

SPIDER-MAN IS OBVIOUSLY A SIKH

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Seeing the new Spider-Man movie in theatres, I remember again that I am Peter Parker.

When I was a toddler, my parents immigrated and brought my brother and me to Jamaica, Queens not far from JFK airport where we had landed. We lived in a one bedroom apartment. I knew no English. One day, Mom and Dad took me to start kindergarten in the early 1970s. Mom recalls that I said I was going to teach my kindergarten teacher to speak Punjabi. At graduation, I was selected as the student with the highest grades to give a valedictory speech.

My mom sent me to kindergarten with braids in my hair, red ribbons and mascara. She said that was how her brothers were first sent to school in India in the 1950s. She did not think I looked like a girl. Of course, other students teased me about my appearance. We told school officials that I was a Sikh from India. Suddenly, I was popular with the teachers. My fourth grade teacher, Mrs. James, had been a missionary in Papua New Guinea in the 1960s. She was in her 60s. One day she brought her daughter to meet her students, me in particular. She would talk to me at recess and tell me I needed to be saved, to accept Jesus or I would go to hell. I told my parents what Mrs. James was saying. They taught me about Guru Nanak and about our faith and how to respond when people asked what we believed and where we were from. By then I was wearing a turban every day. I had reached my 'bar mitzvah' age. A prominent student at school and valedictorian at graduation, I already learned to debate a teacher about religion.

Mrs. James did not like my response to her Christian zeal. She reluctantly stopped trying to convert me at a public school in Jamaica, Queens. I think she was trying to use her daughter to get me to go along. I remember they wanted to take a photograph of me with her. They asked me to remove my turban. I refused.

My parents bought a row townhouse in another part of Queens. We had neighbors from all over the world in what the movies show as Peter Parker's hometown. In sixth grade, my English teacher, Mrs. Coleman, was having a baby and so she had little time to know her new students. She gave me a 65 as a number grade. That is a minimum passing grade. The next marking period, my new teacher announced that one student had increased their grade by 30 points. I still have the commendation card she gave me. It was embarrassing to get it and to have that attention. Other students asked the teacher, did Kulvinder get a 120 when the highest grade is 100? They did not know I had started at 65. My teacher told me Mrs. Coleman had by looking at me, concluded that I was 'fresh off the boat' and not proficient in English. My new teacher knew I was bilingual. Some people decide before meeting you what you are or capable of every day.

Those moments in my life as a child made me think, be different and still belong, be questioned and show who I am. I know my abilities. As Sikhism teaches, I am proud to serve others.

Living in a house in Queens, as Peter Parker, was interesting. I could take the elevated Number 7 train to Manhattan. The new Spider-Man movie reminds me of middle school, where again I did well, graduating as valedictorian.

My best friends were Jewish. I learned Yiddish terms I can still quote to describe things. Like mensch. My eighth grade teacher, Mr. Haller, was Jewish. He loved teaching astronomy, chemistry and physics. We talked about those subjects after class often. He encouraged me to apply to Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan. After taking the highly competitive specialized high school entrance exam, I was admitted there. Mr. Haller had confidence in me that I could do anything. I had as Sikh boy at age 10 had already given the valedictory speech in fifth grade, and again selected as valedictorian in eighth grade, felt I could excel at Stuyvesant high school.

I was busy by choice. I joined the Junior Academy of Sciences. I went to Manhattan museums. I did research at Rockefeller University for a nationwide science competition during my high school years. I visited the UN, NYU and Columbia campuses. I walked everywhere and learned about New York's history. Professors I met welcomed my questions. My inquisitive nature, shaped by these once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, led me to think about debate and law as a career, which seemed second nature along with my Sikh values growing up in New York.

In the greatest city in the world, at a critical time as a young person in my teen years, doors were opening for me. I could choose what I wanted to study. Where I wanted to study. What I wanted to do. As a proud New Yorker with an India origin story, I wanted to make a difference in the world. At that time, we were proud to be Indian in New York. Sikhs participated in India Day parades marching down Broadway. My brother and I were in an Independence Day parade in mid-August 1977, the 30th year since 1947. We celebrated the advancement of our country of origin from British colony to the world's largest democracy. People were moving to Flushing and Richmond Hill, Queens. Sikh temples were started there.

I finished my undergraduate studies in New York and wanted to go west. Having read about Justice Kennedy's appointment to the US Supreme Court by President Reagan in 1987, I had been to California once before and had heard of Sacramento, where he was a part-time law professor. I could move to California, work during the day and go to law school part-time. I wanted to be a lawyer in California, where Sikhs had first arrived around 1899 and where a large population lived. The state with the largest Sikh population in the United States was California.

My inspiration was Dalip Singh Saund who came to Berkeley at age 21 in 1920. He earned his PhD in mathematics. He was the first Asian elected to the US Congress, in November 1956, after first being elected to the justice court in the Imperial Valley. I wanted to become a lawyer, maybe a judge one day, maybe be elected as he was. I want to do it from Northern California, where so many Sikhs live now.

After I got my JD and MBA graduate degrees in Sacramento, I had to wait for my bar exam results and license to practice law. I was already in Marysville-Yuba City, where I had friends in the Sikh community and saw there were Punjabi-speaking immigrants in large numbers. No Punjabi-speaking lawyer was in active practice within 100 miles. Whether I had one day of experience or 10 years of experience did not matter when you need a Punjabi-speaking lawyer.

The toddler who arrived in Queens knowing no English become someone people were looking for. Speaking Punjabi is a plus and made me prominent as a Sikh in America. Still judged by how I look, I was now able to help people navigate a complicated system. The boy whose teachers had opened doors for him was now able to open doors for others. My California story is still being written. I am Peter Parker. I am a Sikh. I am Spider-Man. I grew up in Queens and I learned to make my way in America as a Sikh. My teachers (who took the time) saw something in me, my parents gave me a foundation, New York gave me opportunities that exist only there.

The Spider-Man principle is a moral maxim often expressed as: 'With great power comes great responsibility.' I have always understood that as a Sikh, I am different. I am here to help others. I have strength, I have education, language skills, a profession, a community, and the key as a Sikh - the confidence I am here to make a difference, as I walk through a door opened by me.

Lawyers have that kind of power in society. We help people who do not know how to navigate the system. We can speak for people whose voices are not being heard. We can challenge what is unfair. We are agents of social change. I aspire to do more with what I have been given.

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