

A portrait of Kamala Harris, smiling, wearing a white collared shirt, a pearl necklace, and a pearl earring. The background is a solid dark grey.

Kamala Harris

The Truths  
We Hold

*An American Journey*

ALSO BY KAMALA D. HARRIS

*Smart on Crime: A Career Prosecutor's Plan to Make Us Safer* (2009)

THE TRUTHS  
WE HOLD

*An American Journey*

KAMALA HARRIS

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Version\_1

*To my darling husband:  
Thank you for always being patient, loving, supportive, and calm. And most of all, for your  
sense of "the funny."*

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## PREFACE

Most mornings, my husband, Doug, wakes up before me and reads the news in bed. If I hear him making noises—a sigh, a groan, a gasp—I know what kind of day it’s going to be.

November 8, 2016, had started well—the last day of my campaign for the U.S. Senate. I spent the day meeting as many more voters as I could, and of course cast a vote myself at a neighborhood school up the street from our house. We were feeling pretty good. We had rented a huge place for my Election Night party, with a balloon drop waiting to go. But first I was going out for dinner with family and close friends—a tradition dating back to my first campaign. People had flown in from all across the country, even overseas, to be with us—my aunts and cousins, my in-laws, my sister’s in-laws, and more, all gathered for what we hoped would be a very special night.

I was staring out the car window, reflecting on how far we’d come, when I heard one of Doug’s signature groans.

“You gotta look at this,” he said, handing me his phone. Early results for the presidential election were coming in. Something was happening—something bad. By the time we arrived at the restaurant, the gap between the two candidates had shrunk considerably, and I was inwardly groaning as well. *The New York Times*’ probability meter was suggesting it was going to be a long, dark night.

We settled in for a meal in a small room off the main restaurant. Emotions and adrenaline were running high, but not for the reasons we had anticipated. On the one hand, while polls hadn’t yet closed in California, we were optimistic that I was going to win. Yet even as we prepared for that hard-earned celebration, all eyes were on our screens as state after state came back with numbers that told a troubling story.

At a certain point, my nine-year-old godson, Alexander, came up to me with big tears welling in his eyes. I assumed one of the other kids



in our group had been teasing him about something.

“Come here, little man. What’s wrong?”

Alexander looked up and locked eyes with mine. His voice was trembling. “Auntie Kamala, that man can’t win. He’s not going to win, is he?” Alexander’s worry broke my heart. I didn’t want anyone making a child feel that way. Eight years earlier, many of us had cried tears of joy when Barack Obama was elected president. And now, to see Alexander’s fear . . .

His father, Reggie, and I took him outside to try to console him.

“Alexander, you know how sometimes superheroes are facing a big challenge because a villain is coming for them? What do they do when that happens?”

“They fight back,” he whimpered.

“That’s right. And they fight back with emotion, because all the best superheroes have big emotions just like you. But they always fight back, right? So that’s what we’re going to do.”

Shortly after, the Associated Press called my race. We were still at the restaurant.

“I can’t thank you all enough for being with me every step of the way all the time, all the time,” I told my incredibly loving and supportive family and friends. “It means so much to me.” I was overwhelmed with gratitude, both for the people in that room and the people I had lost along the way, especially my mother. I tried to savor the moment, and I did, if briefly. But, like everyone else, I soon turned my eyes back to the television.

After dinner, we headed to our Election Night venue, where more than a thousand people had gathered for the party. I was no longer a candidate for office. I was a U.S. senator-elect—the first black woman from my state, and the second in the nation’s history, to earn that job. I had been elected to represent more than thirty-nine million people—roughly one out of every eight Americans from all backgrounds and walks of life. It was—and is—a humbling and extraordinary honor.

My team clapped and cheered as I joined them in the greenroom behind the stage. It all still felt more than a little surreal. None of us had fully processed what was happening. They formed a circle around me as I thanked them for everything they’d done. We were a family, too, and we had been through an incredible journey together. Some of

the folks in the room had been with me since my first campaign for district attorney. But now, almost two years after the start of our campaign, we had a new mountain to take.

I had written a speech based on the assumption that Hillary Clinton would become our first woman president. As I went onstage to greet my supporters, I left that draft behind. I looked out at the room. It was packed with people, from the floor to the balcony. Many were in a state of shock as they watched the national returns.

I told the crowd we had a task in front of us. I said the stakes were high. We had to be committed to bringing our country together, to doing what was required to protect our fundamental values and ideals. I thought of Alexander and all the children when I posed a question:

“Do we retreat or do we fight? I say we fight. And I intend to fight!”

I went home that night with my extended family, many of whom were staying with us. We all went into our respective rooms, changed into sweats, and then joined one another in the living room. Some of us were sitting on couches. Others on the floor. We all planted ourselves in front of the television.

No one really knew what to say or do. Each of us was trying to cope in our own way. I sat down on the couch with Doug and ate an entire family-size bag of classic Doritos. Didn't share a single chip.

But I did know this: one campaign was over, but another was about to begin. A campaign that called on us all to enlist. This time, a battle for the soul of our nation.

In the years since, we've seen an administration align itself with white supremacists at home and cozy up to dictators abroad; rip babies from their mothers' arms in grotesque violation of their human rights; give corporations and the wealthy huge tax cuts while ignoring the middle class; derail our fight against climate change; sabotage health care and imperil a woman's right to control her own body; all while lashing out at seemingly everything and everyone, including the very idea of a free and independent press.

We are better than this. Americans know we're better than this. But we're going to have to prove it. We're going to have to fight for it.

On July 4, 1992, one of my heroes and inspirations, Thurgood Marshall, gave a speech that deeply resonates today. “We cannot play ostrich,” he said. “Democracy just cannot flourish amid fear. Liberty

cannot bloom amid hate. Justice cannot take root amid rage. America must get to work. . . . We must dissent from the indifference. We must dissent from the apathy. We must dissent from the fear, the hatred, and the mistrust.”

This book grows out of that call to action, and out of my belief that our fight must begin and end with speaking truth.

I believe there is no more important and consequential antidote for these times than a reciprocal relationship of trust. You give and you receive trust. And one of the most important ingredients in a relationship of trust is that we speak truth. It matters what we say. What we mean. The value we place on our words—and what they are worth to others.

We cannot solve our most intractable problems unless we are honest about what they are, unless we are willing to have difficult conversations and accept what facts make plain.

We need to speak truth: that racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and anti-Semitism are real in this country, and we need to confront those forces. We need to speak truth: that, with the exception of Native Americans, we all descend from people who weren't born on our shores—whether our ancestors came to America willingly, with hopes of a prosperous future, or forcibly, on a slave ship, or desperately, to escape a harrowing past.

We cannot build an economy that gives dignity and decency to American workers unless we first speak truth; that we are asking people to do more with less money and to live longer with less security. Wages haven't risen in forty years, even as the costs of health care, tuition, and housing have soared. The middle class is living paycheck to paycheck.

We must speak truth about our mass incarceration crisis—that we put more people in prison than any country on earth, for no good reason. We must speak truth about police brutality, about racial bias, about the killing of unarmed black men. We must speak truth about pharmaceutical companies that pushed addictive opioids on unsuspecting communities, and payday lenders and for-profit colleges that have leached on to vulnerable Americans and overloaded them with debt. We must speak truth about greedy, predatory corporations

that have turned deregulation, financial speculation, and climate denialism into creed. And I intend to do just that.

This book is not meant to be a policy platform, much less a fifty-point plan. Instead, it is a collection of ideas and viewpoints and stories, from my life and from the lives of the many people I've met along the way.

Just two more things to mention before we get started:

First, my name is pronounced "comma-la," like the punctuation mark. It means "lotus flower," which is a symbol of significance in Indian culture. A lotus grows underwater, its flower rising above the surface while its roots are planted firmly in the river bottom.

And second, I want you to know how personal this is for me. This is the story of my family. It is the story of my childhood. It is the story of the life I have built since then. You'll meet my family and my friends, my colleagues and my team. I hope you will cherish them as I do and, through my telling, see that nothing I have ever accomplished could have been done on my own.

*—Kamala, 2018*

*One*

## FOR THE PEOPLE

I still remember the first time I walked into the Alameda County Superior Courthouse, in Oakland, California, as an employee. It was 1988, during the last summer of law school, and I, along with nine others, had been offered a summer internship in the district attorney's office. I had a sense that I wanted to be a prosecutor, that I wanted to be on the front lines of criminal justice reform, that I wanted to protect the vulnerable. But having never seen the job up close, I hadn't made up my mind.

The sun shone brightly on the courthouse. The building stood apart on Lake Merritt, taller and more regal than other buildings nearby. From certain angles, it looked like an architectural marvel from a foreign capital, with its granite base and concrete tower rising to meet a golden rooftop. Though from other angles, it bore an uncanny resemblance to an art deco wedding cake.

The Alameda County District Attorney's Office is itself something of a legend. Earl Warren led the office before becoming attorney general of California and later one of the most influential chief justices of the United States Supreme Court. He was on my mind that morning as I walked past the stunning mosaics in the lobby that depict the early history of California. Warren's words—proclaiming segregation “inherently unequal”—had taken a long fifteen years to make it to Berkeley, California. I was grateful they had come in time for me; my elementary school class was only the second class in my city to be desegregated through busing.

I was the first to arrive at the orientation session. Within a few minutes, the rest of my fellow clerks showed up. There was only one

woman among them, Amy Resner. As soon as the session was over, I went up to her and asked her for her phone number. In that male-dominated environment, it was refreshing to have at least one female colleague. She remains one of my closest friends today, and I'm godmother to her children.

As summer interns, we understandably had very little power or influence. Our job was primarily to learn and observe, while assisting where we could. It was a chance to get a taste of how the criminal justice system worked from the inside, what it looked like when justice was served—and when it wasn't. We were placed with attorneys who were trying all kinds of cases, from DUIs to homicides, and had the chance to be in the room—and part of the process—of putting together a case.

I'll never forget the time my supervisor was working on a case involving a drug bust. The police had arrested a number of individuals in the raid, including an innocent bystander: a woman who had been at the wrong place at the wrong time and had been swept up in the dragnet. I hadn't seen her. I didn't know who she was or what she looked like. I didn't have any connection to her, except for the report I was reviewing. But there was something about her that caught my attention.

It was late on a Friday afternoon, and most people had gone home for the weekend. In all likelihood, a judge wouldn't see her until Monday. That meant she'd have to spend the weekend in jail.

*Does she work weekends? Is she going to have to explain to her employer where she was? Is she going to get fired?*

Even more important, I knew she had young children at home. *Do they know she's in jail? They must think she did something wrong. Who's taking care of them right now? Is there even someone who can? Child Protective Services might get called. My God, she could lose her kids.*

Everything was on the line for this woman: her family, her livelihood, her standing in her community, her dignity, her liberty. And yet she'd done nothing wrong.

I rushed to the clerk of the court and asked to have the case called that very day. I begged. I pleaded. If the judge could just return to the bench for five minutes, we could get her released. All I could think

about was her family and her frightened children. Finally, as the minutes in the day wound down, the judge returned. I watched and listened as he reviewed her case, waiting for him to give the order. Then, with the pound of a gavel, just like that, she was free. She'd get to go home to her children in time for dinner. I never did get the chance to meet her, but I'll never forget her.

It was a defining moment in my life. It was the crystallization of how, even on the margins of the criminal justice system, the stakes were extraordinarily high and intensely human. It was a realization that, even with the limited authority of an intern, people who cared could do justice. It was revelatory, a moment that proved how much it mattered to have compassionate people working as prosecutors. Years before I would be elected to run a major prosecutor's office, this was one of the victories that mattered the most. I knew she was going home.

And I knew the kind of work I wanted to do, and who I wanted to serve.

The courthouse wasn't far from where I grew up. I was born in Oakland, California, in 1964 and spent the formative years of my childhood living on the boundary between Oakland and Berkeley.

My father, Donald Harris, was born in Jamaica in 1938. He was a brilliant student who immigrated to the United States after being admitted to the University of California at Berkeley. He went there to study economics and would go on to teach economics at Stanford, where he remains a professor emeritus.

My mother's life began thousands of miles to the east, in southern India. Shyamala Gopalan was the oldest of four children—three girls and a boy. Like my father, she was a gifted student, and when she showed a passion for science, her parents encouraged and supported her.

She graduated from the University of Delhi at nineteen. And she didn't stop there. She applied to a graduate program at Berkeley, a university she'd never seen, in a country she'd never visited. It's hard for me to imagine how difficult it must have been for her parents to let her go. Commercial jet travel was only just starting to spread globally. It wouldn't be a simple matter to stay in touch. Yet, when my mother asked permission to move to California, my grandparents didn't stand

in the way. She was a teenager when she left home for Berkeley in 1958 to pursue a doctorate in nutrition and endocrinology, on her way to becoming a breast cancer researcher.

My mother was expected to return to India after she completed her degree. Her parents had an arranged marriage. It was assumed my mother would follow a similar path. But fate had other plans. She and my father met and fell in love at Berkeley while participating in the civil rights movement. Her marriage—and her decision to stay in the United States—were the ultimate acts of self-determination and love.

My parents had two daughters together. My mother received her PhD at age twenty-five, the same year I was born. My beloved sister, Maya, came two years later. Family lore has it that, in both pregnancies, my mother kept working right up to the moment of delivery—one time, her water broke while she was at the lab, and the other while she was making apple strudel. (In both cases, knowing my mom, she would have insisted on finishing up before she went to the hospital.)

Those early days were happy and carefree. I loved the outdoors, and I remember that when I was a little girl, my father wanted me to run free. He would turn to my mother and say, “Just let her run, Shyamala.” And then he’d turn to me and say, “Run, Kamala. As fast as you can. Run!” I would take off, the wind in my face, with the feeling that I could do anything. (It’s no wonder I also have many memories of my mother putting Band-Aids on my scraped knees.)

Music filled our home. My mother loved to sing along to gospel—from Aretha Franklin’s early work to the Edwin Hawkins Singers. She had won an award in India for her singing, and I loved hearing that voice. My father cared about music just as much as my mother. He had an extensive jazz collection, so many albums that they filled all the shelving against one of the walls. Every night, I would fall asleep to the sounds of Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, or Miles Davis.

But the harmony between my parents didn’t last. In time, things got harder. They stopped being kind to each other. I knew they loved each other very much, but it seemed they’d become like oil and water. By the time I was five years old, the bond between them had given way under the weight of incompatibility. They separated shortly after my dad took a job at the University of Wisconsin, and divorced a few years



later. They didn't fight about money. The only thing they fought about was who got the books.

I've often thought that had they been a little older, more emotionally mature, maybe the marriage could have survived. But they were so young. My father was my mother's first boyfriend.

It was hard on both of them. I think, for my mother, the divorce represented a kind of failure she had never considered. Her marriage was as much an act of rebellion as an act of love. Explaining it to her parents had been hard enough. Explaining the divorce, I imagine, was even harder. I doubt they ever said to her, "I told you so," but I think those words echoed in her mind regardless.

Maya was still a toddler at the time of their separation, a little too young to understand what was going on, to feel the hardness of it all. I have often felt a pang of guilt because of something Maya never got to experience: I knew our parents when they were happy together. Maya never really did.

My father remained a part of our lives. We would see him on weekends and spend summers with him in Palo Alto. But it was really my mother who took charge of our upbringing. She was the one most responsible for shaping us into the women we would become.

And she was extraordinary. My mother was barely five foot one, but I felt like she was six foot two. She was smart and tough and fierce and protective. She was generous, loyal, and funny. She had only two goals in life: to raise her two daughters and to end breast cancer. She pushed us hard and with high expectations as she nurtured us. And all the while, she made Maya and me feel special, like we could do anything we wanted to if we put in the work.

My mother had been raised in a household where political activism and civic leadership came naturally. Her mother, my grandmother, Rajam Gopalan, had never attended high school, but she was a skilled community organizer. She would take in women who were being abused by their husbands, and then she'd call the husbands and tell them they'd better shape up or she would take care of them. She used to gather village women together, educating them about contraception. My grandfather P. V. Gopalan had been part of the movement to win India's independence. Eventually, as a senior diplomat in the Indian government, he and my grandmother had

spent time living in Zambia after it gained independence, helping to settle refugees. He used to joke that my grandmother's activism would get him in trouble one day. But he knew that was never going to stop her. From them, my mother learned that it was service to others that gave life purpose and meaning. And from my mother, Maya and I learned the same.

My mother inherited my grandmother's strength and courage. People who knew them knew not to mess with either. And from both of my grandparents, my mother developed a keen political consciousness. She was conscious of history, conscious of struggle, conscious of inequities. She was born with a sense of justice imprinted on her soul.

My parents often brought me in a stroller with them to civil rights marches. I have young memories of a sea of legs moving about, of the energy and shouts and chants. Social justice was a central part of family discussions. My mother would laugh telling a story she loved about the time when I was fussing as a toddler. "What do you want?" she asked, trying to soothe me. "Fweedom!" I yelled back.

My mother surrounded herself with close friends who were really more like sisters. My godmother, a fellow Berkeley student whom I knew as "Aunt Mary," was one of them. They met through the civil rights movement that was taking shape in the early 1960s and was being debated and defended from the streets of Oakland to the soapboxes in Berkeley's Sproul Plaza. As black students spoke out against injustice, a group of passionate, keenly intelligent, politically engaged young men and women found one another—my mother and Aunt Mary among them.

They went to peaceful protests where they were attacked by police with hoses. They marched against the Vietnam War and for civil rights and voting rights. They went together to see Martin Luther King Jr. speak at Berkeley, and my mother had a chance to meet him. She told me that at one anti-war protest, the marchers were confronted by the Hell's Angels. She told me that at another, she and her friends were forced to run for safety, with me in a stroller, after violence broke out against the protesters.

But my parents and their friends were more than just protesters. They were big thinkers, pushing big ideas, organizing their

community. Aunt Mary, her brother (my “Uncle Freddy”), my mother and father, and about a dozen other students organized a study group to read the black writers that the university was ignoring. They met on Sundays at Aunt Mary and Uncle Freddy’s Harmon Street home, where they devoured Ralph Ellison, discussed Carter G. Woodson, debated W. E. B. Du Bois. They talked about apartheid, about African decolonization, about liberation movements in the developing world, and about the history of racism in America. But it wasn’t just talking. There was an urgency to their fight. They received prominent guests, too, including civil rights and intellectual leaders from LeRoi Jones to Fannie Lou Hamer.

After Berkeley, Aunt Mary took a job teaching at San Francisco State University, where she continued to celebrate and elevate the black experience. SFSU had a student-run Experimental College, and in 1966, another of my mother’s dear friends, whom I knew as Uncle Aubrey, taught the college’s first-ever class in black studies. The campus was a proving ground for redefining the meaning and substance of higher education.

These were my mother’s people. In a country where she had no family, they were her family—and she was theirs. From almost the moment she arrived from India, she chose and was welcomed to and enveloped in the black community. It was the foundation of her new American life.

Along with Aunt Mary, Aunt Lenore was my mother’s closest confidante. I also cherish the memory of one of my mother’s mentors, Howard, a brilliant endocrinologist who had taken her under his wing. When I was a girl, he gave me a pearl necklace that he’d brought back from a trip to Japan. (Pearls have been one of my favorite forms of jewelry ever since!)

I was also very close to my mother’s brother, Balu, and her two sisters, Sarala and Chinni (whom I called Chitti, which means “younger mother”). They lived many thousands of miles away, and we rarely saw one another. Still, through many long-distance calls, our periodic trips to India, and letters and cards written back and forth, our sense of family—of closeness and comfort and trust—was able to penetrate the distance. It’s how I first really learned that you can have very close relationships with people, even if it’s not on a daily basis.

We were always there for one another, regardless of what form that would take.

My mother, grandparents, aunts, and uncle instilled us with pride in our South Asian roots. Our classical Indian names harked back to our heritage, and we were raised with a strong awareness of and appreciation for Indian culture. All of my mother's words of affection or frustration came out in her mother tongue—which seems fitting to me, since the purity of those emotions is what I associate with my mother most of all.

My mother understood very well that she was raising two black daughters. She knew that her adopted homeland would see Maya and me as black girls, and she was determined to make sure we would grow into confident, proud black women.

About a year after my parents separated, we moved into the top floor of a duplex on Bancroft Way, in a part of Berkeley known as the flatlands. It was a close-knit neighborhood of working families who were focused on doing a good job, paying the bills, and being there for one another. It was a community that was invested in its children, a place where people believed in the most basic tenet of the American Dream: that if you work hard and do right by the world, your kids will be better off than you were. We weren't rich in financial terms, but the values we internalized provided a different kind of wealth.

My mom would get Maya and me ready every morning before heading to work at her research lab. Usually she'd mix up a cup of Carnation Instant Breakfast. We could choose chocolate, strawberry, or vanilla. On special occasions, we got Pop-Tarts. From her perspective, breakfast was not the time to fuss around.

She would kiss me goodbye and I would walk to the corner and get on the bus to Thousand Oaks Elementary School. I only learned later that we were part of a national experiment in desegregation, with working-class black children from the flatlands being bused in one direction and wealthier white children from the Berkeley hills bused in the other. At the time, all I knew was that the big yellow bus was the way I got to school.

Looking at the photo of my first-grade class reminds me of how wonderful it was to grow up in such a diverse environment. Because the students came from all over the area, we were a varied bunch;