

# “Bad Things Can Even Happen on the Most Beautiful of Days”

*By Greg Young, M.Div.*

On a day that was so beautiful that it defied anything bad possibly happening, a dark cloud hung heavy over the community of Oak Creek, Wisconsin. The day was August 5, 2012. On that day, a white supremacist drove up to the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin on Sunday morning at the time of worship and shot 6 people dead, and wounding three others, one of which was Lt. Brian Murphy, who by all accounts is a hero for his actions. Lt. Murphy was the first police officer to arrive after receiving the 911 call. He exchanged gunfire with the gunman, and even after being shot several times by the gunman, he was more concerned about the welfare of the Sikh families in the temple than he was for himself, waving off initial officer rescue attempts by other officers.

The shooter took his own life after being shot by another police officer who had arrived at the scene.

It was an act of ignorant hatred to which I responded on that day. I remember it well. I remember counseling a couple having some marital issues in my office following the worship service in my congregation, after which I got in my car, turned on a “sports talk” radio station to enjoy and decompress listening to on the way home. What I heard upon turning on the radio was the kind of on-air chaotic scramble including some dead air and reporters working on the fly to start to report on something big going down. The breaking news was the news of the Sikh Temple Shooting in a community on the far side of the Milwaukee metropolitan area where I lived. Because I wear multiple hats as a volunteer for the Salvation Army, police chaplain, an FBI chaplain, a debriefer for the Milwaukee Fire Department and numerous other agencies, a trainer in CISM known to many, a criminal justice program trainer and teaching law enforcement officers how to make death notifications, I knew that I was about to be called. And I was. The call was from the Disaster Services Director for the Salvation Army, Wisconsin and Upper Michigan Division who said to grab your Salvation Army identification, and whatever other credentials you have and come down to Oak Creek. And I did. Enroute to the area where I was instructed to go and report, I found myself attempting to recall what little I knew of the Sikh religion and culture. I have to confess to say that my knowledge was sketchy at best. I did know that Sikhism was not Hinduism, and that Sikhism doesn’t believe in a caste system. I also knew them to be good neighbors and citizens, and that was the extent of my knowledge.

After passing through several barricaded areas, (the area cordoned off was quite large). I saw a Salvation Army truck and personnel in a parking area adjacent to a bowling alley parking lot which had become the staging area for the incident response. There were quite a few Sikh community members isolated behind crime scene tape separating them from the staging area. After talking briefly to the Salvation Army staff, remembering Maslow’s hierarchy of needs that we use in teaching Individual & Peer Support CISM, I grabbed a few bottles of water and began to approach some of the Sikh people standing or sitting clustered together, gently introduced myself and asked them if they would like water and to see if there was anything that I could do for them. If the people I approached were all seated, I crouched down to mirror their body language, all basic things we teach, but profoundly important in connecting with them. I found that some of those gathered were a mix of temple members, or friends of temple members. Some of them had recently come to this country and couldn’t understand English, but English speaking Sikh’s, (especially young people living here), were very helpful in translating. Some of these same young people later became an invaluable resource in assisting responding agencies in communicating with non-English speaking Sikhs who were impacted by the incident.

As Sikh individuals and families fled the temple and police arrived and set up perimeters, barricades, and crime scene tape, some Sikh families were geographically cut off from one another temporarily.

One of the most frequently mentioned needs of the Sikh families and friends waiting behind the cordoned off areas was to know where other family and friends were and how they were doing. They wanted to be reunited, or to call them. Because some of them didn't have cell phones on them, I offered them mine, and some took me up on the offer and were able to make contact with loved ones. In some cases I was able to carry a message from people in one area cut off from people isolated in another area. I listened to many personal stories of loved ones they hadn't heard from and were concerned about.

The Bowling Alley owner decided to close his door and make the entire facility available for the incident response operation. Members of the Sikh community cut off from each other were able to get together, and the Salvation Army canteen was able to move into the parking lot staging area to meet food and hydration needs. Good business citizens in the community offered food and hydration supplies. A respite center was established in a large banquet room in the basement of the bowling alley where temple victims, and close family members could gather and wait and be available for interviews with investigative personnel. It was arranged to have food prepared at another Sikh Temple located elsewhere in the metropolitan area to be brought down to those gathered in the respite center. And then we waited.

Once we had established a central location, I encountered several people from various agencies who had received CISM training of one sort or another from me. It was humbling and gratifying. The gravity of the incident also made me keenly aware of how important a resource that CISM is, and that we get it right. We are, after all, only as good as we train. There were law enforcement officers who were conducting aspects of the investigation and assisting with the family death notifications with utmost compassion, CISM trained Salvation Army officers, staff, and volunteers who worked hard to provide food and water meeting the basic fundamental human needs, serving responders as well as the Sikh community, all the while providing a ministry of presence that spoke far louder than words. Kevin Ellers, Territorial Disaster Services Coordinator worked with me and others providing Emotional and Spiritual Care. There was the female Salvation Army officer who brought personal comfort, psychological first aid, a ministry of presence that transcended cultural and language barriers, to Sikh women after being given the horrible news that their loved ones were killed.

Throughout the night the Sikh families were gentle and in the midst of their unfathomable grief were thanking us for what we do, and put their hands together in an expression of "Namaste" a gesture of great respect nearly every time they passed one of us who had responded to help them.

There were briefings to quell rumors and provide information for families, (although in hindsight, and agreed upon at after action reviews, briefings perhaps should have been offered more frequently). Late on Sunday night as Sikh families spilled out onto the Bowling Alley parking lot after being notified, there were many of us simply walking around with Kleenex boxes quietly offering a tissue to grieving families. This simple act too is CISM at work.

The following day, I received a call from the Salvation Army Disaster Services Director indicating that a company located in a nearby suburban area where several of the Sikh women from the temple worked, wanted to have me come and be available to meet with any of the women who might want to talk. I talked to the plant manager and the vice president of human resources about what to expect and look out for with their Sikh employees. I gave them copies of the Critical Incident Stress information sheets and went over that information with them. They were happy to have the information. A woman who had been shot in the arm and then hid out in

the pantry with several others while the gunman was searching the adjacent kitchen came to talk to me. She had not slept at all following the incident on the previous night, and still seemed to be running on adrenaline. She couldn't stay home, and to keep her mind off the incident decided to go back to work, but try as she might, she wasn't ready to for that.

Although I wasn't a part of it, a CISM team did provide a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing for the Oak Creek Police department, Fire & EMS.

A couple of weeks following the incident, I had the opportunity to work with a team of counselors from Quantico and together we had a panel discussion with time for question and answer in the Milwaukee Division and in teleconference with the FBI offices in Madison and Green Bay. We then made ourselves available for anyone seeking individual sessions, and concluded with small group debriefings.

One never leaves such an experience as the Sikh shooting without taking something with them. I carry with me now several new friends from the Sikh community. I also carry with me the knowledge that the Sikh community is a very close-knit community, and that they are a very resilient people, whose spirit and grace inspire me to this day. The Sikh religion has an expression that they offer up in their prayers, in the midst of despair and pain, "Chardi Kala" which means to encourage strength, or lift up in high spirits, in hope. At the candlelight vigil on the Tuesday evening in Oak Creek following the incident, in the midst of many of the Sikh community and many others gathered, as the Sikh priest lifted up Lt. Brian Murphy in prayer, there was a loud proclamation from all the Sikhs gathered "Chardi Kala". The thought that came into my head as we were trying to surround the Sikh community with care, and as they sought to care for themselves and others is the same thought which was the title of a message I gave for my suburban community immediately following 911 and that thought is: "We've seen what hate can do now let's see what love can do." "Chardi Kala!"

**(Postscript)** About two and a half months following the Sikh Temple Shooting, another mass shooting at the Azana Spa & Salon took place in the Milwaukee Metropolitan area. I responded to this incident providing crisis counseling to spa staff and their clients and was heartened to see two young Sikh men from the Temple shooting working as volunteers for the Salvation Army distributing food and water to those involved in the incident. One of the young men was the son of the Sikh Temple president who had been shot and killed on that dark day of August 5.

Biographical Statement:

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