so interesting, because even though I will still experience, you know, some anti Blackness here and there in, in my practicing of Sikhi, because *people are still people*. I still, it's almost like laughable though, sometimes, you know. Because in my mind, I'm not like blaming Sikhi. I'm like, “You're not

doing it, right? Like, that's okay. Maybe you'll get there one day, but you're not doing Sikhi, right? And that's okay.” And it's like a good reminder that like, people are flawed. But like, God is perfect, and God is safe, and God is love. And like, as long as I sort of like stay anchored in that, I'm good.

And so when I think about intimacy, like, those are the type of things I think about. Like safety and like, love and like, you know. I don't, I don't think I'm like asexual by any means. But at the same time, I have come to discover like, sex is just not like a must for me. It's something that for me is very much a part of a relationship when I love a person and I desire that person, right? And I already have like intimacy with that person. It doesn't have to be. But if it's not, then for me, it's kind of like, meh, “Why?” You know, it's whatever. And so that's what I think about, like, that's, I think that's why my mind didn't go to like. Because I think when most people hear intimacy, they might think sex, or they might think sexual or whatever. But I didn't. When I thought intimacy, I just thought like love, safety, those things. And when I think about desire, those, that's when I think about like, sensuality. And I have to sort of like, let my mind wander into other things that could be considered desire. I don't know. I mean that that was mostly me sort of like talking out loud and like trying to think it out. I don't know that I have. I wish I had like a really like, concise, like concrete answer. But I don't know. That's, that's where I'm at right now.

01:42:12**SPEAKER_PSK**

No, I think it is a concrete answer. I think it's beautiful. Yeah, I'll say more afterwards. My last question. A bit of a two parter. But it is one question. What are your hopes and aspirations for yourself, and what do you hope comes out of sharing your life history with us?

01:42:40**SPEAKER_KS**

Um, I think if I'm, you know, if I'm being honest, which, you know, why stop now?

01:42:54**SPEAKER_PSK**

Sure.

01:42:56SPEAKER_KS

In terms of hopes and aspirations for *myself*, I think I hope to have hopes and aspirations for myself again. I've had them my whole life, my whole childhood. Like I said, I sort of, I felt like I figured out my purpose at nine. And then ever since then, I was just like on this path of like, pursuing those hopes, those dreams, those aspirations. And I'm at a place now where it's safer to not have them, if that makes sense. Where it's sort of safer to be resigned to like, this is what life is, this is what it's going to be, accept it so that you can just move on.

But like I said, it's like, once you have, or once you experience like happiness, it's really hard to imagine a full life without it. You know what I mean? Like, um, and I go back and forth. I go back and forth daily about like. Because having hopes and like aspirations and like dreams is really, it's terrifying now at this point now at this point in my life, in a way that it wasn't as a kid. Because I think like when you're in your teens, your twenties, you know, there's things you don't know, you don't know any better. Kind of like gung-ho. Like even me, I was like, "I'm not going to college. I'm going to be famous next year. What are you talking about?" Right. Like that was sort of like my thinking then. And so like, I think now, partly because I did go see the Janet concert the other day, this is going to sound weird for people, but anybody who actually knows me will understand this. this. I will just say this for context, growing up, my entire bedroom, you couldn't see the paint on my walls because it was covered in posters. One half was Janet Jackson. One half was like B2K and Bow Wow. But the *really* important side was Janet Jackson. I would just spend, while other kids were out partying and drinking, I was like at home on the computer printing out pictures of Janet Jackson to put on my wall. Right. And like, she's been like the biggest source of inspiration, like musically, career wise, in terms of my dreams. And I think I've only missed one show since I was in high school, since like 2001. And so I just went to her latest tour and I knew I was going to enjoy it. But it also, what it did was remind me that like, I do have the capacity to feel joy and happiness. Which is like it can be tough like, it's, I was talking to my mom about this because it's like it's like a good and bad thing. Right. It's like, it's a good thing if you, if you're going to decide, decide, all right, well, I'm going to like pursue life. I'm going to go for it. I'm going to have these dreams, hopes and aspirations because it was great motivation. Like it was everything that I needed. But then at the same time, like if I don't like, dang, that was a reminder like I didn't need. And so I've been talking to my mom about it. And, I'm hoping a lot of this makes sense because there's a lot, there's a lot I'm like not saying. But like just for context, just in

terms of like mental health struggles and like physical struggles and like adulting and like things have just gotten in the way. Right. Like I've never been in a position where I could just recklessly pursue my dreams. I can't just like I'm moving to Hollywood, \$50 in my pocket and we're going to see what happens. Like, no, I have to have health insurance. I have to have, make sure I have access to my medications. Like that's just not an option. So that means I have to adult in some way. I don't have the same luxury. That means I can't spend 18 hours on a movie set and like hope, you know, I get noticed one day or something like that. So I'm saying all that to say, like, I *think* I'm in a place, I *think* where I'm like, I want to have hopes and aspirations again. As scary as that, like, sounds or may be.

And then, in terms of like, others who like might hear this. I mean, I think the biggest thing is like, something that I definitely realized recently was like, who I am now, in my mid-thirties is definitely not who I was at 20. The conversation came up in the form of tattoos, like people were just saying if they regret their tattoos. And people were saying how, you know, "If I would have gotten the tattoos that I wanted at 20, I probably would have regretted them." And I was thinking the same thing, like my taste has evolved. What I like has evolved. Like all the I think back to all the ideas I had for tattoos when I was like 16-17. I just knew as soon, as I hit 18, I'm gonna go get – Oh my god, thank God I didn't do that. Thank God I didn't do that. Like, why did I? Because I just thought I knew *so* much. I just was so sure I knew who I was. And I do think that I was like a lot more aware than a lot of my peers because I like sort of had to be because of my chronic illness and other things in my life. So I do think I was more self-aware. But *child*, not nearly as much. Like I just was so sure that I knew who I was, you could not have told me that I wasn't going to go do college for three years. I was going to finish a year early, come back to music. Like, I just knew who I was, or so I thought. And so the main thing that I would say, and that I do tell people is like, "Make space, keep space for possibilities. Like for growth. Like, don't force it, don't push it. But just be okay when it comes." And like, so much. I. There's there are things that I held on to because I didn't want other people to be right. You know, like I was like, "Oh, they said that. But if I do that, they're gonna be right. No, nope, not doing that." Like, let them be right. Like, let them be right. Because holding on to or denying or pretending you're somebody else or whatever, for two more years just so this person won't be right, it's not worth it. Like, just leave space for growth. Leave space for evolution. Leave space and make room to get to know yourself. First, I think so much of, so many of like the issues that we have growing up comes from just like a lack of knowing ourselves yet. Like we're still getting to know ourselves. But also lack of introspection or worrying about what others are doing. Like whether it comes to dating, and you

know, you want to be in a relationship. There's a reason that everybody says the moment you stop dating and start focusing on yourself, that's when people start popping up out the woodwork, you know. Because when you focus on yourself, when you're focusing on improving yourselves, like you will attract the right people. I will, I will die on this hill, that you are the company you keep, and that you are what you attract, right? Or you attract what you are. The energy that you put out is, what's. Like, I've been in enough therapy, I've been in enough like leadership classes, and like, you know, to know like, the people that you're attracting into your life, there, there's something about you that they are attracted to. God, bad, or otherwise. And so I feel like the more that we just make space and keep space for growth and development and evolution, and getting to know ourselves more importantly, and becoming the people that we really want to be. Not the people that we think we should be, right? Like that's very different. But the people that we want to be, because if I were to try to be the person that I think I should have been, or whatever. Oh my God, I don't even know. I don't know. I would have been a miserable individual. And I will say, last thing, is that it may sound selfish. Something that I don't like, I hear a lot of like, Americans and like a lot of Western folks have these very individualized, and which I think is just like the nature of Western culture, right? Is like to be more individualistic. And so they have this idea of like, "Put your own happiness first, and screw everybody else and what everybody else thinks." And like, to a certain degree, I get that. And that's not how it works for everyone. Like, it's not that simple for everyone in every culture. Like, I think, you know, you have to decide for yourself whether it's worth it. Like, whether you want part of your family or all of your family, or if you want to. Like for me, there was a point where I was like, I have to be, I can't be my whole self with my mom. Right? Like, I'm gonna give her these parts of me. And I'm gonna keep these parts to myself or away. And the more we talked about it, or you know, therapy and whatever else, I had to like, let her know, you don't get to see all of me. But what I realized was like, that's more of a loss for her than it is for me. Because I still get to be all of me. At some point – even if she doesn't get to see all of it, I still get to be all of me. And me telling her that, and I'm not saying this is gonna be the case for every person, I told you, my mom's amazing. But me telling her that sort of made her be like, "Oh, I need to get it together. Because I do love my child. Like, and I don't just want pieces of you." But not only did she say she was like, "I don't want pieces of you, I don't want you to have to fracture yourself into pieces to have a relationship with me. And so that means I need to do more self-work." Right? Like, that's what she was saying. And so and that's true. And she has done that. And I, I will always like applaud my mom for that. *And* on the flip side, I realized, like, like, I can do the same thing. We don't have to talk about religion. Like religion is a real touchy subject for her. She has accepted that I am not Christian, that I am practicing this other religion that she does not fully

understand. She's like come to Gurdwara a couple times, but she's like, "I don't get it. But that's cute. Do you girl." And that's fine. We don't have to be on be on the same page. I don't have to like, challenge her ideas of Christianity. Like it doesn't matter how ridiculous I think they are, or if they don't make sense. It doesn't matter. Like, because if that's her comfort, if that's what's making her happy, if that's what's helping her survive, if that's, if that's what's working for her, and it's not harming other people, right? Like when it when it was harming other people, we had to have a talk about that, right? Like, when it was harming other people, when your beliefs are actively harming, you know, my niece and your grandchild, and – Okay, that's not going to work. But we have grown past that, even my stepdad, we have, we have come a long way as a family. But what I'm saying is, like, I can also remember, I can meet her where she's at, too. As much as I want her to meet me where I'm at, and not like, have to like, fracture myself into pieces, I can do the same thing for her. Like, I don't have to light myself on fire to keep her warm. But, but I can meet her where she's at.

And knowing between her, having her here, like on earth, in the physical realm that I can text, and then also having a relationship with God, I realized, like, at the end of the day, I'm gonna be okay. Like, even if I'm not okay, in the moment, right now, this year, this decade, or whatever, like, it will be okay at the end of the day. Like, I'm, I'm just not worried about it. And so that's like, that's, that's what I would tell people is just like, "Leave space so that you can have that relationship with yourself. And if there are people in your life, that you want to get it together." I really, I really feel like focusing on yourself, even if that just means honoring your own boundaries, right? Because if you honor your boundaries, and you respect yourself, there's certain things you're just not going to tolerate and accept from other people. And a lot of the times, people behave in ways that they behave, because they can, right? Like, they do what they can get away with. And I'm not saying that that's the case. I'm not saying I have all the answers. But I'm saying that was definitely the case for me and my mom in a lot of ways where it was like, "Yeah, that's not okay. That's not acceptable. These are my boundaries. It might mean we don't have a relationship right now. But if you want one as much as I want one, then we're both gonna have to make some changes. And here's me doing my part." And so the only thing you can control is your part, right? Like, I can't control my mom, I can't control what she does. But I can control me. I can control the changes I make. I can control how I show up and who I show up as. And deciding to honor myself and my boundaries. And all of the work I've done. Like, me deciding to show up as my full self is also honoring all of the work that I did. That was it was *so* much work figuring out who I am. You know, like, in a world that tells me that everything that I am is wrong. Figuring out that I am like, queer, disabled, Black, polyamorous. Like,

the world saying, “Nope, that's not right. That's not right. That's not right. That's right.” And then me having to constantly affirm myself saying “No, actually, it is like it is right. This is who I am. I'm gonna love me.” Like, how dare I disrespect and dishonor myself and all of that work I did by not showing up as my full self and not honoring my boundaries and not honoring like, this is who I am. You can take it or leave it. And that's what I would just say. I'm not saying like, religion makes everything perfect. But it certainly helped me in ways that I needed to survive. And so I'm, I'm fully grateful to other Black Sikhs, but also mostly Black Sikhs and other queer Sikhs, for, for helping me to stay on this journey. As much as it was a solitary one, having them there. I shouldn't say them – *y'all*. Because prabh, you've been part of that, in very instrumental ways. Just having y'all there, whether it's as an example, or to talk to, or to run stuff by to ask questions of to. Whatever it is like. Oh my God, my queer sangat has been just life changing. So I'm really grateful for that.

01:57:55**SPEAKER_PSK**

Thank you. That's a beautiful note to wrap this up on. Thank you for sharing your story with us. I know that I'm gonna have a, this is gonna sit with me for the rest of the day, at least, rest of the night, evening for me. And I hope you recognize that you've already had a huge impact just by sharing your story with me now. And as more people come across it, I can, I'm, I am excited for them and what it initiates and sparks in them. So thank you.

01:58:30**SPEAKER_KS**

Thanks. I appreciate that.

01:58:32**SPEAKER_PSK**

I'm gonna turn the recording off.

01:58:35**SPEAKER_KS**

Okay.