

### **Reveal your authentic self**

From the day we are born until the day we die, we face an endless series of welcome and unwelcome life changes. How do we discover or develop the resilience that is necessary to live our lives to the fullest, make our unique contribution, find our calling?

In a series of six interviews, Klaartje van Gasteren, Marnix Reijmerink and Jakob van Wielink talk to known international thinkers, all of whom show that the road leading to our talent and potential also lies in discovering and recognizing our vulnerability. Some of them have had to endure experiences that seem too overwhelming to survive.

These are six stories of six people who have come forward and that invite and challenge the reader to do the same.

The fourth interview in this series is with Azim Khamisa, founder of the Tariq Khamisa Foundation and bestselling author of books about forgiveness that he wrote after the murder of his son Tariq.

Talking to Azim Khamisa about  
the power of forgiveness

# There were victims at both ends of the gun

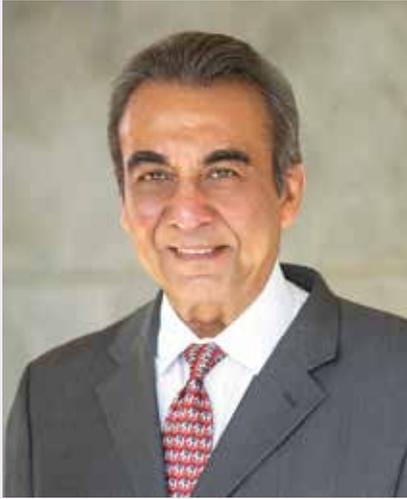
**“There is no problem in life that your spirit cannot resolve or heal. When my son was murdered, I was overcome by immense sorrow and intense pain. I fainted and had an out-of-body experience. I saw myself lying on the floor and felt calm and peaceful. When I came to, I had an important realization: in this tragedy, during which a young man under the influence of drugs and alcohol shot and killed my son, there were victims on both ends of the gun. That thought opened the path to forgiveness for me.”**

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On the evening of January 21 1995, Tariq Khamisa – a twenty-year-old student who delivered pizzas in his spare time – was shot and killed by Tony Hicks, who was fourteen at the time. That evening, Tony and his friends used a lot of alcohol and drugs and they decided to order a pizza without paying for it. By way of initiation into the gang he belonged to, his friends told Tony to shoot the delivery driver. This event would forever change the lives of many, including that of Tony himself – although he wasn't thinking about that right then.

Inspired by the story of Azim Khamisa, Tariq Khamisa's father, the story he wrote about in his book *From Murder to Forgiveness*, we met Azim in his home in San Diego. After the interview with Dr. Edith Eger, which we covered in an earlier edition of this column, she told us she would “really like to meet him.” Since she lives in San Diego as well, she took us to his house. Even though Azim had never met either Edith or us before, he welcomed us into his home with a warm embrace.

On the morning of January 22 1995, Azim Khamisa found a business card from the San Diego police department on his doormat that had the following words on it: "We are trying to reach Tariq Khamisa's family." When he called, he received the horrible news about Tariq's death. A period of intense mourning followed. Azim chose a brave path when he



#### About Azim Khamisa...

After his only son Tariq became the victim of a senseless murder by a gang member in 1995, Azim Khamisa chose the path of forgiveness and compassion over that of revenge and bitterness. Azim spreads his inspirational message of forgiveness, peace and hope in a world that desperately needs more of each. His amazing choice led to the founding of the TKF, the Tariq Khamisa Foundation.

Azim was praised by dignitaries such as the Dalai Lama, former president Bill Clinton and Al Gore and his works were discussed in publications including the New York Times, Oprah Magazine, the Washington Post, NBC's Today Show and CBS' Early Morning Show.

[www.tkf.org](http://www.tkf.org)

decided not to lose himself in his sorrow. Instead, he opted to forgive his son's killer and worked together with Ples Felix, Tony Hicks' grandfather and foster father, to set up a foundation in his son's honor. The Tariq Khamisa Foundation strives to show and teach young people in schools about the power of forgiveness in an effort to stop children from killing other children. The work that the foundation does might be more relevant now than ever, especially in today's American society.

At the time of the murder, Azim worked as an international investment banker. Tariq's death put his job and its importance in a new perspective. Although Azim's faith as a Sufi Muslim was already strong, the loss of his son gave it a new, deepening impulse. The search to assign meaning to this loss was fed by the Sufi tradition that gives loved ones forty days to mourn the deceased. "Prolonged mourning prevents the soul of the departed from continuing their journey in the afterlife. Of course, my sorrow was not over after forty days. However, when I met my spiritual leader, he implored me to turn the loss into something good so I could finally move on. He told me to perform a good deed as a kind of ritual, in order to actively deal with my loss."

It was during this time of mourning that Azim realized that his own path to liberation would require him to forgive Tony. "Forgiveness is not an easy process. You have to move through and past your anger and embrace it. The more you try to hold the anger inside, the more attention it demands. Forgiveness also invites you to think about and feel the pain you inflicted on others in life. As time goes on, I find it easier to forgive. It has become a habit of sorts, although one that does require constant practice. I meditate for two hours every day, which is an important part of that practice."

Azim understands that it is not Tony, the one who pulled the trigger, who is the enemy, but the society he grew up in. At a young age, Tony's parents were unable to care for him and

he came into contact with extreme violence. "How is it possible that we are unable to resolve the circumstances under which this act could occur?" Driven by this question, Azim actively fights for restorative justice, which involves not just two but three parties: the victim, the offender and society itself.

After Tariq's death, during the lawsuit against Tony, Azim met his son's killer's grandfather. Plex Felix took over as Tony's guardian when his grandson was nine years old. After Tariq's murder, he felt betrayed by his grandson. This was accompanied by an overwhelming sense of shame and guilt. Nevertheless, he decided to face Azim and his family and offer to do anything he could to help and support them. Azim asked Plex to take part in the Tariq Khamisa Foundation. Since then, the two have visited countless schools in America and abroad to tell their very personal and remarkable story, inspired by the conviction that the leadership that young people need to develop within themselves starts with the role models they meet in life. Plex and Azim want to be important role models by showing others how a positive meaning can be given to any tragedy in life. In the end, Plex has become one of Azim's best friends.

### **Tony**

Azim's forgiveness has opened new and unexpected doors for Tony as well. He has not been idle during his now twenty-five years in prison. He got a college degree, became a poet and writes a blog on the TKF's website, where he also answers questions sent in by (often young) readers. One such question is what he would say to Tariq, given the opportunity. "Your father Azim forgave me for killing you. He even came to visit me in prison. The compassion he has shown me is very humbling. I also maintain frequent contact with Tasreen (Tariq's sister, director of the TKF, KMJ),

who allowed me into her life. I feel truly blessed that I have got to know her. They taught me more about you and you taught me more about myself as well."

### **"I found my calling because of my son's murder"**

Through the Tariq Khamisa Foundation's programs, the two men now work together to teach young people about the principles of non-violence. These principles assume that violence is part of the reality we live in and that all of us are affected by violence in some way. We have to realize that every choice we make has consequences. Azim stresses that each of us is capable of making the right – non-violent – choices. That also means that "anyone can choose forgiveness over vengeance. Every person on this planet deserves to be treated well. We are all one family. This means that, if we truly want to, we can turn any conflict into a source of unity and brotherly love through dialogue."

Living up to these principles requires a lot of our leadership. Azim weathered the despair he felt after the loss of his son. He did so by facing the rage, the pain and the sorrow head on, instead of turning away from them. Together with those nearest and dearest to him, he was able to "embrace the sorrow like an old friend and give it the best place in my home." Azim tells us about how bitterness and wrath slowly subsided by talking to Tony and forgiving him for killing his son. This choice also inspired a complete shift in his perspective on the tragedy of this murder.

### **There is no forgiveness without acknowledging the anger**

Azim found that choosing to forgive brought him new energy and a different focus – one directed towards growth and finding meaning in his own life and the lives of other people, especially youths. Step by step, it became clear to Azim that the death of his son had

a deeper meaning and exposed a stronger desire: to show the world that Tariq's death was not in vain and, perhaps more so, that his life had not been in vain either. That love gives Azim, Ples and their families the strength to keep up their work for the foundation and continue the struggle to bring about Tony's (early) release. In late 2018, Tony became eligible for early release. If the governor of California signs off on it, he will be released this year after a twenty-five-year prison sentence. When that happens, he will join the Tariq Khamisa Foundation along with Azim and his grandfather. From that moment on, Azim will share the stage with Ples and his son's killer to make young people in schools and the rest of the world experience how love can ultimately conquer all.

The emphasis Azim places on practicing forgiveness inspires us. It reminds us of the journey of the hero and the heroine, who are invited to take on that which seems impossible. To reach deeper into their own souls in order to uncover previously hidden pearls. For us, it also forms a bridge to our meeting with professor Philip Zimbardo, leader of the Heroic Imagination Project that challenges young people to perform "ordinary" acts of heroism every day. We will reveal more about the remarkable meeting we had in San Francisco in the next instalment of this series.

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