

“After 45 years of being born and raised in this Healthy, Happy, Holy 3HO community, I finally came to terms and spoke out to support those who left long ago, forgotten by many. May our stories help others evaluate their experiences and recognize the massive abuse and unnecessary harm inflicted. I know how hard it is to look back at your life and face hurtful truths. It’s time to be kind to ourselves, listen to our inner voices, and tear down the pedestal we placed Yogi Bajan on. He betrayed his position, the community, and his legacy. I have compassion for those struggling or looking the other way. Let’s acknowledge that no one wants to join a cult or harm their children.”

Sat Pavan Kaur Khalsa, born and raised in 3HO,
groomed, and abused by Bajan, a second-generation
survivor voice in *Under the Yoga Mat*.

“What we discover hidden *Under the Yoga Mat* is astonishing in its depth and magnitude. Ms. Coenen has pursued and shared here the fruits of her own research. Like a private investigator, she identifies and brings forth the many levels of deception and corruption carried out under the guise of assembling an enterprising community of people with a ‘mission’ of service to a New Age. The gulf between the idealistic vision expounded by Yogi Bajan, and the degree of corruption he employed, is mind-boggling. Ms. Coenen has managed to share these many facets and avenues of abuse and exploitation and also to help the reader understand the ways in which such charismatic leaders seduce and exploit their followers. Hers is a cautionary tale that reminds us of the importance of looking beneath the surface.”

Pamela Saharah Dyson, the first secretary general for
Bajan’s organization, author of *Premka:
White Bird in a Golden Cage: My Life with Yogi Bajan*.

“Our collective spiritual health demands that we recognize the potential dark side of the teachers and institutions we turn to. They can inspire, illuminate, and transform our lives for the better—and, at the same time, they can abuse, wound, and traumatize. In this well-

researched book, Els Coenen makes an important contribution by exposing the egregious actions of the once-prominent Yogi Bhanan and his 3HO organization. The lessons in the book can make us all more spiritually mature.”

Philip Goldberg, author of *American Veda:
From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation,
How Indian Spirituality Changed the West.*

“*Under the Yoga Mat* is an engrossing, beautifully written account of the systematic and heart-breaking abuses that occurred in the 3HO community under Yogi Bhanan. By interweaving historical sources and the very human testimonies of survivors, *Under the Yoga Mat* proves a master class in the psychology and harm of cults. Anyone who supports or works with cult survivors should have a copy. I intend for it to be required reading for our lawyers.”

Carol Merchasin, Lawyer, Of Counsel Sexual Abuse in Spiritual
Communities, McAllister Olivarius, mcolaw.com.

“*Under the Yoga Mat* is an essential and eye-opening book that delves into the potential dangers lurking within spiritual teachings and communities. Els Coenen’s unwavering commitment to uncovering the truth offers a valuable service to survivors and is a cautionary tale for all. With a discerning eye, Coenen emphasizes the importance of understanding spiritual teachings’ complete context and origin, especially when associated with controversial figures. This thought-provoking work is a powerful reminder of the importance of critical thinking and awareness when engaging in spiritual pursuits, empowering readers to make informed choices and navigate the complex terrain of spiritual movements.”

Dr. Steven Hassan, Author of *Combating Cult Mind Control* and
Freedom of Mind, Cult Expert, freedomofmind.com.

UNDER THE YOGA MAT

UNDER THE YOGA MAT

The Dark History
of Yogi Bhajan's Kundalini Yoga

ELS COENEN

with Excerpts from GuruNischan's
Uncomfortable Conversations Podcast



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In honor of Kirantana († July 26, 2022).

This book is dedicated to Kirn Jot and all Yogi Bhan's rape victims.

*Proceeds from this book go to nonprofit initiatives that support recovery
from sexual violence, child neglect, and institutional abuse.*

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FOREWORD

by GuruNischan

I am one of the thousands of children born and raised in the 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization) Kundalini Yoga community. Yogi Bhajan, my parents' spiritual leader, was revered as all-knowing, a grandfather to many, a living saint to some, a master of Kundalini Yoga, and a spiritual leader of the Sikhs in the Western Hemisphere. I refer to him as YB.

Under his influence, my parents, like many of his followers, became Western Sikhs, resulting in our foreign-sounding names. We, the children of 3HO, were groomed to be perfect yogi-warriors, divine souls. We were born to ensure the survival of humanity as we usher in the Aquarian Age with the 3HO lifestyle and Kundalini Yoga technology. Being a child in this community meant that we were expected to live up to the image of the bright and evolved souls YB promised we would become. Our parents' lives and the future of the planet depended on it.

In 1978, one year after my birth, my mother left the community after rampant infidelity by my father, who exploited his young, pretty yoga students—behavior condoned by YB himself. Prior to her abrupt departure, she counseled with YB and was sent to other ashrams (community houses) to “serve” and learn how to become a “better wife.” This

included time in service to BibiJi, YB's wife, now widowed and heir to his empire.

After my mom left, taking my brother and me with her, she faced community slander, shaming, and fierce custody disputes. My brother and I ultimately ended up living with my father back in the community. When we visited our mom, she always spoke to us about knowing who we were outside of "the community." She encouraged us to express ourselves, experiment, wear our hair down, and try meat if we wanted. It was confusing, to say the least, and we were often pulled between two worlds, seeking freedom and stability simultaneously.

My mom was made out to be the crazy, erratic, emotional one, while my dad played a lot of manipulative games backed by YB and his leadership. Her house was broken into three times in two years, and her car was damaged more often than seemed "normal" throughout my childhood. Often, community members would ignore her when she arrived to pick us up for our monthly visits, as if looking at her would cause them disgrace.

Nonetheless, I have to say I loved my community and the people who made up my extended family worldwide. I thought it was awesome, and I've always held my upbringing in high regard. By fifteen, I thought I had reconciled the hypocrisy and the abuse patterns that I knew were prevalent with what I thought were the good health habits and spiritual consciousness that seemed legitimate and true as well. After all, didn't governments and all religions have hypocrisy?

My identity was solidified in being "a cultural other." I had a deeply rooted pride in being born different, a Western Sikh (a seeker of Truth) with elevated consciousness meant to change the world. I was a world traveler, outspoken and proud to be unique. While no longer "in" 3HO, this "specialness" still propelled my sense of self throughout my twenties and thirties.

After the book *Premka: White Bird in a Golden Cage: My Life with Yogi Bhajan* was released in early 2020, abuse stories started flooding in

online and in private Zoom meetings. While fellow second-generation adults were sharing the impact of being sent to schools in India—nonattachment, bullying, neglect, hunger, trust issues, and other emotional and sexual abuse barriers—I was washed with overwhelming familiarity, even though I had never attended the schools in India myself.

I began to understand that my “resilience” and my “strength” were actually trauma patterns covering up my feeling of anything at all—joy, happiness, lust, love, anger, hunger, and the full range of expression normal to being human. My mind had convinced me that the sensation of deprivation was enlightenment, holiness, and love. It was actually neglect, emptiness, and loneliness. It was “disassociation.” It was the mimicry of adults modeling how to give up their power while continuously overriding their needs—all built into the lifestyle itself.

In an eerie, dreamlike way, I remembered KartaPurkh from 1980: she was a princess to my childlike wonder because she was the only one wearing high heels. Come to find out, this young woman was brought in as a child and groomed by her older sister to be horribly and abusively raped by YB, forced to wear high heels as a manipulative control tactic. When she went public in 1985—I was seven years old then—she was discarded and slandered. All this has been in the public record for decades. Yet I had been trained not to look at it. Even to this day, current 3HO members will share YB’s anecdote, teaching that “he made her wear heels for her spine and to correct her past life karma.”

This helped me realize that the compacted memories in my body were the very ethos of abuse that happened around us every single day. This is the inner terror propelling me into obligatory service and rigorous discipline. This is the horror I’ve held in my body as tightness and anxious achievement.

I was blown away by each and every story shared, as they reminded me of something I had long since tucked away for mere survival. It was like flipping a Rubik’s cube in my psyche. I was stunned to be bearing witness in 2020 to victim shaming, denying, propaganda videos, and written rhetoric from members of 3HO. It was, quite literally, YB’s 1985 slander narrative on full display for all of us to view.

I appreciated the private Facebook group Beyond the Cage, which created an atmosphere of support and spoke out loud about uncomfortable truths among survivors spanning several decades. And then, when Krishna Kaur, a senior teacher in Los Angeles, failed to come forward with a statement about the abuse that was surfacing, I called her. I reminded her that silence is not neutral. Silence is abusive.

She was my “Auntie,” my only lifeline into 3HO as an adult. She had been around since my birth, privy to what my mom had dealt with prior to leaving. As an early leader in YB’s community, she had been the primary communication channel for my father as the head of the Phoenix Ashram. I took Teacher Training Level One with her when I was going through really dark times in my mid-thirties. She had never judged me for cutting my hair and making choices not aligned with the community regulations. So, when she finally released a statement, I was angry because I felt it was subpar and minimizing to the countless children, women, and men who had actually been harmed.

I was perplexed. How can I love someone and be angry with them too? At that moment, I realized my anger was mine, and it was right. I no longer had to pretend that my anger didn’t exist. I no longer had to repress or internalize it. I can be angry. I can say it out loud, and I don’t have to direct it toward her, anyone else, or myself. I can use it as fuel to create and speak what is true for me.

That realization birthed *The Uncomfortable Conversations Podcast: The Untold Stories of the 3HO Kundalini Yoga Community*. I simply wanted these stories to move from secret, private spaces, into a public platform, a place where the dark part of our history could be accessed and listened to whenever someone is ready. The shackles of my obligatory reverence for “The Teachings” fell, and I realized, *There’s nothing for me to be reverent towards*.

From my point of view, we’ve spoken about the amazing aspects of the 3HO lifestyle long enough. We’ve felt elevated and communed worldwide. We chanted and drank Yogi Tea together. We’re now in a stage where we *must* speak to the predatory abuse in the 3HO community worldwide as well. It’s time to talk about the not-so-amazing

parts—not by “light-washing” or sugarcoating them, but by facing the realities of harm that have occurred. We do it by shining light into the dark history head-on, by speaking to it clearly and holding the pain, discomfort, resentment, disgust, and rage. We learn to hold the conflicting inner realities of ourselves and begin to examine how we may have participated in propagating false narratives and presenting them as truth. We cannot heal what we do not recognize.

This book leans into the enormous task of illuminating these cultlike characteristics lurking beneath the surface of the Kundalini Yoga community worldwide. It brings a myriad of collective voices, revealing tales woven together to architect the historical and present-day patterns hiding in plain sight. This book is not simply “telling a personal story or two.” It tells many stories over many decades on a complex web. Stories that have weaved their own tapestry of discovery, revealing the essential patterns of abuse and criminal tales from the untold, dark history of this Healthy, Happy, Holy 3HO community.

Els Coenen brings us a well-refined compilation from numerous publication sources on this organization spanning five decades. Her artful crafting together of facts and distillation of patterns from various interviews delivers a glaring and accurate view into the lived reality and personal everyday lives of those who’ve been and are still being impacted by it.

This book reveals what has always been there but has never before been highlighted so clearly. It’s the convolution of love and abuse comingled, normalized, and disguised as community, compassion, caliber, and consciousness. Students of Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhasan are told that this is the Yoga of Awareness. But those who practiced it for decades were blind to what happened with their children, sisters, brothers, spouses, colleagues, and neighbors.

This book reveals the courageous voices of second-generation children born into this lifestyle or brought in as children, and numerous survivors of sexual, physical, emotional, psychological, financial, and

spiritual harm inflicted by YB and other community “leaders” over several decades. It’s a compilation of the flood of stories released in audio, video, and print since 2020, as well as many decades before that, since the beginning of 3HO in 1969. It’s a diligent effort to make sense of a very dark, secret past that has been hiding in plain sight.

There is nothing easy about speaking out loud about abuse, as we’ve been trained in YB’s lifestyle to discount and be silent. It can be retraumatizing to tell your story or to listen to someone’s story of harm. It can feel minimizing to read your life summed up in a well-researched article, a book, or a documentary feature displaying secrets that have been kept confined to the silent walls of your own inner experience.

With this in mind, we honor your courage to listen as each voice reveals a missing puzzle piece for dissolving our collective entanglement. We acknowledge the *RishiKnots* blog, being one of the only voices of the children of this community who’ve been relentless in speaking out loud about cult and child abuse in 3HO since the 1990s. Their efforts are acknowledged as foundational groundwork for this publication to be possible. A special thanks to the crusaders behind the Wacko World of Yogi Bhanjan website. Your fierce pursuit to expose the truth has been a source of respite and recovery for so many people, spanning several decades.

There are numerous other content creators, writers, podcasters, researchers, website builders, and organizers—many of whom are survivors—who dedicated thousands of hours collecting personal testimonies, researching from various sources, and spending countless amounts of time listening to survivors’ stories. Their sole purpose is to bring the dark truth about 3HO, and Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhanjan, into the light. We thank them for their diligence and commitment.

Yet, what Els Coenen has done by bringing it all together in one manuscript is a priceless feat that surely will create a ripple effect worldwide. It’s a clear, transparent stand for the complete telling of the TRUTH. Her efforts to amplify the voices of survivors from this community in a coherent, digestible, and easily distributed form will prove to be life altering and shattering for many. Many, like me at one point,

were dedicated, devoted, and fully convinced that it's entirely possible to “follow the teachings but not the teacher.”

What you're about to read, in part, is what changed that misnomer for me. We welcome you to have an experience of your own.

April 2023

GuruNischan

Writer, trauma-healing activist, and consultant in personal and professional reinvention; host of *The Uncomfortable Conversations Podcast: The Untold Stories of the 3HO/Kundalini Yoga Community*, and the *Uncomfortable Conversations on Predators in Business Community and Culture* podcast publication.

GuruNischan.com

@gurunischan

Those who cannot remember the past
are condemned to repeat it.

GEORGE SANTAYANA IN 1905

INTRODUCTION

*C*ome and sit on your heels. Let me show you what we are going to do. Just watch me first. You will raise your arms straight up like this. Fold your hands. Then, extend your index fingers, so they touch each other and point to the sky. Allow your upper arms to softly touch your ears. If they don't, turn your elbows toward each other, and they will. Keep your shoulders relaxed. Do not bend forward, and make sure your back is straight, not hollow like this. Tilt your pelvis a bit if needed. Smile. There is no need for strain in this position. Your eyes will be closed and focused on the spot between your eyebrows.

We will use the mantra "Sat Nam." Remember that "Sat" means truth, and "Nam" means identity. So, as you chant "Sat Nam," you call upon your true identity, your soul. On "Sat," you pull the navel point in and up. Keep in mind that the navel point is slightly lower than the belly point and more inward. On "Nam," relax the navel point. We will repeat that movement on a steady rhythm of about eight repetitions every ten seconds. The breath will regulate itself. You don't need to worry about that. Questions? No? Please come into the position. Are you all set? Inhale . . . and exhale . . . Make your upper body light. Inhale . . . exhale . . . and here we go. Sat Nam. Sat Nam. Sat Nam . . .

Hundreds of thousands of yogis worldwide will recognize the instructions of Sat Kriya. The Sanskrit word *Sat* means truth, and *Kriya* means an action to achieve a specific result. Sat Kriya is a photogenetic practice from Yogi Bhajan's legacy that can be performed on its own or can be part of a yoga set with multiple exercises. It is said to strengthen the sexual system and stimulate its natural energy flow.

Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan has hundreds of different yoga sets and meditations with promising names: Kriya to make you Enchantingly Beautiful, Kriya to Develop Human Power, Kriya to Relax and Release Fear, Kriya to Throw off Stress, Kriya to Release Pain and Refresh Yourself, and so on. Some kriyas are relaxing or prepare you for deep meditation. Others are intense, physically challenging, and exhausting. Yoga teachers and practitioners can pick and choose from a wealth of materials available in books and on the Internet. They will always find something to fit the needs of the moment. It never gets boring.

Yogi Bhajan often combined classical yoga postures with eccentric exercises such as snoring, walking like an elephant, chewing like a cow, or pretending you are a giant crocodile, strong and mighty, slithering along a riverbank.

Typical for this yoga style are the mantras woven through the sets, released in rock-and-roll, upbeat, psychedelic, or angelic-sounding compositions. They help maintain a steady rhythm during energetic and challenging body movements. For example, they give you strength while holding your arms like a halo above your head with your hands folded for eleven to thirty-one minutes. Or they support meditation and relaxation sessions. It is common for students to slip into a light trance through the repetitive rhythms of breathing patterns or while chanting mesmerizing mantras. Most practitioners enjoy being in such an altered state of consciousness and look forward to achieving it in every yoga class if possible. The mantras come mainly from the Sikh tradition since Yogi Bhajan was a born Sikh. They add considerably to the charm of his yoga.

While hundreds of thousands practice and enjoy Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bajan, many more people worldwide drink Yogi Tea. Only a minority of them know that the creator of their favorite yoga sets and the spiritual father of the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO) in which Yogi Tea originated was a cult leader, sexual predator, child abuser, gay basher, and successful but fraudulent businessman.

In 1968, when Yogi Bajan arrived in the US, he portrayed himself as a yoga master. A few years later, he claimed to be the Chief Religious and Administrative Authority for Sikh Dharma in the West. Sikh leaders and academics from Punjab questioned the legitimacy of this position. Nonetheless, it was in this capacity he met with Pope Paul VI in 1972 and Pope John Paul II in 1984. These popes probably did not know they were dealing with a criminal and a rapist.

There are pictures of Bajan with President Nixon, the Dalai Lama, and several other secular and religious leaders. He was a generous political donor to both the Democrats and the Republicans. He maintained good relations with the governor of California and established strong ties with the governorship of New Mexico. Former governor Bill Richardson considered him a trusted advisor and loyal ally.¹

While other cult leaders were exposed in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s,² Bajan remained at large. He played it smart. However, as early as 1977, an article in *Time* magazine used the word “cult” while revealing issues within 3HO.³ Nonetheless, there was never an official investigation. In 1986, lawsuits were filed against Bajan for sexual abuse and other misdeeds. Yet, they were all settled outside the courtroom. Over the years, his accomplices were imprisoned for drugs and arms-related felonies and financial and business fraud. He himself was never convicted.

In the early 1990s, the assistant district attorney of California (ADA) told a former community member that the FBI was one handshake away from Bajan.⁴ Unfortunately, they could not close the gap. The ADA compared his gang activities with the Chicago Mafia. “At that moment, Yogi Bajan fled from California to New Mexico,” says the ex-member, “not to return for many years.”⁵

Two weeks after Bhajan died in October 2004, the *Los Angeles Times* wrote:

Before he was Yogi Bhajan—kundalini master, Sikh missionary, lifestyle sage and political advisor with 300 yoga centers and 4,000 instructors, more than a dozen corporations, and \$1 billion in government contracts for security—he was Harbhajan Singh Puri, an ex-civil servant who landed in Los Angeles at the dawn of the city’s guru boom and inspired the hippie masses with his movie star charisma and exotic health regimen. . . .

Bhajan’s legacy wasn’t immune to controversy. While many see him as a tireless missionary whose only goal was to serve humanity, others considered him a brilliant cult leader and masterful con man who lived the life of a rock star by exploiting his followers.⁶

At the death of Yogi Bhajan, the flags of government buildings in New Mexico flew at half-mast. Six months later, on April 6, 2005, the US Congress agreed to honor Yogi Bhajan in a two-page resolution listing his achievements and concluding with the words:

. . . be it resolved by the House of Representatives (the Senate concurring) that the Congress

- (1) recognizes that the teachings of Yogi Bhajan about Sikhism and yoga, and the businesses formed under his inspiration, improved the personal, political, spiritual, and professional relations between citizens of the United States and citizens of India;
- (2) recognizes the legendary compassion, wisdom, kindness, and courage of Yogi Bhajan, and his wealth of accomplishments on behalf of the Sikh community;
- (3) extends its condolences to Inderjit Kaur, the wife of Yogi Bhajan, his three children and five grandchildren, and to Sikh and 3HO communities around the Nation and the world upon the death on October 6, 2004, of Yogi Bhajan, an individual who was a wise

teacher and mentor, an outstanding pioneer, a champion of peace, and a compassionate human being.⁷

In September 2005, the Yogi Bhajan Memorial Highway was inaugurated in New Mexico.⁸

In September 1968, the almost forty-year-old Harbhajan Singh Puri gave up his job as a customs officer at New Delhi airport and traveled to Toronto, Canada. Three months later, he moved to Los Angeles, California. By his own account, he was a master of Kundalini Yoga and became Yogi Bhajan. With his handsome looks and charisma, he soon gathered a core group of followers around him who helped launch a new spiritual movement. Under his influence, masses of young people stopped using drugs and alcohol and became fully-fledged vegetarians. They started growing their hair and wearing turbans as their spiritual leader introduced them to Sikhism. He determined that they should wear white to expand their auras. Each day at half past three in the morning, they took cold showers before engaging in a two-and-a-half-hour ritual, including Sikh prayer, yoga, meditation, and chanting. At the simple request of their beloved teacher, they married complete strangers and moved to faraway cities in other states and countries to establish spiritual centers. These community houses, called ashrams, mushroomed and attracted new followers.

In those days, many young Westerners read *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda. That book taught them that guidance from a guru was needed if you wanted to live a meaningful life. Yogi Bhajan's followers believed he was such a guru. They considered him as all-knowing and larger-than-life, a man of great wisdom who would lead them to liberation, eternal freedom, and happiness. Utterly uncritical, they surrendered control of their lives to him.

Shortly after Bhajan had won the trust and devotion of many gullible seekers, he began to abuse his power and status until he died in 2004. Over the years, his hunger for power grew along with the brutal-

ity and cruelty of his actions. Hundreds of ex-community members are still actively working on trauma recovery.

A former secretary of Yogi Bhajan estimates that he sexually assaulted more than a hundred women. At least a thousand children who grew up in 3HO suffered greatly from his child-unfriendly distance therapy and other sectarian policies.

In 1969, the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization, was officially established. Over the years, more nonprofit organizations were added, as well as for-profit companies. Yogi Tea and Akal Security, a security company that earned billions from US government contracts, became successful thanks to the cheap labor of devotees in the early years. When small businesses born from the creative minds of 3HO members began to make money, Yogi Bhajan took them over. More than once, he pushed the founders and investors aside.

Bhajan was a genius and master in controlling everyone and everything, always. He did it so no one else could understand what was happening in his empire. Entity names, organization structures, and leadership changed randomly.

The current leaders still use the same tactic. The financial flows from for-profit entities to nonprofits were and still are a well-kept secret. In 2021, the names of the for-profit companies suddenly disappeared from the organizational chart on the website of the umbrella organization, the Siri Singh Sahib Corporation, the SSSC. *Siri Singh Sahib* is an honorary title that Yogi Bhajan took on in the early 1970s.

Because 3HO was the first officially registered entity of the organization, its name is often used to refer to the totality of organizations and businesses. That's not correct, but it serves a practical purpose.

Yogi Bhajan preached his own version of Sikhism. In 1973, the Sikh Dharma Brotherhood was recognized as a religious organization in the US. 3HO Sikhs often refer to their community as "the dharma." In Sikh tradition, "the dharma" means the path of righteousness and proper religious practice. The official purpose of this nonprofit organization, later called Sikh Dharma International, was to spread Bhajan's Sikh teachings in the West and support the rapidly growing number of 3HO

Sikhs. 3HO's status as a religious organization helped to keep prying eyes away from the nefarious and illegal activities of the master and his accomplices. Moreover, it created opportunities for all community activities to benefit from the favorable tax regime that a religious association enjoys in the US.

In 1975, the State of California approved the creation of a corporation sole. This legal entity, also used by the crown of England, was the ultimate solution to grant Bhajan overall power and authority.⁹

Since the early 1990s, many 3HO-related entities have headquarters in Española, a small town in Santa Fe County in New Mexico. The Santa Fe ashram, which had begun as a hippie campground, moved in late 1971 to a house on a modest plot of land in Española. Over the years, the community bought more properties as the number of members increased. In 1975, 3HO bought "the Ranch."¹⁰ Bhajan stayed there when he visited Española and lived there after he fled California in 1992. Many atrocities occurred on that ranch.

In 1977, Yogi Bhajan influenced a faithful follower to spend about a million dollars of her inheritance to buy 150 acres (61 hectares) of land some miles outside Española. Big events for the worldwide community were and are still hosted there. He named it Ram Das Puri. "Ram Das" refers to Guru Ram Das, the fourth guru of the Sikhs, who lived in the sixteenth century and whom Yogi Bhajan considered his personal guru; "Puri" is Bhajan's birth name. Events held in that high desert wilderness brought, and still generate, a lot of money. Gigi, the woman who bought the land and "donated" it to 3HO, ironically became homeless in recent years.

GRUESOME STORIES COME TO LIGHT

2020—The Masks Fall

For decades, the 3HO–Kundalini Yoga–Sikh Dharma community managed to outwardly maintain the Healthy, Happy, Holy façade. At the beginning of 2020, fifty years after the abuse had started, the masks finally fell. The massive revelation of wrongdoings began with the publication of the book *Premka: White Bird in a Golden Cage: My Life with Yogi Bhajan*, written by Pamela Saharah Dyson. In 1968, twenty-five-year-old Pamela fell under Bhajan’s spell and decided to devote her life to him and his mission. He called her Premka which meant “the beloved of God,” he said. In 2022, she learned it is the Punjabi word for “mistress.”

For sixteen long years, Bhajan presented her as the second in command while she was a gullible puppet in his hands, like every other leader he appointed. At the end of 1984, Pamela left 3HO to finally live her own life. Her book *Premka* tells a story of devotion, hard work, dedication, love, loneliness, abuse, lies, exploitation, harassment, pain, and loss.

Because Pamela/Premka played a prominent role in 3HO, her voice could not be ignored in 2020. Combined with the #MeToo zeitgeist, this

encouraged many others to finally speak out. As more accounts of terror and abuse emerged, and still do as I write this, the true extent of the damage done became, and still becomes, clearer every day. Some survivors had testified before but were never listened to. Now was the time.

For many years, RishiKnots, the Wacko World of Yogi Bhajan, and the Gurmukh Yoga Forum brought the issues into the open,¹¹ but they received no attention and were shunned and ridiculed. After the publication of *Premka*, the private Facebook group Beyond the Cage was launched and joined by thousands. To this day, it is a space where survivors share stories, give and receive support. Second-generation adults have set up private groups, and like-minded Kundalini Yoga teachers have formed communities to share and reflect on what happened and how to deal with it.

The Siri Singh Sahib Corporation (SSSC), the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization (3HO), the Kundalini Research Institute (KRI), the International Kundalini Yoga Teachers Association (IKYTA), Sikh Dharma International (SDI), and the 3HO-related profit-making companies like Yogi Tea and Akal Security had not seen it coming. The yoga of awareness turned out to be the yoga of deafness and blindness.

In the spring of 2020, the flood of allegations forced the SSSC, the umbrella organization, to scrutinize the fast-growing number of claims of sexual abuse by their founder and spiritual leader. An Olive Branch (AOB), a Buddhist-inspired organization that guides spiritual groups in examining ethical issues, was called in to do the job.¹² They contacted three hundred people, half deniers of the abuse, and half believers. At the end of July 2020, they released following findings: “. . . based on reports of harm from 36 people, the investigation concludes that it is more likely than not that Yogi Bhajan engaged in several types of sexual misconduct and abused his power as a spiritual leader.” The AOB team acknowledged that “it is likely that not all individuals who had been harmed by Yogi Bhajan came forward to participate in this investigation.”

The major limitation of the AOB report was that it only considered allegations of sexual abuse of women. Claims involving child abuse, exploitation, homophobia, life threats, financial abuse, and other misdeeds were not investigated.

Early 2023, an expert report was made public that focused on the abuse of 3HO children. Cult expert Dr. Alexandra Stein drafted her “Report on Themes and Impacts of 3HO Childhood”¹³ at the request of a group of second-generation adults. It is a tough and raw but necessary reading.

Here are some of the former 3HO kids’ experiences cited in Stein’s report that indicate the extreme levels of neglect: they ate rose petals and drank water to give themselves a feeling of being full, food served in schools contained bugs, worms, cigarette butts, and other foreign objects. Children suffered from continuous sleep deprivation. In Indian schools, the latrines were often filthy and scary. They constantly had to deal with lice, boils, diarrhea, parasites, or wounds that took months to heal. One person testified they deliberately broke their arm to get much-needed attention and care. Bullying was pervasive. Many kids had suicidal thoughts and no one to talk to. Higher education was discouraged, and culture and arts were not part of the school curriculum. Harsh caning in schools resulted in injuries. Punishments consisted of holding physical positions for a long time while kneeling on gravel. Children were isolated, verbally abused, and humiliated in front of others. There was sexual abuse by teachers, American staff members, and older students. The kids were made to believe that Yogi Bhanjan could read their auras and minds, which was experienced as extremely invasive. They were told that their parents were neurotic, and Yogi Bhanjan was the only adult to trust.

Stein’s report analyzes the impact the abuse had on the survivors’ lives in adulthood.

3HO was and is a cult, she says, and she includes the evidence that supports this claim in her report.

Since the 2020 revelations and the AOB report, the yogic nonprofits 3HO and KRI have quietly but unmistakably repainted their façades. Yogi Bhanjan’s name, picture, and quotes have been removed from the forefront. No more all-in-white and whites only, many fewer turbans on websites and social media. The new outer image of 3HO and KRI is colorful and focuses on diversity and inclusion. Bhanjan has been relegated to the back burner.

Sikh Dharma International and the umbrella Siri Singh Sahib Corporation play a different game as they still openly honor Yogi Bhajan as their spiritual leader. Their income seems less dependent on “what the outside world thinks about them.”

Following the AOB report, the SSSC launched the Compassionate Reconciliation Program.¹⁴ I was a member of one of its advisory teams for almost two years. At the end of 2022, I stepped out as it felt like I was part of a window-dressing operation. The focus during our meetings was not on healing the wounds of the past but on finding ways to put a bandage on those stinking injuries without coming near them, looking at them, smelling them, hearing the screams, or feeling the pain. One day I asked, “Why is this not a ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission,’ like most other initiatives pursuing Restorative Justice?” They told me that the word *truth* was left out because, in this community, in this situation, different people have different truths. Everybody should respect that.

Desmond Tutu would have furrowed his brows at such an answer. In 1996, he chaired the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established in response to the atrocious misdeeds of the apartheid regime. In his *Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*, he described four steps to healing. The first step is admitting the wrong and acknowledging the harm. Next, the stories need to be told, and the pain and damage should be witnessed. After that, forgiveness can eventually be granted. Finally, reconciliation can be sought, and a new way of living together may be explored.

In May 2022, most probably triggered by juridical actions of second-generation adults, the SSSC launched the Independent Healing and Reparation Program (IHRP).¹⁵ People harmed by Yogi Bhajan or any other community leader or at any of the schools in India were invited to file a claim for reparations. Over six hundred claims were reportedly filed. Other complaints, like those linked to financial abuse, exploitation and homophobia, did not qualify for the reparations program.

On April 28, 2023, Dr. Nirinjan Kaur Khalsa-Baker, born and raised in 3HO, spoke at the Harvard Divinity School spring conference on the

topic, “Healthy Happy Holy? Harm and Healing in Sikh Dharma’s Kundalini Yoga Community.”¹⁶ She talked about the awakening of her community to the reality of sexual misconduct, manipulation, and abuse by their spiritual teacher.¹⁷ “The second-generation adults are discussing what accountability could look like when some of their parents continue to hold fast to their loyalty to Yogi Bhajan rather than believe their own children, continuing to demonstrate patterns of silence and denial. They’re asking what it takes for their voices to be heard, to receive acknowledgment, accountability, and how to prevent future abuse with some organizing lawsuits and others participating in the reparations program,” she said. There were community leaders in the audience as she spoke in an often trembling voice. They kept silent.

On June 11, 2023, a group of a hundred Second Generation Advocates wrote an open letter and launched a petition to make their voices heard in response to the abuses that they experienced in the community. Many are currently participating in the Independent Healing and Reparations Program, which may have been well-intentioned but is being poorly executed and is causing re-traumatization.¹⁸

Less than a week later, just before the 2023 3HO summer solstice event in New Mexico started, another shock wave went through the community. The president of the highly divided board of directors of the Siri Singh Sahib Corporation, Sahaj Singh Khalsa, a second-generation adult himself and an advocate for change and truth telling, resigned from the board and as a Sikh Dharma minister. In his resignation letter circulating on the Internet, he recounted how he and his family were attacked, threatened, and abused because of his stance.¹⁹

Purpose of This Book

To Keep You Vigilant

This book is not about the battle between the ardent worshippers of Yogi Bhajan, deniers of the abuse, and people within 3HO who see the need

for acknowledgment, reparation, and change. Neither is this book about the issues with the current reparation and reconciliation programs. The reason is simple: as long as the enormity of the abuse and malpractice remains underestimated, any remedial initiative will also be inadequate and insufficient.

Nor is this book written to keep you away from yoga. Scientific studies provide evidence that yoga practice can have a positive impact on brain health.²⁰ And healthy brain is what you need when you choose a spiritual practice, a teacher, and an organization for guidance. “Do not leave your brain behind,” says lawyer and investigator of sexual abuse in spiritual communities Carol Merchasin,²¹ and always remain vigilant.

By highlighting the pain, suffering, and shady practices in 3HO, *Under the Yoga Mat* aims to show you why you should be wary of teachers and organizations who claim they know what is good for you better than you do. Trust your own sensing. Training programs that have sleep deprivation built into their schedule, and starve you, are influencing you in an unhealthy way. Euphoric states numb your critical thinking.

Call for Rectification!

This book is written because it is time to adjust the world’s perception of this not-so-saintly man and not-so-holy organization. Part of the public injustice inflicted could be righted by amending the 2005 resolution of the US Congress and changing the name of the New Mexico highway to one that honors the survivors rather than the perpetrator.

Inform Those Who Want to Know

The information shared by current leaders about the wrongdoings is shamefully limited. At best, they say, “There was abuse, we acknowledged it, and we will help those who suffered harm.” That is far from enough. When it dawned on me that they would not do more anytime soon, I decided to write this book to fill the gap in the truth-telling part of the healing process.

Newcomers, practitioners, and teachers have the right to know to be able to answer the question, “Can I separate the teacher from the teachings?” in a well-informed way. Everyone should be able to choose to look at the whole story, the light and the dark side of it, or not. Teachers or trainers who keep people from this knowledge show how the cult nature is still active in them.

Since mid-2020, I have spent hundreds of hours listening to and reading survivors’ stories. In 2021, I summarized and structured what I learned on abuse-in-kundalini-yoga.com. The site and this book compile fragments of publicly available testimonies from children and adults who lived in different periods and locations. Together they provide a broad picture of the atmosphere and culture of 3HO. The selection is made to give an overview of the extent and diversity of the crimes committed and the damages incurred. We cannot represent the lives of thousands of people over fifty years in one book, let this be an invitation for many more to follow.

Under the Yoga Mat shows how Bhajan used his yoga, lifestyle, and religion as a cover-up for his criminal activities and to create conditions to manipulate, use, and abuse his devotees and their children to his advantage. Bhajan’s methods and tools carry the potential to control people. It is that simple.

Trigger Warning

Reading this book may be confronting and can be (re)traumatizing for those who were or are still involved in high-demand groups or cultic organizations. **If that is your case, make sure there are people you can reach out to if you get triggered. Contact a trauma-informed and preferably a cult-informed therapist who can assist you.**

Piercing the Myth

Yogi Bhajan told his followers they were privileged and special human beings. They were lighthouses for humanity, more conscious and

enlightened than “normal people.” Many 3HO members and Kundalini yogis still strongly identify with that image. They believe they possess the exquisite and unique technology, lifestyle, and values to bring salvation and solve all ills. Blinded by that important quest, many are unable or unwilling to see what went on for decades under that holy veil. Bhajan said, “When everyone else goes down, we remain upright. We are the saviors, the spiritual warriors, the chosen ones, the pure ones.”

Today, there are still teacher trainers who continue to preach the specialness of this path and how it is different and superior to other paths.

Reading this book may pierce this myth. It may reveal that instead of being more aware than others, we—I count myself as an ex-member of this cult—were more asleep than others. **Letting go of a cult identity is ultimately liberating but can be extremely confronting, frightening, painful, retraumatizing, and complex. It should be done under the guidance of specialized counselors and therapists.**

By retelling the survivors’ stories and calling Yogi Bhajan a cult leader, *Under the Yoga Mat* deliberately scratches the wounds to drain the pus, which is very uncomfortable, unpleasant, and painful but necessary.

Cult Nature of 3HO

Cult expert Dr. Steven Hassan developed a model that helps to evaluate cases of exploitation, mind control, thought reform, and undue influence. It is based on four components: control of behavior, information, thoughts, and emotions, and is therefore called the BITE model. I performed a BITE analysis of 3HO at his request using my experience of being showered with survivor stories for three years. It was amazing how easily I could map the 3HO situation to his model²² as if he developed it for 3HO. The results make it difficult to deny that 3HO was a cult when Yogi Bhajan was still alive.

Alexandra Stein argues in her 3HO-childhood report that 3HO was and still is a cult: “Note that after his [Yogi Bhajan’s] death the group

has apparently loosened up and may now be moving away from at least some of the elements listed. However, though there have been some incremental improvements, many of the same elements of neglect, abuse, coercion, and isolation from the mainstream as noted above [*she refers to her report*] have persisted at least until 2019.”²³

By describing various aspects of life in 3HO, *Under the Yoga Mat* is of interest to people who want to understand or research high-demand groups and cultic organizations. It will also help readers to recognize situations of undue influence and mind control more quickly.

About Cults

Cults have existed throughout history and come in many different forms. Expert Dr. Steven Hassan gives the following definition in his book *Combating Cult Mind Control*:

A destructive cult is a group that violates its members’ rights and damages them through the abusive techniques of unethical mind control. It distinguishes itself from a normal, healthy social or religious group by subjecting its members to systematic control of behavior, information, thoughts, and emotions (BITE) to keep them dependent and obedient.²⁴

How can sane and intelligent people join such groups? It is hard to understand for people who never consciously dealt with cults. Fortunately, academic research has dispelled some myths and misunderstandings in recent years. One such myth is that only weak people can be caught up in them. Here is what Dr. Alexandra Stein has to say on this topic:

I want to emphasize that the people who find themselves in cults, extremist groups, or even totalitarian nations are ordinary people who did not choose that situation. Rather, the situation—or the group—chose them. . . .

None of us are immune, given the right come-on and the right situation, yet those who do become victims are demonized. This demonization prevents us from recognizing our own potential vulnerability.²⁵

In her book *Terror, Love, and Brainwashing*, she explains cult dynamics and how cult leaders create a relationship of disorganized attachment to gain complete control over people's lives.

Dr. Jajna Lalich, another cult expert, explains in her book *Bounded Choice* what she calls the bounded choice perspective:

I have struggled intellectually with issues of belief and coercion, which I see as the heart of the matter. I have concluded that there is a particular state of being, which I call “charismatic commitment,” that can take root quickly, so that people become easily enmeshed and, in some cases, trapped, at least psychologically. This is the point at which there is a fusion between the ideal of personal freedom (as promised in the state goal of the group or its ideology) and the demand for self-renunciation (as prescribed by the rules and norms). At that point, the believer becomes a “true believer” at the service of the charismatic leader or ideology. In such a context, in relation to personal power and individual decision-making, that person's options are severely limited—hence my overall conclusion is that the best way to understand why cult members do what they do is to consider them in a state of ever-present bounded choice, a narrow realm of constraint and control, dedication and duty.²⁶

In their respective books, Jajna Lalich, Steven Hassan, and Alexandra Stein cite testimonies of survivors of high-demand groups or cultic organizations in various situations. The similarities between their stories and those coming from Bhajan's 3HO community are remarkable.

Setting the Stage

One-on-One Interviews

After reading *Premka* in early 2020, Kundalini Yoga teacher Mina Bahadori felt there was a need in the community to connect and openly discuss what was surfacing. She started interviewing survivors and experts on her Instagram account. In November 2020, she wrapped up after more than thirty revealing and intense live interviews. GuruNischan, born and raised in 3HO, continued this critical work. She created a new podcast/YouTube platform with the all-telling name: *The Uncomfortable Conversations Podcast: The Untold Stories from the 3HO/Kundalini Yoga Community* and invited (ex-)3HO members who felt ready to share their stories in the open. At the time of publication of this book, more than a hundred interviews are available on Instagram, YouTube, and various podcast channels.²⁷

The responses to these testimonies show how important they are for other survivors who are often inspired by listening to peers to bring their own stories into the light or seek support.

GuruNischan's first interview was with a good-humored couple in their seventies, Guru Bir Singh and Gur Siri Kaur, who entered 3HO in 1974. Yes, reader, I know. Guru Bir Singh and Gur Siri Kaur. Those names! How are you going to remember such strange names? To keep it simple, I will call this couple Bir and Gur.

Intermezzo on Spiritual Names

Like other cult leaders, Bhajan gave his followers new names to drive them further away from their own identity. 3HO's spiritual names follow the Sikh tradition. Men have Singh as a second name, which means lion. Women are called Kaur, meaning princess.

Baptized 3HO Sikhs use an extra name: Khalsa. It means "pure" and stands for the Sikh ideal of the "warrior-saint." While most Punjabi Sikhs are not initiated into the Khalsa, 3HO Sikhs join the Khalsa more easily. Again, unlike Punjabi Sikhs, baptized 3HO Sikhs use Khalsa as

their surname, and Singh and Kaur become middle names. (Are you still with me? If not, no worries. This is not crucial, but still, I need to explain a minimum.)

In 1974, Yogi Bhajan established the Khalsa Council. Initiated members, called ministers, could/can perform Sikh initiations, marriages, and death ceremonies. Initially, only his confidants, mostly community or business leaders, had seats on the Khalsa Council.²⁸ According to khalsacouncil.com, in 2022, there were seventy-one active ministers, most from the US. Male members are addressed as Singh Sahib and females as Sardarni Sahibas.

Many 3HO members of the first generation renounced their birth names. Their spiritual name became their official name, a solid and clear sign of their commitment to their new lifestyle. This played into the hands of Bhajan, who encouraged his followers to distance themselves from their natural family, especially if relatives were not interested in joining “the dharma.”

When Yogi Bhajan was still alive, 3HO parents would call him to receive a name for their newborn. There is a story of a boy to whom Bhajan gave the same name as his brother.

The parents said, “Oh, sir, but you already gave this name to our firstborn.”

He replied, “Very well then, that is their karma. They will bear the same name.”

Children born in 3HO got those strange-sounding names from birth. GuruNischan, for example, says she often needs to spell her name.

Exiled after Eighteen Years

“Why do you want to share your story?” GuruNischan asks in her very first *Uncomfortable Conversation* with Gur and Bir on November 20, 2020. The husband, Bir, replies:

You know, in our community, everybody loved everybody. We worshiped together. Every morning we did our sadhana [morning

practice] together. We went to yoga class together. We washed each other's feet going into the gurdwara [the house of prayer of the Sikhs]. . . .

And then, suddenly, we were told, "Oh! These people are gone. They betrayed our leader and the dharma. They are no longer welcome. Don't let them in whenever they show up at the door." Nobody knew what had happened to them. We never guessed that one day it would be our turn [*Bir and Gur laugh*].

People asked us, "What happened to you? Where did you go? You disappeared from the face of the earth?"

We told them, "No. We didn't."

So, that's why we're here, to share our story.

Bir prepared a summary of what happened to them and read it aloud.

We started awfully long ago, in 1974, in 3HO and the world of Yogi Bhanan, Kundalini Yoga, and ashram life. We've named this our 3HO graduation story. In short: On April 30, 1992, I was arrested, handcuffed, and transported to jail. My arrest was on the evening news on television and front-page news in the morning paper. As a result, I lost my business, my wife lost her job, our children were bullied in school, and we lost our house.

For eighteen years, we had been the beloved son and daughter of the Siri Singh Sahib [Yogi Bhanan's title often used by his devotees]. Overnight, we were exiled from our community.²⁹

We will tell Bir and Gur's story in more detail later, but you can already sense that what this family went through had nothing to do with sexual abuse.

After the publication of *Premka* in early 2020, most of the talk was about Bhanan's sexual abuse. Bir and Gur's story is different but equally harsh. It shows how Yogi Bhanan did not shy away from taking everything from an innocent family with two children, turning their lives

upside down, to save his skin. Many stories covered in this book show that Bhajan's lack of ethics was monstrously multifaceted.

Faithful until the End

GuruNischan grants her guests ample time to share their experiences. Most Zoom interviews last between ninety minutes and two hours. And yet there is one that tops it all: the interview with Siri Nirongkar, whom we will call Siri. It lasts three hours and thirty-eight minutes. Though long, there is never a dull moment.

Siri was nine when he and his mother entered 3HO in 1976. They lived in the ashram because they could not afford their own flat. Siri was sent to the single men's room where the guards lived who worked for Akal Security and often served as Yogi Bhajan's bodyguards. Over the years, Siri was assigned to three or four different men. They were supposed to care for him as his mom was busy working as a nurse for one of 3HO's medical doctors. Siri recounts:

She thought she did the right thing. She had no time. I only saw her once in a while.

Growing up with all these guards meant that nobody took advantage of me or beat me and that I was not sexually abused, but I was neglected. I was clothed and fed, and my physical well-being was not in jeopardy. Though nobody gave a shit if I did my homework. Nobody guessed how my day at school was. Nobody gave me a hug. Nobody cared if it was my birthday because I didn't know it myself. To this day, I don't celebrate my birthday. "What's the point?" you know.

These guardians weren't mean. They weren't purposely not asking how my day was. I was not their kid. I bet they didn't even want me. I bet the Siri Singh Sahib, or the head of the ashram, told them, "You're taking a kid." . . .

I once lived with the head of the ashram in Española, New Mexico. That was interesting. I watched the power dynamic as people

came in and out of the house and how they ran things. When people left the community, I heard the conversations about them. As a kid, you're soaking it all up. You're watching and discovering, "Ha, this is how it works." . . .

I wasn't the only kid living with the guards. When I was in Española, there were probably seven or eight of us. We became good friends. We loved to disappear. We played in the irrigation ditch and climbed around in the old barn. We threw chunks of dirt at each other. Because ten-year-old boys aren't the brightest, we got caught from time to time. As a punishment, we had to do push-ups or frogs [one of Yogi Bhaijan's favorite exercises: you sit as a frog, fingertips on the ground, stretching your legs up and sitting down again, up and down, up and down]. Then, I would say, "You want me to do frogs? I can do frogs." So, I just busted out frogs. My ability to keep doing that . . . [*laughs and shakes his head*]. What I figured out as a kid was that I could take punishment longer than they were interested in punishing me. . . .

We knew how to play the game. It was not that difficult. I learned how to quietly do what I wanted. How to make my own plans, and how to avoid problems. I knew the power dynamic and became more and more able to deal with it. We learned to lie like the best. There was no other way. Everyone was lying, and hypocrisy was the norm. But don't get me wrong. I don't mean to make it sound like it was all good. I remember being lonely. How I longed for an adult who would hold me. Someone who would genuinely care about me. I went to a different school every year. I had dreamed of going to military school, but, at the age of fourteen [in 1981], I was sent to a boarding school in India together with other 3HO kids.

Soon after the children arrived in Mussoorie, at the foothills of the Himalayas in the Uttarakhand region, where the school was, the two American adults who had accompanied them from the US to India returned home.

I watched them walk away, and I remember thinking, *There goes my only connection to the US. I don't know how to make a phone call to the US. I don't know how to write a letter to the US. I don't know anything. That's my only connection to the US that just walked away.* That was a strange feeling. Wow, that was like, *OK, I am really on my own now. I am really on my own. . . .*

After all, India was the most stable part of my childhood. I appreciated that part of India. At least I knew where I was going to school next year, and I wouldn't have to make new friends.

Siri stayed in India for the next five years. A few days after he had returned to the US, he was having lunch with seven fellow students at a community gathering. Yogi Bhajan joined them at the table.

"You will all go to college," he said. "None of you will have to pay for it. I will pay for you all."

Later, when the boys inquired about how they would get the money, they were told, "He didn't mean that. It was just a joke."

Siri started working for Akal Security and often served as a personal bodyguard to the master.

I was willing to give my life for him because he was serving something big. And I was serving him to do that. I threatened people for him. I heard him say to people, "You're going to be a prostitute." He told a friend, "When you get to Saint Peter's gate, I will be there. I will make sure you don't get in." My friend wrestled with this for years. Rationally, he knew it was a bunch of shit, but in the back of his mind, he was afraid it might be so. I watched the Siri Singh Sahib do those things. And I should not have stood by. But I was twenty-two years old, you know.

At one point, Siri's boss at Akal Security was a young woman. He thought she was incompetent, arrogant, and a bully. However, she was protected by the Siri Singh Sahib. Regularly, Siri and his teammates were called to the ranch. On those occasions, Yogi Bhajan yelled at them for their behavior toward her. Then, one day, they were called in again.

I had a principle I took to heart: "I bow to no man. I bow only to the Guru." [By *Guru*, Siri means the holy book of the Sikhs, the *Guru Granth Sahib*.] So, I never touched Yogi Bhajan's feet as most people did. That day, he told me to get over to him. My body language was probably one hundred percent showing, "I don't give a shit. Can we just get yelled at, so we can leave?" He asked me to massage his feet. I thought, *OK, I don't give massages, I am awful at doing it, but I will do it.*

"What are you doing?" he shouted.

"Massaging your feet."

"Come here."

He got up from his chair. We walked to the back of the ranch toward his bedroom. He opened the door. I walked in first. He hit me so fucking hard in the back of the neck and then punched me in the head. I saw stars. I hit the floor, and he kicked me hard while I was on the ground. He kicked me into a fetal position. I'm not small. I had my body armor on and was wearing a gun.

He looked down at me and said, "You are fucking useless."

I was shocked. I jumped up and said, "Give me one minute to explain."

He looked at his watch.

I said, "If you want to turn this company around, fire the boss. And get in some people who know what they are doing. So, if you want things to work, we need to do this, this, and this . . ."

He looked me up and down. Then he said, "I will burn that fucking business to the ground around her before I ever fire her. Your whole job is to make sure she looks good." He walked out. He was not interested in making that business better. If you have enough of those experiences, you realize you are working to improve things, but the system is not designed to make the place better. The weird thing is that it didn't even hurt me. It was worth it to have him hit me that hard, so I had a moment to say what I needed, so to get it off my chest. If that was what it took to have him open up and listen to me for a minute ... I felt so much better just being allowed to speak out honestly.

In 1992, when Siri was twenty-five, he decided to finally pursue his old dream. He started making arrangements to go to military school.

But Yogi Bhajan pulled me in and said, “The kids are moving to Amritsar [in India, where 3HO was building a new school]. I need somebody to go over there and take care of these kids. You know India. You know the program. You know these kids. You can do this.”

Of course, he promised me many things he never delivered. But he knew me. Once I got there, it would be about caring for these kids. It wasn’t about me. I would make it work because I cared about these kids. So, I got there, and it was horrendous. We had a hundred kids living in a house. Fifty boys stayed downstairs, and roughly fifty girls upstairs. I had three bathrooms for fifty boys. They had just come from another pretty crappy school in a pretty crappy situation. The academics in the school they were going to was a joke. The living conditions were subpar, for sure. . . .

I didn’t have enough food for the kids. Even the little ones had to wash their own clothes, as I had no money for the laundry service. And meanwhile, the Siri Singh Sahib called me regularly to run political errands and get things done for him [in India].

I said, “Sir, I need these things, and these things, to run the school and to do the things you are asking me.”

“Yes, I will get them for you.”

He never kept his word. Then he called me, “Did you do what I asked you to do?”

“No, because you were supposed to give me this and that.”

He always had excuses every time. It slowly started to dawn on me: If my word is supposed to be ironclad, isn’t your word even more important? If you’re going to take the perks of being in charge, you also get the responsibility, and you are held up to a higher standard. That’s just how it works. If you have any honor, that’s how it is supposed to work. So, I started to get disillusioned. I said, “Look, I need half a dollar a day per kid to feed them. Why don’t I have

enough food for the children?" I started to challenge him directly, always polite but firm. . . .

Things were really disjointed and disorganized at the leadership level. It was a mess back in America and in India. We uncovered fraud in the building of the school. Nobody cared. There was embezzlement of funds. People told me, "We know what the kids are paying." But the money was not there. We did not know where it was. So I said, "I hope you can figure it out. I gotta go back and take care of those kids." I did not have the bandwidth to deal with all that.

After two years, Siri returned to the US. He was determined to do his own thing and became a paramedic. He worked for a few years on his own account. When Yogi Bhajan's health started deteriorating, the nurses regularly called Siri to the ranch to give the master his injections.

He was such a baby about needles. He was terrified of needles. I said, "You're a big strong man. Give me your hand." And boom! I didn't give a shit. Can't you handle a needle? Harden the fuck up, son [*laughs*].

"You know, all these cheese sticks, pizza, and all that shit are what got you here."

Do you know what he used to do at the movies? How he got his popcorn?

GURUNISCHAN. Yeah, with M&M's at the bottom and popcorn on top.

SIRI. Not just M&M's. A layer of popcorn, a whole order of nachos, an entire box of M&M's, and popcorn on top so the staff wouldn't see. He ate awful! That's what did him in.

Things really changed between us during that time. I was in the back of the car when he was driven miles and miles to the hospital in Albuquerque. He had heart attacks and missed toes from diabetes. He had one kidney, was in constant pain, and was drugged to the gills. His life was miserable. Compassionately I was saying, "I

forgive you. Hurry up and die. You have no quality of life. What are you hanging on for?" It felt good I could take care of him in the end. For all the shit he did to people I know and to me. For all that I had watched him do, I said, "I'm going to be big and have a big heart. I am going to take care of you. I am going to watch you die." It got to a point where our conversations were so frank.

The staff asked Siri more and more to visit Yogi Bhanjan. "We ask you because you don't want anything from him," they said. "You're not going to be a drain on his energy. You're a distraction, a couple of minutes of entertainment for him. He really enjoys seeing you." So, Siri stopped by occasionally. One day they called him in to give another injection. While everyone else in the room had taken the habit of using whispering voices, Siri just used his normal voice to greet him.

"How are you doing, sir?" I leaned over to listen to what he had to say.

"Well enough to kick your ass."

"Oh, wow," I just stood up and laughed. "No doubt, sir. No doubt at all. OK, what are we here for today?"

That was my goodbye. I felt really good about where we were at.

Two days later, Yogi Bhanjan died. Siri had arranged with his boss at the ambulance to drive Yogi Bhanjan's dead body to the funeral home in Santa Fe. It was at night. They had to go to a dark alley behind the funeral home, where there was a walk-in cooler. With his bare hands, Siri placed the master's body on a shelf in the steel refrigerator.

"It looked like it could have been an industrial kitchen, but instead, it stored bodies."

He closed the door and stood in the alley looking at the walk-in cooler door and said, "That's quite an end, buddy. Where's all your power, jewels, cars, and people? They're all fucking gone." And that was the end of it. Siri did not go to the funeral. He forgave Yogi Bhanjan.

Siri ends his three-and-a-half-hour-long interview with the following words:

There's obviously a huge fracture in our community right now. For simplicity, there are deniers, and there are believers. I don't know why we can't all get along. Why can't someone who denies all this say, "I can't deal with it. He's still my spiritual teacher who brought me to the feet of the *Guru*. Yoga and meditation work for me, and I will leave it at that. I'm not going to call you a liar."

And for the people who believe all of it. I want to hear compassion from them and say, "He did these things. He's no longer my teacher. I can't deal with him. But you get to have your experience. Just don't call me a liar."

Because the same person can be sensed differently by different people. I don't have a problem with that. Because we are humans. And we are complicated.³⁰