



*Walking Between Worlds*  
Shilpa Jain  
Berkeley, California

From a young age, Shilpa Jain learned how to “walk between worlds.” Born and raised in a multicultural community in suburban Chicago, Shilpa didn’t realize how unusual it was to coexist with people from the Philippines, Haiti, India, Taiwan, Korea, Pakistan, Thailand, and Syria. “I had no idea at the time what a privilege it was to grow up with that kind of diversity; I just thought it was normal.”

At the same time, she was blessed with belonging to a strong Rajasthani community. She would spend her weekends with her parents and their friends speaking Hindustani and Marwari, celebrating traditional festivals, and sharing traditional food. Multiple childhood trips to India cemented her connection to her family’s homeland. “So, I felt myself simultaneously rooted in a community and comfortably building bridges across differences with others.”

Shilpa was raised Jain, which is a small minority faith in India. She has been empowered by several of the core principles of the faith. The first is *anekantavaad*, which means “There are many paths to truth.” Everyone has a part of the answer, and therefore, there is no need to judge anyone. The second is *ahimsa*, which focuses on creating a culture of love, compassion, and understanding. It’s about doing as little harm or violence as possible. For Shilpa, this manifests powerfully not only with people, but with “how I feel toward the trees, the birds, the small insects... that sense that we are all connected.” The third principle is *aparigraha*, which is living with a sense of enough. This principle focuses on sharing and completeness, as a means to restore balance and achieve justice and fairness.

Shilpa has integrated all of these principles into her practice of activism - from awareness, to service, to advocacy, to teaching, to the creation of development policy, to cocreating learning communities. This journey has taken her from Chicago to the East Coast of the U.S., to India, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, Senegal, Malaysia, Thailand, Bolivia, Mexico--and back to the United States, where she now roots herself in Berkeley, California.

For the last nine years, Shilpa has been the executive director of the nonprofit YES! Founded in 1990 by Ocean Robbins and Ryan Eliason, YES!'s mission is to connect, inspire, and collaborate with changemakers to build thriving, just, and regenerative paths of life for all. For Shilpa, the military-industrial-institutional model has stranded many people, keeping them from “the lifeboat of living in community.” This disconnection isolates and socializes us in ways that can lead to violence and dehumanization. Instead, Shilpa has embraced a core YES! value: that personal, interpersonal, and systemic change are all interconnected. “We welcome different sectors of communities that have been disaffected...and try to move the needle in a positive direction. Together we recognize that our cultures and identities can transform as we transform ourselves.”

Shilpa began her journey by serving the elderly and poor. Soon, she realized that charity and service work did not address the larger systemic issues that are generated by failed political and economic institutions. She tried advocacy and activism through petitions and protests and struggled with asking those who were causing the problems to fix them, when they didn't seem to have an incentive to change. She experienced a similar revelation while teaching peace-making and creative self-expression programs for at-risk youth. “These activities could only serve as a band-aid for the attack on young peoples' souls from the violence and intensity of the school system and the larger world,” she says.

At the height of her frustration with trying to fix a broken world, in 1999, Shilpa attended a conference on Gandhian education in New Delhi. There, she met a Tibetan monk, Samdhong Rimpoche, who later became the prime minister of the Tibetan government-in-exile, and asked him, “Don’t you think we need to just destroy this system?” she explained. “It’s so violent, oppressive, and exploitative. I can’t see a way forward without breaking it all down.” He responded, “Shilpa, instead of thinking about destruction, think about renunciation. If you let go of the system, if you organize around freedom and possibility and building the world we want, the system will lose its power and you will regain yours.”

This revelation shifted Shilpa's work as a “learning activist” at Shikshantar: The Peoples’ Institute for Rethinking Education and Development, based in Udaipur, India. She worked with Shikshantar's cofounder and Shilpa's elder brother, Manish, and they were a powerful team for more than 10 years. It was at Shikshantar that Shilpa was first able to see her way toward an integrated life, “*where living is learning, and learning is living.*” Through the work of Rabindranath Tagore, known as “the Bard of India,” she studied creativity as a core aspect of self, and collective, liberation. Shilpa integrated this learning by leading workshops for children using theatre, art, and cooperative games as forms of self-expression, collective communication, and vision development.

“I had the chance to investigate and understand real-world crises and conflicts, from struggles against the building of big dams to the death of the small farmer,” Shilpa explains. “I also was blessed to meet extraordinary people who, maybe by others’ standards, might be called just ordinary. But in them, from them, I saw wisdom, dedication, and firm belief in the true and good.”

Then, in 2002, Shilpa attended her first YES! Jam. She was drawn into the World Youth Leadership Jam because its core principles aligned with her ideas of co-learning - where everyone would be learning together during this week-long intensive experience. Inspired by the way that musicians gather, the Jam is the heart and soul of YES!'s work. By design, the Jams offer an improvisational, fluid, creative, and collaborative paradigm of human community. Over the last 20 years, over 150+ YES! Jams have been held with changemakers on six continents. Each of them touches on different issues and creates a shared place for an integrated learning community.

“The Jam community is an ever-expanding network with a worldwide reach, a cauldron of human potential,” Shilpa explains. “People bring their unique tools and talents to share and grow together. Jam leaders and attendees reflect a kaleidoscope of diversity in origin, religion, vocation, and culture. There are Sufis, Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Jains, Jews, those without a specific faith, and more. Jams bring together artists, activists, educators, lawyers, dreamers, visionaries, healers, academics, data analysts, and small business owners, and so many more people who are part of other movements and organizations. We come together to learn from each other, to face our fears and challenges, to uncover solutions and ways forward, to dream of a more truthful, loving, whole world – and to practice ways to get there.”

Shilpa recalls one of the most memorable moments she had, at the second-ever Jam in Turkey: “At the end of an incredible night of gifts and offerings from the community – dances, songs, poems, 'angel walks' – a transcendent feeling, something beyond me, entered the space. The group formed a circle and started singing beautiful songs of friendship and love, and, all of a sudden the sky was full of shooting stars. Then Aysegul, one of the cofounders of the Jam said, with tears streaming down her face, ‘It’s possible. The world that we dream of. It’s possible. It’s here.’ I felt that Rumi had entered the circle, and I truly felt what it is to accept each other with all of our struggles, imperfections, beauty, and grace.”

Shilpa remembers this moment often. It inspires her to continue expanding this powerful community, especially during these times. She knows that the more we can listen to our inner truths and to each other, the more we can slow down and work through our conflicts, the more we can uncover and manifest all the solutions we need – which are already here. She hopes the next Jam will transform more people's lives, giving them the courage to join in cocreating a world that works for all.

*Develop enough courage so that you can stand up for yourself  
and then stand up for somebody else.*

Maya Angelou

**Call to Action:** Support YES! or sign up for a JAM. Visit [www.yesworld.org](http://www.yesworld.org). Follow YES! FB - yescommunity and YES! Twitter - yeschangemakers

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