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## **Arpana Caur and the Mending of Religious Fractures**

**Lucy Soucek**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the paintings of Sikh artist Arpana Caur. She creates works of art that draw upon motifs from different religions to foster unique interfaith spaces. Her bold and bright strokes of color both illuminate memories of cultural trauma and celebrate religious dedication. She depicts powerful images of boundary and unity, love and harm, and violence and safety. Most of all, Caur's paintings illustrate this vital theme: respect the beauty of difference.

**Keywords:** Arpana Caur, Interfaith, Interfaith Art, Sikh, Sikh Art, Partition, Artistic Identity, Religious Identity, Religious Boundaries, Religious Difference, Religion, Pluralism

### **Introduction**

The devastating Partition of India in 1947 has long been a source of cultural and religious trauma for many, including artist Arpana Caur. This event continues to haunt and characterize relationships between families, communities, religions, and countries in South Asia. Memories from this horrific event are still shared down through the generations. During the Partition, power was transferred out of the hands of the British Empire, and the Muslim League called for a separation of states, one for Muslims and one for Hindus and Sikhs. The partition line was hastily drawn by British judge Sir Cyril Radcliffe, separating these two countries based on religious identity, a form of segregation that was previously nonexistent. Hindus and Sikhs were forced to move to India, East Punjab, and Muslims were forced to move to Pakistan, West Punjab. This border, known as the Radcliffe Line, cut through little towns where Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims had been living harmoniously together for years (Singh 155). About fifteen million people were displaced, becoming refugees in their own country (Sharma). In the midst of the destruction, it's estimated that seventy-five thousand women were raped and abandoned, and over a million people died (Sharma). These cross-country treks were littered with countless massacres and riots, destroying homes, fracturing families and communities, and creating divisions that would define religious relations in India for years to come.

Arpana Caur was born just seven years after this traumatic event, and as Sikhs, her own grandparents made the trek to Delhi. She has spent her artistic career exploring

what it means to reimagine possibilities for religious unity. From the image of her own grandfather carrying the Sikh holy book on his back, to the depiction of cracks in the dirt floor of India and Pakistan, Caur illuminates memories of collective cultural trauma through her artwork, and sheds possibilities of religious unity in a new light. This paper will explore her different works of art, their cultural and religious contexts, and dive into how Caur draws upon multiple religious faiths and identities to create works that touch the hearts of many.

### **Discussion/Analysis**

As a young child, Caur was brought up listening to her grandfather read Sikh, Sufi Muslim and Hindu sacred texts. In contrast to the religiously divisive political atmosphere, her family made it a priority to emphasize an appreciation for different religions and their sacred texts. She writes, “because one is not one person, there are so many aspects to yourself, you discover it every day. So, I think this, because I’ve grown up with all this kind of Sufi tradition, and the Bhakti, and the Gurbani, and everybody right from my grandfather reciting from these verses and all that, so this in part is my wanting to express this” (Caur 15). This studying of Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh texts enabled her to not only learn about the sacredness of each religion, but to focus on the importance of having an appreciation for multiple ways of worship.

During her childhood, Caur experimented with various artistic and literary traditions, drawing from each to mold her own artistic identity. Her mother was a Punjabi author among a family of doctors, a role model for Caur as an aspiring artist. Influenced by her mother’s literary and artistic interests, and the ability to do what she loved regardless of familial trends, Caur experimented with various art forms starting at a young age. By the time she went to college, she was interested in pursuing both literature and art. Caur received an MA in literature from Delhi University in 1961 and was given a scholarship to take advanced painting courses at St. Martins School of Art in London (Caur 218). Now with her Arpana Caur Academy of Fine Arts and Literature in New Delhi, she supports the arts and literature for the public. The academy contains a free library of more than 5000 books, an exhibition gallery and three museums containing her work and the work of many other prominent artists (Caur 86).

Caur draws from different artistic and religious styles from the past to influence her multi-religious work in the present. She uses the Hindu Madhubani form,

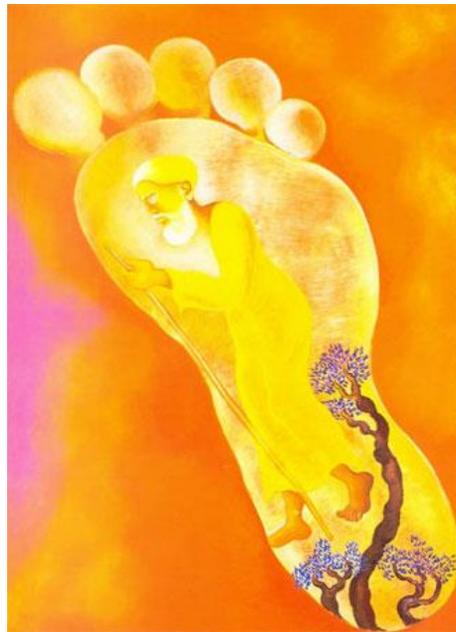
traditionally revolving around Hindu deities such as Krishna, Siva, and Rama. She is influenced by the Mughal styles of Deccan and Pahari miniature painting, which have Muslim roots (Kaur 86). She uses language and inspiration from Kabir, a prominent Indian mystic and poet whose writings can be found in the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib. Many of her paintings resemble the two and three paneled diptychs and triptychs, which are common in Christian churches and cathedrals (Caur 48). She draws from different Indian folk art styles, such as Warli painting (Caur 8). She also draws inspiration from European abstract artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, dabbles in post-cubism and uses elements of graffiti in her work (Caur 47, 48). Her artistic style incorporates many historical and modern movements, religions, and styles across cultures and countries. Beginning with sketching on bits of paper and then transferring those images to large, life-size canvases, Caur employs the use of contrast and surprise in lines and color to enhance her masterpieces (Caur 16, 17). She says, "I have been juxtaposing folk art with contemporary motifs like cars, and gun, chair, trees. There is a way of saying the India lives in two times simultaneously. It lives in the past and present" (Caur 15). Through her art, she reaches into the past and translates it to the present, commemorates national disasters, transcends religious boundaries to express basic human victimization across all religions, and juxtaposes Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim and Sikh motifs.

Caur's recognition of her family's devotion to Sikhism and the ways in which the practicing of this religion shaped their migration to Delhi during the Partition has influenced much of the art that she creates. A core Sikh value is the acceptance of the idea that there are many different ways to find your Truth, an important pluralistic value that was missing for many during the Partition. The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, born in 1469 in Talwandi, India, emphasized the acceptance of all different forms of worship in his founding philosophy. This excerpt from the Japji in the beginning of the Guru Granth expresses this idea:

*Countless are the ways of meditation,  
and countless the avenues of love,  
Countless the ways of worship,  
and countless the paths of austerity and sacrifice.  
Countless the texts, and countless the Vedic reciters,  
Countless the yogis turning away from the world,  
Countless the devout reflecting on future and knowledge,  
Countless the pious, and countless the patrons,*

*Countless the warriors, faces scarred by iron  
Countless the sages sunk in silent trance,  
How can I express the Primal Power?  
I cannot offer myself to you even once.  
Only that which pleases You is good.  
You are for ever constant, Formless One. (Singh)*

Caur draws from artistic works that depict the interfaith nature of Sikhism, and that fully embody the ways in which people of different religions can collaborate. The Janamsakhis, a collection of 57 paintings depicting the travels and biography of

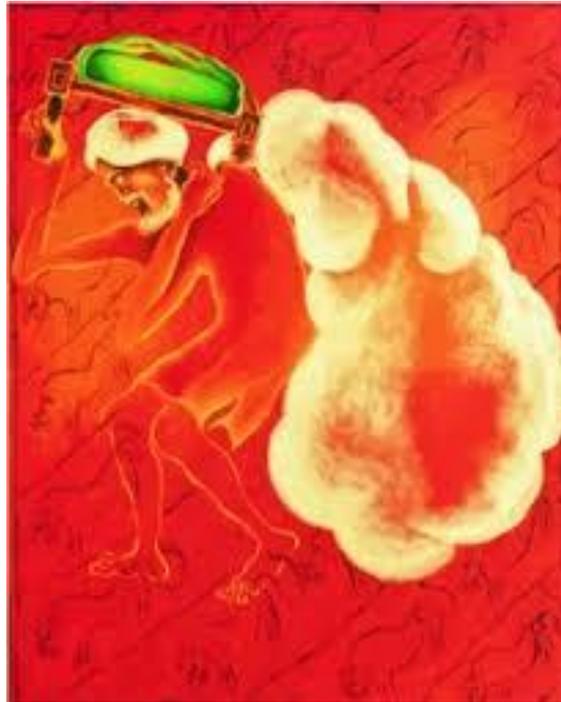


*Journeys*

Guru Nanak, portray the Guru pictured meeting people of all different faiths: Muslim saints, Sufis, Hindus, and Siddhas (Singh 40). He is painted, “as a genuine pluralist who does not simply accept or tolerate diversity but courageously reaches out to others” (Singh 40). During his travels, he actively engaged with people of different religions, and the artists who contributed to the Janamsakhis were local Hindu, Muslim, Buddhists and Jain artists. Influenced by their own faiths and cultural upbringings, they created an interfaith portrayal of the Sikh Guru.

With this as her subtext, she paints images of Guru Nanak throughout her paintings. Her painting, *Journeys*, draws upon imagery from the Janamsakhis, paying homage

to the travels of Guru Nanak while also referencing the long treks of millions who had to leave their homes during the 1947 Partition. The outline of the foot with the image of Guru Nanak walking inside of it reminds me of the saying, “Never judge a man until you've walked a mile in his shoes.” In just one painting, Caur beautifully depicts the fatigue of traveling and the blurry bliss of arrival. The cloudy orange and yellow tones exude feelings of hopefulness and possibility.



1947

As reminders of the all too common devastations we experience, Arpana Caur paints powerful pieces that reflect upon national disasters and the people of different religions affected by them. Drawing from an event particularly close to her heart, her painting *1947*, commemorates the Partition of India. In *1947*, a Sikh man with a turban is depicted carefully carrying a heavy load on his shoulders. The load is the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth, a scripture that celebrates the oneness of divine and humanity, wrapped in a green cloth. The male figure that she depicts is her own grandfather making the difficult trek to Delhi, protecting the precious religious text on his shoulders. A large white cloud swirls behind him, symbolizing the emotional and psychological burdens that the Partition added to not only her grandfather, but thousands of other Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs throughout India

and Pakistan. In the painting, her grandfather treasures the text that he carries with him, celebrating his devotion to it. This is a vivid image of displacement, reflecting the sentiments of many people during the Partition, but also one of hope and devotion.

I'm reminded of the poet Amrita Pritam, whom Caur was influenced by during her early years. Amrita Pritam especially writes powerful poems about the devastation of the Partition and the importance of interfaith appreciation. Through her work, "she powerfully protests the violence against Muslim, Sikh and Hindu women — victims of abduction, rape and carnage during the fateful events of 1947" (Singh 193). Her poem, *Today I Ask Waris Shah*, is a response to the devastation of the Partition and calls to Waris Shah, a Sufi poet adored by Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus:

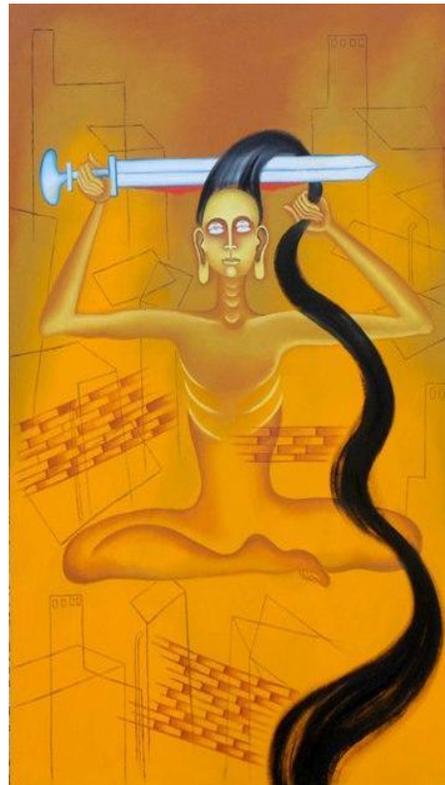
*Today I ask Waris Shah to speak from his grave,  
And to turn the next page of his book of love.  
You saw one Punjabi daughter weep, you wrote page after page,  
Today countless daughters weep, they cry out to you Waris Shah:  
Rise! O sympathizer of the afflicted! Rise! Look at your Punjab!  
The land is sheeted with corpses, the Chenab is full of blood.  
Somebody has poured poison into his five rivers –  
And their waters are irrigating our farms and fields.  
Each pore of this lush land is bursting with venom:  
Redness flares up inch by inch, wrath flies high. (Singh)*

The wording in Pritam's poem evokes the never-ending nature of the devastation of the Partition. The phrases, "Page after page," "countless daughters," and "flares up inch by inch," allude to the infinite nature of the cross-country treks and horrible massacres. Caur's *1947* presents a specific image through which we can view these powerful words. Though he experienced widespread trauma, he still works tirelessly to carry the text he loves and cares for on his back, his body fading into the red background during the long trek. The bright redness reminds me of the last two lines of the poem: "Each pore of this lush land is bursting with venom / Redness flares up inch by inch, wrath flies high."

Her painting *Smouldering City* commemorates deadly anti-Sikh riots and pogroms in 1984. During the Partition, Hindus and Sikhs supported each other, but thirty-seven years later they were pitted against each other during these horrible

massacres. This quick change from allies to enemies shows how powerful and sudden religious division can be. In response to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's order for a military assault on the Golden Temple, possibly the most sacred Sikh Gurdwara in the world, two of her Sikh bodyguards assassinated Gandhi. This assassination sparked anti-Sikh massacres all over India; many of the anti-Sikh mobs contained Hindus, pitting the two religions together in political revenge.

In *Smouldering City*, Caur depicts disjointed brick buildings, fallen smoke stacks and outlined rectangular architecture, all features that are reminiscent of these horrible massacres. The yogi in the middle of the painting has long earlobes like the Buddha, but is also wearing uncut hair, a Sikh practice. She is holding the *khanda*, a double-edged sword, and an important Sikh symbol. The figure is poised with the knife against her hair, about to cut it. This position is intriguing, because in this painting the figure is frozen and will never cut her hair. The knife will forever be held against her locks, her angular elbows always matching the angularity of the buildings falling apart behind her. The swirls of hair juxtaposed against this angularity matches the billows of smoke coming out of the smoke stacks. This image is a commentary on the dichotomy between past and present, modern and traditional which is disputed in many religions.



*Smouldering City*

Not only does she paint about her own faith's cultural and religious history, but she expands her work and awareness to the experiences of those belonging to other faith traditions. In her painting, *Where are all the flowers gone*, Caur commemorates the Hiroshima bombing that marked the end of World War II. The title references the Zen Buddhist poetic reflection, *Flowers in the Sky* written by Zen Master Dogen Zenji in the 13th century. It also references the anti-war song,

“Where have all the flowers gone?” by Pete Seeger, which was made famous by Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. Commissioned for the Hiroshima Museum of Modern Art, the painting beautifully depicts the different levels and stages of the devastating attack, which killed 80,000 people (Bombing). In the first panel, there is calm

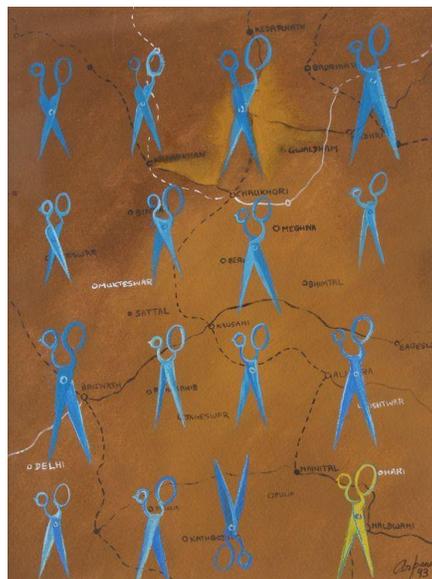


*Where are all the flowers gone*

flowing water and lotus flowers, symbolic to Buddhists and Hindus. This inclusion of these flowers in a painting commemorating a devastating event in Japan’s history points to Caur’s recognition that Buddhism and Shinto make up the two majority religions in Japan. In the second panel, there are lines of soldiers with stern faces seemingly motivated by an outside force. Their bodies form neat lines across the page with their heads facing to the right instead of right-side up. They create the illusion that they are many and widespread, continuing forever even outside the painting. In the last panel, there is a woman crouching below an atomic bomb cloud. The dark black of the cloud and the woman’s clothing and hair are contrasted with the yellow background, making these dark features even more prominent. Through these paintings, Caur recognizes the devastation that can take place in any community, regardless of religion, and especially emphasizes the conflicts between the East and the West. She commemorates these devastating events and displays them for communities to see, understand, and empathize with as cautionary tales. In many of her other paintings, she depicts the boundaries that are often caused by this violence and ignorance regarding religious differences.

Shaped by her religiously pluralistic upbringing and her rich artistic influences, Caur uses her art as a way to speak across time and religious boundaries. She utilizes the scriptures of Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam to create powerful social commentary about the importance of interfaith appreciation across time. She writes, “I think artists in particular are conscious of the flow of time. And in a way art kind of arrests time” (Caur 10). Drawing on historical events of her past and present social issues, she uses her art as a way to abstract real life events and social crises to imagine new ways of living and existing among difference. Suneet Chopra, an author from Lahore, writes about her work: “All this is not a nostalgic return to the past but its reconstruction to build a present that can pierce through the dark age of colonialism and tap its real cultural roots once more in a modern context” (Caur 48). This expansion across time is evident through the sightless gazes of many of her figures (Caur 184). They are meditating, oblivious of time and place, and are reminiscent of the gazes of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain sculptural figures (Caur 146).

The images of scissors and thread recur throughout many of Caur’s paintings, symbolizing the endless cycles of life, which can be quickly snipped at any second. In *Boundaries*, sixteen pairs of scissors are evenly spaced across the page, reminding me of the soldiers in *Where are all the flowers gone*. These scissors are placed over a background of a closeup map of India, with the countries separated by threaded seams. The scissors are splayed out in open positions, prepared to cut the boundaries between these different cities. This powerful image of scissors and thread overlaying the country of India reminds us of several different moments. First, it is reminiscent of the 1947 Partition, in which these boundaries were particularly prominent between Hindus and Muslims. Second, it can be symbolic of what happens when we create such strong boundaries between us as humans. It speaks to the strict borders we’ve formed between different religions, and how reluctant we are to cross them. These scissors are all blue, except for one yellow pair. This blue shade is the same shade of blue of Krishna, a Hindu



*Boundaries*

deity. Therefore, Caur is personifying the scissors, and enabling us to take this concept of cutting boundaries to the human level. Through this painting, she invites us to reflect on: “How do we maintain important boundaries without letting them define our existence together?”

The image of scissors overlaying a map of India is portrayed in her painting *Yogi and the River of Time*. However, this time the scissors have grown and the countries are abstracted, taking this concept to a new level. The scissors in *Yogi and the River of Time* are reminiscent of a Hindu theme: “The over-scaled scissors was presented as an overbearing symbol that echo ancient texts and stories reiterating the belief that Yamaraja cuts the thread of life when it is time to leave” (Caur 152). Yamaraja is the Hindu god of death, and the scissors are painted in jet black, which gives me an eerie and intimidating feeling.



*Yogi and the River of Time*

As someone who grew up attending an Episcopal church, I immediately recognized the flowing water as a Christian symbol of life and redemption; a contrast to the Yamaraja reference. Seeing this flowing water, I am reminded of the practice of baptism, and of biblical stories regarding water as an escape and a life-saving entity. However, taking a step back from my own initial observations, I realize that the flowing water in Caur’s painting can symbolize many other religious associations. It could be a portrayal of the Ganges, a sacred river to many Hindus, the Islamic

practice of *ghusul*, which includes gargling water to gain ritual purity, or even just a secular association. For the purpose of this discussion, I am going to discuss Christianity references in Caur's portrayal of water because it is most recognizable for me. However, I want to note Caur's inclusion of a symbol that can be applied to many different faiths, creating the possibility for people of many different religions to see personal associations. The Christian reference and the Hindu reference in one space actively recognizes that the two religions both have ideas of life and death, both seek to explore the dualities of life, and both want explanations for humanity, and yet proves that they can occupy the same space. As scholar Yashodhara Dalmia explains, "So this thread of life had been woven, embroidered by one, and cut, because within nature are the dualities of creation and destruction, life and death," (Caur 11). Especially in this painting, the scissors are personified and stand in line with four different trees and a human, emphasizing both the uniqueness and universality of humanity.

Pluralism is the subtext of many of her paintings. Caur juxtaposes different religious themes and stories together, acknowledging that they can exist in the same space. As seen in *Yogi and the River of Time*, I initially recognized the Christian use of water as a symbol for redemption. The explanation of water as cleansing can be found throughout the New Testament, "Let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (O'Day, Hebrews 10.22-23). On the bottom of the painting, there are waves of water with five feet walking upside down along the ground. These feet remind me of the Christian parable in which Jesus walked on water to prove to his disciples that he was the son of God: "And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea" (O'Day, Mathew 14.25-26). This theme is juxtaposed with the Hindu Tree of Life (*Kalpavriksha*) mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita and the Katho Upanishad, both Hindu texts. To abstract this symbol, Caur painted four trees, all starkly different shapes, but all the same height and in the same space. These trees and the presence of water speak to both symbols of life in this painting, either from the Christian or Hindu tradition. There is also another tree in the painting: the human in the tree pose, or *vrkansana*, a Hatha yogic pose, which comes from the Hindu tradition. The roots of the trees compliment the waves of the water. This beautiful painting recognizes the commonalities between two religious themes that symbolize similar ideas, but that are individualized through their own traditions, emphasizing the multivalency nature of religious thought.

Revisiting the triptych, *Where are all the flowers gone*, I notice different religious

themes in this painting as well. In the first panel, there are pink, white and green blooming lotus flowers, significant symbols for Buddhists and Hindus. Right next to the lotus flowers is flowing water, painted in the same way as in *Yogi and the River of Time*, which again reminds me of the Christian idea of water as life-giving. These two objects are mirrored in the last panel with the black mushroom cloud and the woman. The black cloud is reminiscent of the petals of a lotus, except it's now dark, round and looming. This paradoxical pairing emphasizes the poignancy of the bomb. The woman is crouched and tightly wound, the exact opposite of the sprightly lotus flowers. This juxtaposition of different religious themes in one painting commemorating the Hiroshima bombing also points to how important



*Body is Just a Garment*

human life is, and how devastating events can affect human life, regardless of religion.

In many of her paintings, she dresses, shapes, and adorns the human body with different religious themes and aspects, depicting them in the same space. In her painting, *Body is Just a Garment*, the faceless blue body, reminiscent of Hindu deity Krishna, is filled with entangled bodies from different religions. I can spot the face with a long white beard of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, and the Muslim musician, Mardana, who traveled with him on his divine journey to Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jainist centers of worship. There are faces with long earlobes, reminding me of the Buddha. The

limbs of these bodies are splayed out everywhere; they are naked, some tangled up and some in tender embraces. These bodies are uncovered and vulnerable, relying on each other for support. This painting is enlivening, it is a visual exploration of the different identities and religions that make up the world. However, the title could also be read as an ironic question. Is the body just a garment? Or do the ways in which we carry, portray and curate ourselves to look and act certain ways matter?

## Conclusion

Caur's ability to display vulnerable and traumatic memories on paper make her work especially commemorative. Her sense of interfaith understanding enables her to reach across religious boundaries. Drawing on the different parts of her religious and cultural influences, she is able to confidently explore them through bold strokes and powerful images. The following quote illustrates the essence of the impact of her work. She writes, "it is when there is an exhibition that you are out in the open and totally vulnerable. When a painter is exhibiting, your feelings, your thoughts are there for all to see" (Caur 219). Caur is a model for all; her ability to draw upon aspects of her own Sikh faith in her work while also touching on motifs and commonalities between other faiths makes her work accessible for many. She creates a physical and theoretical meeting spot; a place to respect the beauty of difference.

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