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# Seva +

## *A Framework for ASLCE Practice and Research*

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## Seva +

### *A Framework for ASLCE Practice and Research*

Imandeep Kaur Grewal

#### **Abstract**

In this manuscript, the author shares a theory-building approach by tracing the development of the seva + framework as a call for a necessary epistemological redefinition, with which to approach the practice and research of academic service-learning and community engagement (ASLCE). In tracing the inspiration and intention of the seva + framework, the author calls attention to the imperative for broadening the golden standards, against which most traditional research, scholarship, and service are measured. The seva + framework connects ancient wisdom with current research to argue for a different paradigm for service-learning, one that acknowledges and makes possible mutually liberating, relationally focused collaborations, and actively resisting ways of being and doing that are shaped by dominator systems. In addition, the manuscript offers guidelines for adapting the seva + framework so as to reflect the unique positionalities, experiences, and agency of the person/community adopting this ASLCE framework.

**Keywords:** *service-learning, theoretical framework, decolonization, research, practice*

## Seva +

### *Un marco para la práctica y la investigación de ASLCE*

Imandeep Kaur Grewal

#### **Resumen**

En este manuscrito, el autor comparte un enfoque de construcción de teoría al rastrear el desarrollo del marco seva + como un llamado a una redefinición epistemológica, con el cual abordar la práctica y la investigación del aprendizaje-servicio y la participación comunitaria (ASLCE). Al rastrear la inspiración y la intención del marco seva +, el autor llama la atención sobre el imperativo de ampliar los estándares de oro con los que tradicionalmente se miden la investigación, la erudición y el servicio. El marco seva + conecta la sabiduría ancestral con la investigación actual para abogar por un paradigma diferente para el aprendizaje-servicio, uno que reconozca y haga posible colaboraciones mutuamente liberadoras y enfocadas en las relaciones, y que resista activamente las formas de ser y hacer que están moldeadas por sistemas dominantes. Además, el manuscrito ofrece pautas para adaptar el marco seva + a fin de reflejar las posiciones, experiencias y agencia únicas de la persona o comunidad que adopten este marco ASLCE.

**Palabras clave:** *aprendizaje-servicio, marco teórico, descolonización, investigación, práctica*

Editors' Note: Translation provided by

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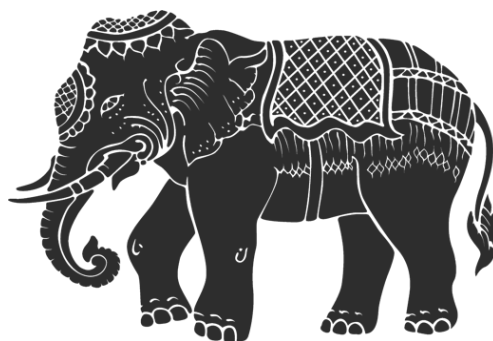
In this manuscript, I advocate for a theory-building process that necessitates an epistemological shift in the practice and research of academic service-learning and community engagement (ASLCE). I do so by tracing the developmental process for my seva + framework and offering thoughtfully placed prompts throughout the manuscript to guide the theory-building process for anyone interested in doing so. In addition, I describe what the seva + framework is, provide examples of how I translate this framework into ASLCE practice and research, and identify key shifts needed to enact the seva + framework.

As a scholar of color, the seva + framework I articulate is distinctively shaped by the intersection of my unique positionalities, experiences, and agency. I share this framework with a caution that it purposefully defies blind replication. It necessitates intentional adaptation so as to reflect the unique positionalities, experiences, and agency of the person/community adopting this ASLCE framework. The modeling of a framework that is both clear and yet necessitates adaptation to context, person, and purpose is offered as resistance to systems of domination that demand conformity to gold standards for scholarship, research, practice, and publication defined by the systems of domination, within which I live and work. These include, but are not limited to, white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy. The resistance efforts seek to increase the freedoms and abilities of historically marginalized individuals to authentically and wholly be the researchers, educators, activists, scholars, and authors that they value and have reason to value.

For the workshop collaboratively developed and delivered by our 14-member team at the 2023 American Educational Research Association conference, we selected the six blind men and the elephant fable to anchor our advocacy for collaboration and polyvocality as a norm rather than an exception in educational research. The call was to connect research with the pursuit of the truth. We used this beautiful stock image of an elephant (Figure 1) for our presentation, arguing that the whole truth (in this fable, the whole elephant) can only be revealed (or known) if each of the six blind people had been given the opportunity to collectively and collaboratively define it. I use that same image in this manuscript for a similar purpose: to advocate for broadening the gold standard by which research, practice, scholarship, and publication are measured, such that space is permitted for and value given to multiple wisdoms, truths, and ways of being and doing. This drawing of an elephant is one of many such ways an elephant can be represented—the most powerful representation being the one the elephant being represented would choose, given opportunity, encouragement, and freedom to do so. Through this manuscript, I seek the opportunity and freedom to share my work in a way that is authentic to me. I recognize that in doing so, I will make some readers uncomfortable or question the legitimacy of my scholarship. I applaud the brave gatekeepers who stand with me and make it possible for my work to become part of the mainstream.

**Figure 1.**

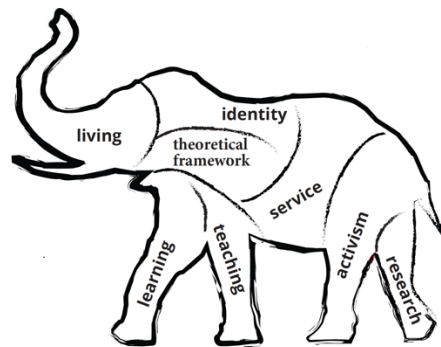
*The Whole Truth.*



As a human being I am a sum of many parts—physical, emotional, social, intellectual, spiritual, and so on. As a unique human individual, these parts are in a reciprocal relationship with my many identities: Asian Indian, female, middle class, cis, Sikh, educator, qualitative researcher, practitioner-scholar, and so on. In my wholeness, I am an expression of this complex web of constantly evolving interrelations. As in the fable, the dominator systems I live and work in harmfully demand divisions (Figure 2), ignoring the essential indivisibility of my being. When we decolonize, we center the margins (Bhattacharya, 2017; Sethi, 2021; Spivak, 2003) that require respect and space for multiple truths to exist simultaneously. I strive to live and work as a whole human individual. I am a researcher, scholar, educator, mother, daughter, sister, friend, love warrior, author, community member, practitioner, and more at all times.

**Figure 2.**

*Sum of All Parts.*



In this work and in this space, I claim my wholeness and share wisdom shaped by my being an Asian-Indian American; first-generation immigrant; mother; sister; daughter; mentor; friend; qualitative researcher-scholar-practitioner; place-based educator; human development expert; and someone who is committed to justice, love, and joy in all spaces and practices of my life. For me scholarship, teaching, learning, service, and research are all interrelated and interdependent parts of the same process.

## **Developing the Seva + Framework**

### **Stories and Scholarship**

Some of my happiest memories of childhood are from the summer breaks I spent at my nanaji's home with my extended maternal family. I remember those times as filled with love and stories. We read *Amar Chitra Katha* that taught us about fables, history, morals, culture, and more. We saw Bollywood movies to escape the blistering heat and the real world. We heard stories in the cool evenings from our elders about babar-shers, rajas and ranis, clever vazirs, healers, and saints. In my heart are embedded stories of Punjab's history, culture, and politics that I overheard my nanaji and his friends share every summer evening over cups of warm chai and biscuits. The stories from my childhood were rich in imagery, language, and emotion.

There is no doubt that stories played an important part in how I came to understand myself, my world, and my place in the world. Story writing, storytelling, and story listening continue to play a significant role in my personal and academic being and doing. It is not surprising then that I choose to write this manuscript in the style of a story. Arundhati Roy (2020) shared that writing novels gives her unfettered *azadi*—freedom. Emotions have been traditionally devalued and separated from the intellect in traditional

academia, but stories break down that division by allowing for the possibility of connecting an idea with an emotion, as Maya Angelou (1981) recommended to write so that “it slides through the brain and goes straight to the heart.” My writing aspires to do so. Writing in the style of a story allows me to share my wisdom in a way that honors my voice, my ancestors, my values, my purpose, and my hopes. I write for my azadi.

I ask you to consider the following as you read on. First, there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them feel (Lorde, 1984). Nothing I write in this story is new; my hope in writing it is to make you feel it differently. Second, this is one story—my story—shaped by who I am, the choices I made, and the purpose for which I am sharing the story. Remember Adichie’s (2009) caution of reducing a story to a single story. Third, I ask readers to read with an open heart, because I am opening mine (Garcia-Pena, 2022) and be open to let the story enter your heart. Fourth, I recognize that stories can be used to dispossess and malign, they can also be used to empower and humanize (Adichie, 2009). This story is shared with the hope that it adds to my, and your—the readers—humanization, liberation, and empowerment. The inclusion of untranslated Punjabi and Hindi words, intentional decolonization of citations, the choice to weave together my truth, the choice to play with formatting and writing style—all are intentional choices as the steps toward liberation and empowerment.

### **The Many Stories That Make Up the Seva + Story**

I believe that a story is made up of many stories. I now share some of the many stories that form the foundation of the seva + framework.

All stories have a beginning. The beginning of this story precedes me. Who I am today and what I am able to do today is because my ancestors were who they were and had the courage to do what they did (bell hooks, 1996; Kaur, 2020; Menakam, 2017; Sethi, 2021, 2023). Both my grandfathers migrated from their villages to the city in pursuit of education and dedicated their lives and careers to challenging unjust practices. My maternal grandmother boldly started and led several all-female service endeavors. “I stand tall because I stand on the shoulders of my ancestors”—African Proverb.

***Ladkeo ki Hadd: Limits of Girlhood—Half the Title of My Doctoral Dissertation.*** I believe the seed for seva + was planted, in my Indian girlhood story. Like so many powerfully transformative moments, this life moment was exceptional only in its ordinariness. During the summer breaks at my nanaji’s home, we gathered around the large dining table for dinner every night. My nanaji sat at the head of the table, next to him on either side sat the men of my family, in the middle were the women, and at the foot of the table sat the children. Like every night, the men animatedly discussed politics and current affairs, the women were busy making sure everyone had enough mutton curry, *dal*, and *garam—garam rotis*—while the children were silently “good.” I was around five years old. Old enough to know that “civilized” people do not eat food with their hands. Old enough to know that dal and roti taste better when eaten with your hands. As I watched and listened, a sudden commitment entered my being—“Someday I will prove I am smarter than everyone at this table.” As an adult, I wonder if by smarter I meant power—the power to exercise voice and choice. I was blessed to be raised by a father who wisely and boldly broke the rules of patriarchy for his daughters proclaiming, “The only dowry I will give my daughters is an education,” and “My daughter is not a piece of furniture I will just toss out.” Both were directed to redefining my purpose and value as an Indian girl. My father stirred a new dream in me—a (r)evolution (Boggs, 2012). And gratitude when I became an immigrant single parent. His dowry of an education gave me the freedom to live a life I value, have reason to value, and give the same to my two sons.

**Sikh—Seeker of Truth.** Being raised in the Sikh faith is also my story. To seek knowledge and understand it, to be curious, to question, to think critically, to defend truth—Sikhi seeded and nurtured these in me. From my many childhood stories, the ones that live on most vibrantly are the stories of Guru Nanak—his bold, humble, clear, compassionate questioning of harmful traditions and beliefs. Stories of dismantling divisions between caste and class and gender, between body and mind, between heart and soul, between theory and practice, and between sacred and secular (Kaur Singh, 2020). In her book, *See*

*No Stranger*, Valarie Kaur (2020), shares how Sikhi seeded and nurtured her inspiration and intention for justice, love, joy, and healing. I find resonance in her story. Oneness and love are the foundations of Sikhi. Oneness is within us and among all living beings. Love is selfless, fearless love for self, for other humans, love for more than humans—for the earth (Kaur Singh, 2020; Singh, 2017). The practice of seva precedes Guru Nanak and continues to evolve across many locations and through the work of many scholars, practitioners, and saints across South Asia. My conceptualization of service as seva, in the seva + framework, is grounded in the teachings of Guru Nanak. Therefore, in this story, I limit the discussion of seva to the teachings of Guru Nanak.

**I Had to Leave Home so I Could Find Myself (Anzaldua, 1987).** From F-1 visa to resident to Alien Green Card to citizen to Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) card holder. Immigration is also my story. I was 23 years old, so old my extended family insisted my father marry me off quickly or be prepared to live with the failure of having an unwed daughter. “I have always been known as your daughter. Imandeep Kaur Grewal c/o—d/o. If you get me married, I will forever be known as my husband’s wife.” The pain of being invisible—*undekha*—stoked the (r)evolution inside me. With 30 hours of traveling and an F-1 visa, I was in the land of the free and the brave, where I learned what it means to be “desi-ish,” to ever know but not be known. “It is to belong but to defy. It is to understand but resist” (Sethi, 2021). I also learned what it feels like to be “othered” and that the spaces where I belong do not exist; I have to build them with radical love and revolutionary liberation (Sethi, 2021). How was it that I came to the land of the free and ended up in an imprisoned life, only to learn that the strongest prisons were inside me? This was ultimately a gift that set me on the path to justice, joy, and seva. I invite you as a reader and practitioner to ask: What are the many identities that shape your work in service-learning and community engagement? What stories form the foundation of this work for you?

## The Seva + Framework

### Transforming Service Into Seva

When asked to explain my decisions, I am inclined to share a complex, nuanced, and layered story. I know no other way to tell a human story. Now that you know some of the many stories that shape this story, let us now focus on seva. In March 2023, I received the highest service award at my university. I was *only* an assistant professor at that time. If you have been there or are there, I expect you to feel the italics! As I worked on my acceptance speech, I drew inspiration and courage from my recent participation in the Practitioner-Scholar Community initiative hosted by International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement to articulate what service-learning meant to me. Sikhi introduced me to seva. There is no single English word that can fully capture the essence of seva—it is more than service. Simran Jeet Singh (2017) offers a powerful explanation, “Seva is about the ethic as much as it is about the action; the inspiration and intention matter just as much as the act itself.” Seva is infused with the spirit of oneness and love, allowing for the creation of movements and institutions beyond divisions, hierarchies, and supremacies (Singh, 2017, 2022). Seva is a selfless service done with and for love, joy, and justice. That is how I conceptualize seva in the seva + framework.

**Seva + Love.** Love is my inspiration and intention for seva. Not the love that has been reduced to romantic feelings. But love that is both an intention and an action, what bell hooks (2000) refers to as love ethics, a confluence of care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. Seva + love is done with and for radical love, which is rooted in a committed willingness to struggle persistently with purpose in our life. Love that asks us to be lively, forceful, and inspiring, while challenging, and remaining consistent and intimately connected to what it means to be human (Freire, 1997). Revolutionary love is a form of sweet labor that is fierce, bloody, imperfect, and life giving—a choice to labor for others, our opponents, and ourselves. Love is about courage, not fear, and about a commitment to others (Kaur, 2020). Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our community from oppression and exploitation are doomed (Hersey, 2022).

**Seva + Justice.** Love, bell hooks (2000) states, is not possible without justice and love. This view is my inspiration and intention for seva. Justice in my seva + framework is inspired by the work of Amartya Sen, a philosopher and Nobel Prize-winning economist, whose framing of development as freedom inspired the creation of the United Nations Human Development Index. The index serves to shift the focus of economic development from the quantitative measurement of resources to the assessment of quality of life. Money and resources are vehicles to live a life of value, not end results in themselves. Every individual should have the ability and freedom to live a life they value and have reason to value (Sen, 2001, 2005, 2010). This translates to freedom and the capability to make essential choices about one's own life, the capability to thrive, and the capability to exercise fundamental freedoms. Seva + works toward reducing the distance between the beings and doings that an individual values, and the beings and doings that an individual is actually able to achieve. Seva + strives to act as “conversion factors”—mediating personal/sociopolitical/environmental conditions that support individual self-realization.

**Seva + Dignity.** The seva + framework adopts dignity-affirming practices. One way it does so is by attending to all the basic needs of its members. The seva + framework draws on William Glasser's (1998) conceptualization of the five basic human needs as being those for survival: love, belonging, power, freedom, and fun. He defines the need for power as the basic need to matter, exercise voice, make a difference, achieve, be competent, be recognized, and be respected. This is a very different conception of power—not of power that dominates, exploits, and corrupts but of power that empowers, heals, and liberates. The need for survival includes our need to feel safe and secure—emotionally, physically, and spiritually. The need for freedom includes the freedom to be creative and free from deprivation. The seva + framework adds a human rights layer to basic needs and understands those rights as indivisible from, and interrelated to the right of every human to have their basic needs met.

**Seva + Joy.** Joy is the inspiration and intention for seva +. I have learned that joy is different from happiness. Happiness is external and temporary. It may arrive via a phone call from my son or a gratitude note from a community partner. Joy is an inside-out job (The Awake Network, 2022). Joy is internal, it is a choice, it is a state of being. Joy is a muscle that strengthens with exercise (Priyadarshi, 2023). We are all born with the ability to experience joy. Sethi (2023) shares in her book, *Joy Is My Justice*, “Every footstep towards joy, even while still living with fear or rage is a radical act of justice.” Not joy that is the “usual whitewashed, oversimplified one of wellness patriarchy that ignores the oppressive world and deems that joy is for the most resilient ... the privileged.” The Dalai Lama insists that joy is both an inside job (a practiced and intentional state of being) and an outside job (seva). Poet and Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore wrote, “I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, **service was joy**.” *Chadia Kala*, often translated as eternal joy or absence of negativity is actually the power to face whatever adversity comes your way and still find joy, no matter what—an inspired state of being for Sikhs (Kaur, 2020; Kaur Singh, 2020; Sethi, 2023; Singh, 2022). Joy reminds us that we have the capacity and right to thrive.

**Seva + Healing.** To have lived a life means to have been wounded. Some wounds are at the surface, some are deep, and many generational. Unhealed wounds create internal prisons that bound our freedoms, our power, our love, and our joy. Healing is hard, heart labor, an essential intent and inspiration of seva +. Shawn Ginwright (2016) advocates for weaving justice work and healing work together to reflect their inherent inseparability. Seva + honors this advocacy. Healing begins with the knowledge about wounding and healing. Soundararajan (2022) writes and encourages us to let the wound be the teacher. Disconnection is wounding, wholeness is healing. Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) writes, disconnecting from “our emotions, from our bodies, from our spirits, from the divine, from our families, ancestors, beloveds, and other species, and even the earth” is a form of survival for communities that have faced centuries of exploitation and othering. Seva + focuses on creating and sustaining practices that center healing and justice through somatic healing, nurturing, integration, wholeness, and connections—particularly between body, mind, and soul (Menakam, 2017; Sethi, 2021, 2023; Soundararajan, 2022).

Seva + work centers the power of the body to be a healer, a liberator, and a disruptor (Menakam, 2017). Our bodies, Sethi (2023) writes, know and always tell the truth; they hold on to everything our

mind and heart cannot resolve. Moreover, our bodies have a desire and the wisdom to heal—building our body’s capacity to flow more freely between intricate systems of hypervigilance and trust. That is justice, and when we feel justice, our body releases neurotransmitters of reward such as dopamine and oxytocin—the hormone of connection and safety. She believes that we heal most powerfully in community with others (Sethi, 2023). “You will feel the truth in your body as a chill or goosebumps or feeling of expansiveness or lightness” (Sethi, 2023, p. 14). I am learning to let my somatic responses guide my seva: It is definitely more subjective and indefinable than a rubric or social/academic norms but holds more truth and power. I have learned that before we can decolonize our minds, we have to decolonize our bodies; in my seva, I am attentive to how the body and bodies are engaged, nurtured, and moved (Menakam, 2017).

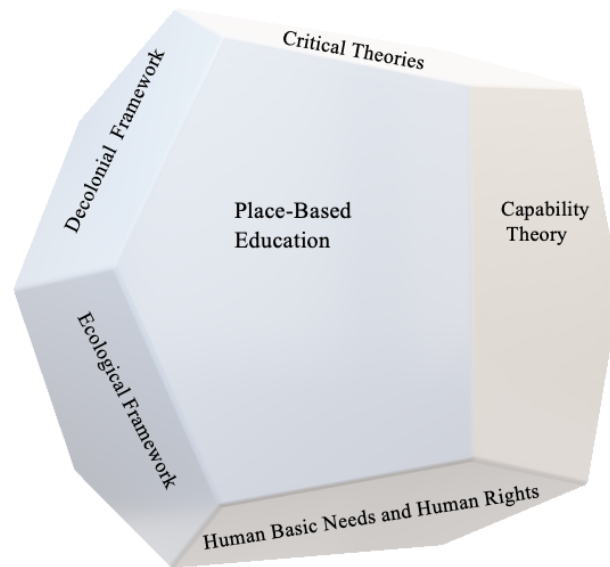
**Seva + Community as a Theoretical Crystal.** Community is an inherent and inseparable part of seva. In seva +, community serves as an optimal space for transformation, much like how a crystal transforms light. Last year, as I was working with the NEXT Scholars to design an impact study, we struggled to articulate the depth, breadth, and fluidity of the program. Sethi (2023) encountered a similar struggle when trying to define joy, “I have wracked my brain to find a definition of joy only to realize the obvious truth. That if I use one, then I am only subscribing to the same confines of a system that took it away from me” (p. 56). Looking beyond institutionalized language to explain the program, I have been experimenting with images, phrases, stories, and ancient wisdoms from several traditions.

Framing community as a theoretical crystal is one such experiment. Light breaks/transforms into a rainbow. The rainbow is an invisible part of light, visibly transformed through a process of refraction, reflection, and dispersion when it meets a crystal—the kind of crystal that hangs on my car’s rear-view mirror. A purple crystal heart I awarded myself when I started to dismantle the prisons inside me after years of transformative breaking. The faces of my seva + theoretical crystal (Figure 3) are defined by the many theories, scholars, philosophers, practitioners, artists, poets, musicians, elders, revolutionaries, solutionaries, and ancient wisdoms that have shaped my being and doing. The inclusion of artists, elders, and so on on a list of theoretical frameworks is an intentional effort toward broadening the golden standard.

### **Figure 3.**

*The Faces of the Seva + Theoretical Crystal.*






The space in the center of the crystal—the core—the one defined by the many faces, is where community functions and seva + is enacted. Muhammad (2020, 2023) iterates that all humans are born with genius, but for many, this genius gets buried by dominator systems (Soundararajan, 2022). In my living, learning, and doing, I focus on building communities shaped by seva + that function as crystals, allowing the genius of each community member to shine like the rainbow. The face or faces of the crystal I draw upon at any given time depends on the particular relational partnership(s) and the purpose of the work. It is a fact that the more faces on a crystal, the greater its potential to catch light and turn it into a magical rainbow. So I keep adding faces to my theoretical crystal. I feel it is my responsibility to create spaces, practices, programs, and relationships, which allows individuals in my seva + community to reflect, refract, and disperse their brightest selves, to unearth their genius (Muhammad, 2023). Unlike real crystals, the seva + theoretical crystal is dynamic and adaptable—inspired by a reading, a discussion, an experience, a research project, a collaboration, a podcast, a meme, a quote, a photo, a song, a movie, a documentary, a book, a magazine, a news article, a walk in the woods or on a beach, and a research article.

**Seva + Learning.** Recognize that unlearning is the highest form of learning ~ Rumi. In the seva + framework, seva and learning are interwoven by the mutuality of their purpose. Nasir and Hand (2006) caution that the way we theorize learning directly impacts how we set up learning experiences, including schooling. My theorization of learning embraces the critical literacy work of Paulo Freire (1997, 2014), who theorized that true power is critical literacy, knowing who the colonizer is, who is colonized, how not to become a colonizer, and how to expand freedoms, liberation, and true democracy. He believed that the outcome of learning should be hope, revolution, and liberation. There is no such thing as a neutral education. Freire stated that education either functions as an instrument to bring about conformity or freedom. My theorization of learning leans toward the social constructivist approach, learning as collective meaning making. Seva + is shaped by my understanding that culture and learning are features of the same process (Nasir & Hand, 2006); teaching and learning are inseparable, fun is a by-product of learning; learning is a developmental and lifelong process, the purpose of learning is to expand an individual's—and community's—functionings, freedoms, choices, joy, hopes, and dreams. All of this involves learning to unlearn. As a place-based educator, I believe learning happens everywhere, in every interaction; we learn best when our whole being—mind, body, heart, and soul—are engaged. Learning

and teaching are a collaborative process, learning for and with community is critical, learning should be inquiry based and result in civic actions.

 *How do you define service within the context of your intersecting identities and stories? Are there any parts of your definition that you wish to adapt to reflect your authentic way of being and doing?*

## **Translating Seva + Framework Into Practice**

### **Seva + as Selfless and Self-Focused Service**

Seva + is service that sees no distinction between self and others—service offered with the absence of fear, service offered with humility and love for self. Seva also means seeing the world through the lens of interconnectedness—'nah koi bairi nah koi begana' (no one is a stranger and no one is the enemy), all our experiences are tied together so that my liberation is your liberation and your suffering is tied to my liberation and my suffering (Kaur, 2020; Singh, 2017, 2022). Speaking about the inspiration and intention for her revolutionary work, Salbi (2018, 2022) shares, "I do what I do for myself as much as for others." Yes! I do seva as much for the love, freedom, power, and joy of others as for my own. Inspired by my Indian girlhood story, my doctoral research with high school-aged girls in India focused on exploring how the intersection of gender, poverty, and education impacted their ability to make essential life choices. Had anything changed since I was five years old? During a conversation, one of the girls asked if she could ask me a question. "Why did I want to know her story when she was a nobody?" That question still vibrates inside me. It was the fuel I needed to establish Sikhya: Strengthening Girls Voices and Choices Through Education as a mentoring-focused nonprofit. Each of the girls who had shared their lives, homes, family, stories, and love with me so generously, had the choice to be paired with a local mentor who got to know their hopes and dreams, and to build trusting, supportive relationships with the family as they made the brave decision to let their daughter pursue education over marriage. Mentors guided their mentees in decision making and provided access to social capital. The mentors and mentees did the hard labor of heart labor that is needed to bring about meaningful change. All my seva is collaborative, relationally focused, and therefore resists the demand to scale up. My seva is about developing and sustaining relational partnership, involving a commitment to putting relationships before purpose, to building trust so that when conflict arises trust will sustain the pursuit of truth. I aspire for relationships to outlast a specific purpose, for the partnership to be "mutually liberating" (bell hooks, 2000).

### **Seva + as Transformation**

In my human development and learning course, I teach about cognitive, physical, and socioemotional human development. The soul finds no mention. Sharing the neuroscience of spirituality, Miller (2023) states that humans are born with an innate capability for spirituality—just the same as our physical, cognitive, social, and emotional abilities. Spirituality, she shares, is much like a muscle, one that needs to be cultivated. Miller (2023) makes a distinction between religion and spirituality, arguing that in the State and Church division, spirituality became synonymous with religion. Miller (2023) suggests that this resulted in a steep decline in attention to soul life and spirituality, which may be one root cause for the global mental-health crises. Ancient cultures give great respect and honor to the soul. Soul stirring, soul nourishing, soul crushing, and soul wounding are rich metaphors in our vocabulary that accept the soul as an integral part of the human being. These can be found in music, literature, art, and theater but not so much in science or education. Loizzo (2023) states that this is the first time in history we have the confluence of modern science and technology with ancient wisdom, creating an opportunity to recenter the soul in seva and education. The time has come to grow our souls, urged Boggs (2012), to grow our relationships with one another, and to create families that are loving and communities that are loving. There are so many ways in which we can grow our souls and the souls of those around us. Resmaa Menakam (2017), healer, author, and trauma specialist, refers to the parasympathetic vagus nerve—the

longest nerve in our body—as the “soul nerve.” It is the nerve that connects the brain to the gut and connects us to the world. Gut feeling and intuition are powerful sources of wisdom. Albert Einstein, who identified as an artist, believed “in intuition and inspiration ... at times I feel certain I am right while not knowing the reason.” In her travel blog, Da Silva (2016) shares that her work as a photographer, activist, and visionary is guided by her intuition as a natural, instinctive feeling that tells her what’s right. Using intuition as a guide allows one to flourish, thrive, and reimagine (Da Silva, 2016). Attending to my soul has strengthened my gut instinct and much of my bravery for saying “yes” comes from a clear certainty that the choice I am making is the right and necessary choice. My intention for seva is a by-product of my inner work, which helps me define, redefine, and adapt my values, dreams, hopes, and purpose.

### **Seva + Is Hard Work and Heart Work**

Freedom, love, power, justice, and joy—all of them require inner work. In June 2023, in collaboration with colleagues at another university, and at a national organization, I hosted a national Summer Institute for educators, students, policymakers, administrators, philanthropic organizations, parents, community members, and so on to dialogue and act toward rethinking community, schools, family-engaged teacher preparation within the context of love and justice. As part of the learning, I collaboratively organized a “listen and learn” (Boggs, 2012) tour with the Boggs Center to visit with community organizations that are practicing love and justice in their communities. “Do your inner work” was a common advice we received from the powerful leaders we met. Their exhortation was to gain knowledge of and acknowledge our own histories, wounds, power, vulnerabilities, ethics, and strengths. “If we want to change the world, we must begin with ourselves” (Salbi, 2018; Sethi, 2023). Doing this inner work enhances clarity of ethics, vision, purpose, and intention.

In his offering of the concept of boundless leadership as a new science and practice of embodying clarity, compassion, and altruism, Loizzo (2023) states that the beginning of all action is intention. “The important work is to self-examine and see if you are living your life in alignment with your values—this is hard work. Activism needs to shift from the breadth of my chest to the length of my spine! The journey toward our truth is the hardest but the taste of the freedom at the end of this journey is so worth every moment” (Salbi, 2022). I have put the work in, and continue to prioritize my healing, my ability to love, clarify my ethics, and know and value my truth. I seek to be in *chadi kala*, to do seva, to center my empowerment, all of them as separate yet one effort. As Sethi (2021) shared, once I learned to love myself, it was a revolution!

### **Food as Justice, Love, and Community in Seva +**

*Langar* is a communal meal extending from cooking to serving, eating, and cleaning. Established around 1500 CE, the practice of langar demands the erasure of hierarchies and supremacies. Langar is seva + as love, justice, power, and joy. Langar food is always simple, simply delicious, including dal, *sabzi*, roti. The Golden Temple Gurdwara in Amritsar serves langar to almost 100,000 people every day (Krishna, 2020). Sikhs globally have organized langar at peaceful protests, such as the recent farmers’ protest in India (one of the largest protests in history that lasted over a year), Black Lives Matter rallies, war-torn areas, and after natural disasters. Langar is about justice, offering free nutritious and nourishing food for all. It is also about place making, giving attention to creating a space that feels safe, welcoming, nurturing, and nourishing. Langar at its core is a revolution. Food and place making are an essential part of seva +. My colleagues often joke, “Who are you feeding now?” Food is how I translate love, justice, joy, and build community. For the focus group data-gathering event my eleven-member “Speak Up” research team organized last year, we began by sharing a meal. Our team extended the invitation to share the meal to people who helped clean the space, set up, and people who were working in the building. We shared food that was healthy and delicious, nurturing the taste buds and the soul. Food that was provided with love by a family-owned restaurant. We are confident that the level of participation and the quality of participation by over 50 educators at the event, held in the one week educators had off between the end of school and the beginning of summer school, had much to do with our attention to place-making and

dignity-affirming practices, much like langar. At the 2022 EdTalks: Decolonizing College of Education, a student-designed, -organized, and -led day-long event at my university, I worked with students to plan lunch to align with the theme of the event. Lunch for this event was served in three different rooms. In one room, participants were offered a selection of soul food, in the second room there was langar food, and in the third room tamales. In each room, participants had the opportunity to converse with the family who prepared the food about their family's personal food stories. Nourishing, healthy, and delicious food is integral part of the intention and inspiration for seva +.

### Essential Lessons from Seva +

As I work to wrap up this story, I offer some essential ways of being that make it possible for the seva + framework to guide living, learning, and doing. As Maya Angelou wisely shares, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

- Develop the courage to say “yes” and the wisdom to say “no.” For me, the courage to say yes is life giving, and the wisdom to say no is about sustenance. Let resonance, intuition, and intention guide the decision making. Value curiosity over certainty, ambiguity over clarity, iteration over linearity, fluidity over rigidity, relationships over numbers, trust over accountability, creativity over conformity, subjectivity over objectivity, polyvocality over hierarchies, multiple over singular truths, and diversity over uniformity. Work that resonates with my ontology is what compels me to action (Bhattacharya, 2017).
- Nurture fearless curiosity (Vidhantam, 2018). Gino (2018) defines rebel talent as experts who are willing to experiment, play, or do something just a little differently by defying norms with the purpose of generating new ways of being, feeling, and doing. Fearless curiosity, Gino (2018) states, is at the heart of rebel talent. A fact is not a fact solely based on evidence but also because of power (Soundararajan, 2022). Just because it has always been done this way does not mean that is the only way it should or can be done.
- Develop the wisdom to know which rules need to be broken and develop the courage to break them. Disruption must be rooted in ethical imagination, in care, and in compassion, so we are not left in a vacuum (Boggs, 2012; Lahiri, 2003). Cooking, like so many things in life, has rules, many rules. Someone at some time established these rules because they worked for them. Questioning rules creates space for liberation and innovation. Seva + encourages purposeful and constructive *rule-breaking*. That is what a love warrior (Soundararajan, 2022) does. If you listen with compassion (Thich Naht Hanh, 2012), from a place of love (Kaur, 2020), and let the subaltern speak (Spivak, 2003), you will know which rules need breaking.
- Know what nourishes your mind, heart, body, and soul and commit to taking care of yourself. Seva + is hard and demands self-care for sustenance and sustainability.
- Develop the wisdom to know what needs to be resisted and the courage to resist it. In her book, *Joy Is My Justice*, Sethi (2023) shares that joy, justice, and freedom cannot be given to you, you have to choose them and work for them while actively resisting what works against joy, justice, and freedom.
- Question and resist the tyranny of time. Seva + thrives when time is decolonized and communities claim power with time instead of giving time power over them. Seva + encourages you to take time to make mistakes and learn from them; take time to persist at tasks until a somatic response indicates alignment; take time to build and nurture relationships; take time to grieve, be sick, celebrate, and rest.
- See rest as resistance. Hersey (2022) suggests that we are socialized by systems that encourage us to conform and tie our worth to productivity. The constant labor becomes our prison where we are disembodied, manipulated, and disconnected from our power and exhausted. Rest is our basic human right, it allows us to know our inherent worth by

birthright. As Salbi (2022) shared, joy is the clean, renewable energy that fuels everything in life. Seva + shifts attention from productivity to joy and respects the fact that justice work is hard-heart work. Rest is essential to sustain the work.

- Whenever and wherever it is possible, resist divisions. Seva + rests in the power of resisting and dismantling artificial dichotomies, such as mind/body, heart/soul, human/more than human, personal/professional, artistic/scientific, modern/ancient, first world/third world, Black/White /Brown (a trichotomy and more), good/bad, and us/them. It is never either/or and always both/and (Hersey, 2022).
- Aim to thrive, not survive. Love (2019) argues that thriving rather than surviving is a measure of justice. Survival-based culture that promotes the zero-sum game mentality along with the ego-driven culture that promotes hyper-individualism, materialism, colonization, and patriarchy is root causes of injustice according to Loizzo (2023). Loizzo calls for a radical redefinition of individual and collective human consciousness, one that allows us to overcome the default limits of survival. Seva + supports thriving.
- Resist hyper-individualism and nurture community. Garcia-Pena (2022) says that community is what allows our humanity to shine. She describes community as a verb—a source of critical support, particularly for female faculty of color, who are teaching for and with freedom. Loving, supportive communities, such as the NEXT Scholars provide spaces that allow our individual light to reflect, refract, and disperse into a powerful rainbow. Finding, building, nurturing community and collaboration is seva +.
- See self-compassion as resistance. Curiosity, Salbi (2022) says, is the vehicle that will help reveal the truth, truth about how the stories we tell ourselves, personally and collectively, impact our lives, impact the world we live in, and reflect the joy we experience. Compassion is a subversive act, a radical act that moves us toward interdependence and interbeing, and allows us to return to wholeness. Compassion can be a cycle breaker. Compassion can heal and awaken us (Pham, 2022) by connecting us with what it means to be and feel human. Compassion compels us to develop and mobilize the ability to understand, to forgive, to be kind, to be empathetic, to connect with love, and to be flexible. Self-compassion, compassion given to oneself, is a powerful form of resistance and reclaiming of power and justice.
- Employ hopes and dreams as resistance. In a presentation at the Global Vision Conference, Tenzin Priyadarshi (2023) shared, “You either perpetuate a system or you disrupt the system—there is no other way.” Patriarchy, colonization, capitalism, and racism, all make us forget how to dream (Boggs, 2012). Reclaiming hopes, visions, and dreams is necessary resistance for justice, love, and joy. Seva + is shaped by the courage to dream. “Let yourself imagine what is possible, let yourself dream of too much, instead of too little. It’s time to take up the big space you were always entitled to” (Sethi, 2023, p. xxix).

It is my hope that this story has landed in your heart and in small or big ways inspires you to act in the service of love, justice, and power. *Jee Aya Noo*.

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