

## **Sample Lesson 34: Building Empathy**

Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies

Time: 60 minutes

Essential Questions

- What turns xenophobia into violence?

Lesson Objectives (Students will be able to...):

- understand the Oak Creek tragedy in historical context; and
- build empathy.

Materials Needed:

1. Handout 1: BBC Article
2. Handout 2: Graphic Organizer (optional)
3. Handout 3: Oak Creek Testimony
4. Projector or smart board for YouTube viewing

Performance tasks

Understanding and Situating the Oak Creek Tragedy

Activity (3 min)

1. Connect students to the activity from the previous Lesson where they represented their own migration story and the xenophobia their families may have faced and also to the South Asians in America timeline that they walked through for the previous Lesson.

## Part I: Opening Activity (15 min)

Before beginning the lesson, the teacher should warn students that this lesson contains details and stories from a recent mass shooting.

### Direction for Students:

1. Today, we will examine the treatment of South Asians and Muslims in America. We will begin class by reading and reacting to a current event. In the fall of 2012, a white supremacist opened fire in a [Sikh Gurudwaratemple \(Sikh house of worship\)](#), ~~known as a Gurdwara~~, and killed seven innocent people. As you read this article, pay attention to what happened and why it happened. Use the headings to take note of the key ideas the author wants to illustrate, and also pay attention to how you are feeling. Annotate the article as you read for key ideas and your reactions. Draw on information you learned in the previous two lessons as you respond to the text.

### Instructions for Facilitator/Teacher:

[When implementing this lesson, teachers should take care to ensure that students do not conflate Islam with terrorism. Questions 3-4 in this section have been added to address this point.](#)

1. Give students 7–10 minutes to read and react to the article and follow with a facilitated discussion. After reading the article, the teacher should provide time for comment and reflection to help the student process the traumatic events.
  - Handout 1: BBC News Article
  - Handout 2: Graphic Organizer (optional)

2. Guiding Questions for Discussion: What are your reactions to this article? What do you see happening here? Why do you think this happened? How do you see xenophobia and racism at play?

3. What is problematic about the following statement in the article which makes reference to mistaken identity and negative stereotypes? ‘Members of the community have been attacked in the past by assailants mistaking them for Muslims.’ Why should Islam not be conflated with terrorism? What challenges occur when people who are Muslim, or perceived to be Muslim are targeted with Islamophobic sentiment?

2-4. Compare the above statement from the article with the following one from Harpreet Singh Saini’s testimony. ‘So many have asked Sikhs to simply blame Muslims for attacks against our community or just say “We are not Muslim.” But we won’t blame anyone else. An attack on one of us is an attack on all of us’. Why do you think many Sikhs refrain from using the phrase ‘we are not Muslim’?

#### Part II: Historicize Oak Creek – 9/11 Connections (15 minutes)

1. If a student doesn’t mention this, highlight that a key idea the article mentions is that this is not the first of these kinds of incidents. TwentyTen years ago, after the World Trade Center attack on 9/11, Muslims, ~~and~~ Sikhs, South Asians and Arab Americans became targets of xenophobic harassment and attack.
2. Guiding Questions:
  - What do you know about 9/11?
  - What knowledge do you have of what happened to members of the ~~South Asian and~~ Muslim, Sikh, South Asian and Arab American communities after 9/11?
  - Why do you think this happened?
3. Use a T-chart/graphic organizer to capture student responses.

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- Key Understanding:

- After 9/11, ~~South Asians and~~ Muslims, Sikhs, South Asians and Arab Americans have experienced increased incidents of racial profiling, harassment, discrimination, bullying, and hate crimes.

4. Have students watch the opening sequence of the documentary Divided We Fall (0–4:30) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d22ZuUbgZeg>. Frame the viewing by telling students that you will now watch a segment of a film that captures the aftermath of 9/11 faced by ~~South Asians~~, Muslims, Sikhs, South Asians and Arab Americans. Tell students to record their reactions.
5. Discussion: What are your thoughts regarding the connections between the Oak Creek tragedy and post-9/11 aftermath?

Part III. Building Empathy: Oak Creek Testimony and Response Letter (25 min)

1. Bring students back to the Oak Creek tragedy by suggesting that hearing people's testimonies and narratives deepens our understandings. Tell students that you will now read a testimony from the Oak Creek tragedy.
2. Engage in a shared reading of the Oak Creek testimony (Teacher reads aloud, students follow along).
  - Handout 3: Oak Creek Testimony
3. Ask students to reread the Oak Creek testimony independently, and respond by writing a letter to Harpreet. As they read the Oak Creek testimony again, guide them to capture their emotional reactions, and think about what they would like to share with teenagers who share Harpreet's religious background.
4. Before the end of the class period, ask if any student would like to share any excerpts from their letter. Ask students: How did it feel to write the letter?

If useful, share with the students this infographic prepared by the Sikh Coalition (based in New York): Who are the Sikhs?

[http://sikhcoalition.org/images/education\\_resources/whoarethesikhs\\_national\\_web.pdf](http://sikhcoalition.org/images/education_resources/whoarethesikhs_national_web.pdf)

US and Canada

6 August 2012

Last updated at 09:21 ET <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-19143281>

Sikhs express shock after shootings at Wisconsin temple

**Sikhs living in the United States have expressed their shock and fear after a shooting at a temple in Wisconsin on Sunday which left seven people dead.**

Some community members could not believe what happened. Others said they had feared such attacks since 9/11.

A gunman entered the Sikh temple on Sunday morning and opened fire, killing six people and injuring a policeman.

The suspect has been named as Wade Michael Page, a 40-year-old army veteran, in US media reports.

But his identity has not been independently confirmed to the BBC.

A vigil for the victims was held in nearby Milwaukee as police searched the suspect's home.

FBI and bomb squad officers have surrounded the property of the alleged gunman in Cudahy, about 2.5 miles (4km) north of the Wisconsin Sikh Temple, and evacuated local residents.

In total, seven people died in the attack in Oak Creek, a suburb of Milwaukee, including the gunman. A police officer and two other men were critically injured.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who is himself a Sikh, said he was "deeply shocked and saddened" by the attack.

"That this senseless act of violence should be targeted at a place of religious worship is particularly painful," Mr Singh said in a statement.

### **Muslim confusion**

Officials have not yet identified the gunman or a possible motive, but Sikh organisations in the US say the community has been vulnerable since the 9/11 attacks.

"This is something we have been fearing since 9/11, that this kind of incident will take place," said Rajwant Singh, chairman of the Washington-based Sikh Council on Religion and Education.

"It was a matter of time because there's so much ignorance and people confuse us [as] being members of Taliban or belonging to [Osama] bin Laden," he told Associated Press.

"We never thought this could happen to our community," Devendar Nagra, 48, told Associated Press. "We never did anything wrong to anyone."

Sikhism hails from the Indian subcontinent, and observant Sikhs wear turbans. Members of the community have been attacked in the past by assailants mistaking them for Muslims.

"That turban has tragically marked us as automatically suspect, perpetually foreign and potentially terrorists," Valarie Kaur, a filmmaker based in the US who has chronicled attacks on Sikhs, told AP.

Several hundred people turned up to an impromptu candlelit vigil in Milwaukee on Sunday evening for the victims. Cab driver and Oak Creek resident Kashif Afridi went to the temple after he heard about the attack.

"When the shooting happened, I was at home watching the news. I went straight out and drove to the temple. There were lots of police and the area was closed off.

"The press was already there and there were lots of people from the Sikh community. I spoke to one girl who was in the temple when the shooting happened.

"She said when the shooting started, everyone panicked. People were running around trying to hide. She said she lost her uncle.

"People here are in a state of a shock. This is a very small and peaceful place, you would never imagine this kind of attack could happen here. Nobody can believe it.

"Lots of people have gathered in the area. People just stop by to express their sympathies."

### **'Terrorist-type incident'**

There are an estimated 2,500–3,000 Sikh families in and around the city worshipping at two gurdwaras, or temples, including the Wisconsin Sikh Temple.

Lakhwinder Singh, a member of the congregation there, told Reuters that two of the victims were believed to be the president of [the](#) temple and a priest.

"It will take a long time to heal. We're hurt very badly," he said.

President Barack Obama expressed his condolences with victims of the attack, which comes just over two weeks after a gun massacre left 12 people dead at a Colorado cinema.

"As we mourn this loss which took place at a house of worship, we are reminded how much our country has been enriched by Sikhs, who are a part of our broader American family."

The US embassy in India said it was "deeply saddened by the senseless loss of lives and injuries" caused by the shooting.

"Our hearts, thoughts, and prayers go out to the victims and their families," a statement said.

"The United States takes very seriously the responsibility to respect and protect people of all faiths. Religious freedom and religious tolerance are fundamental pillars of US society."

Local politician Mark Honadel called the attack "craziness".

The state representative told CNN: "Unfortunately, when this type of stuff hits your area, you say to yourself, 'why?' But in today's society, I don't think there's any place that's free from idiots."

Police have described it as a "domestic terrorist-type incident". The FBI are taking over the criminal investigation.

There was believed to be only one attacker, with eyewitness reports suggesting it was a white male.

BBC Article: "Sikhs express shock after shootings at Wisconsin temple"

Information from the Article



## My Reactions

Testimony before the US Senate of Harpreet Singh Saini (age 18) [Survivor of the Oak Creek Shooting]

Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights Committee on the Judiciary on "Hate Crimes and the Threat of Domestic Extremism"

September 19, 2012 (excerpts)

My name is Harpreet Singh Saini. I am here because my mother was murdered in an act of hate 45 days ago. I am here on behalf of all the children who lost parents or grandparents during the massacre in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. A little over a month ago, I never imagined I'd be here. I never imagined that anyone outside of Oak Creek would know my name. Or my mother's name. Paramjit Kaur Saini.

As we all know, on Sunday, August 5, 2012, a white supremacist fueled by hatred walked into our local Gurdwara with a loaded gun. He killed my mother, Paramjit Kaur, while she was sitting for morning prayers. He shot and killed five more men – all of them were fathers, all had turbans like me. And now people know all our names: Sita Singh. Ranjit Singh. Prakash Singh. Suvegh Singh. Satwant Singh Kaleka.

This was not supposed to be our American story. This was not my mother's dream. My mother and father brought Kamal and me to America in 2004. I was only 10 years-old. Like many other immigrants, they wanted us to have a better life, a better education. More options. In the land of the free. In the land of diversity.

It was a Tuesday, 2 days after our mother was killed, that my brother Kamal and I ate the leftovers of the last meal she had made for us. We ate her last *rotis* – which are a type of South Asian flatbread. She had made the *rotis* from scratch the night before she died. Along with the last bite of our food that Tuesday...came the realization that this was the last meal, made by the hands of our mother, that we will ever eat in our lifetime.

My mother was a brilliant woman, a reasonable woman. Everyone knew she was smart, but she never had the chance to get a formal education.

She couldn't. As a hard-working immigrant, she had to work long hours to feed her family, to get her sons educated, and help us achieve our American dreams. This was more important to her than anything else.

Senators, my mother was our biggest fan, our biggest supporter. She was always there for us, she always had a smile on her face. But now she's gone. Because of a man who hated her because she wasn't his color? His religion? I just had my first day of college. And my mother wasn't there to send me off. She won't be there for my graduation. She won't be there on my wedding day. She won't be there to meet her grandchildren. I want to tell the gunman who took her from me: You may have been full of hate, but my mother was full of love. She was an American. And this was not our American dream.

We ache for our loved ones. We have lost so much. But I want people to know that our heads are held high. We also know that we are not alone. Tens of thousands of people sent us letters, attended vigils, and gave us their support – Oak Creek's Mayor and Police Chief, Wisconsin's Governor, the President and the First Lady. All their support also gave me the strength to come here today.

Senators, I came here today to ask the government to give my mother the dignity of being a statistic. The FBI does not track hate crimes against Sikhs. My mother and those shot that day will not even count on a federal form. We cannot solve a problem we refuse to recognize.

Senators, I also ask that the government pursue domestic terrorists with the same vigor as attackers from abroad. The man who killed my mother was on the watch lists of public interest groups. I believe the government could have tracked him long before he went on a shooting spree.

Finally, Senators, I ask that you stand up for us. As lawmakers and leaders, you have the power to shape public opinion. Your words carry weight. When others scapegoat or demean people because of who they are, use your power to say that is wrong.

So many have asked Sikhs to simply blame Muslims for attacks against our community or just say “We are not Muslim.” But we won’t blame anyone else. An attack on one of us is an attack on all of us.

I also want to be a part of the solution. That’s why I want to be a law enforcement officer like Lt. Brian Murphy, who saved so many lives on August 5, 2012. I want to protect other people from what happened to my mother. I want to combat hate – not just against Sikhs but against all people.

Senators, I know what happened at Oak Creek was not an isolated incident. I fear it may happen again if we don’t stand up and do something.

I don’t want anyone to suffer what we have suffered. I want to build a world where all people can live, work, and worship in America in peace.

Because you see, despite everything, I still believe in the American dream. In my mother’s memory, I ask that you stand up for it with me. Today. And in the days to come.

Accessed and excerpted from full testimony available at:

<https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/9-19-12SainiTestimony.pdf>