



Mighty Thunder Web Design & Marketing, 31945 Emerald,
Castaic, CA 91384-3102. minwilli@gmail.com (661) 295-9318

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LOS ANGELES, CA. Sunday May 31st. Proponents of abolishing the death penalty, those convicted under the “three strikes” law for petty crimes or for exhibiting mental disorders, and inmates needing drug rehabilitation may be thanking their lucky stars for the possibility an early release because of the effort currently underway to solve California’s budget problems. At least this was what was expressed by several speakers at the Fame Renaissance Center of the First AME Church, located at 1968 West Adams Blvd.



California has the seventh largest economy in the world. Will the federal government ignore California’s desperate plea for backing on short-term loans necessary to continue to meet its critical financial obligations? This was one of the questions being asked in the Death Penalty presentation.

In attendance were guests Judge Mike Davis, Congresswoman Maxine Waters, State Senator Gloria Ramirez, actor Mike Farrell, assembly district delegates from the Los Angeles County Democratic Party, representatives from the ACLU, community advocates, and local citizens.

Congresswoman Maxine Walters opened the meeting by introducing the impressive list of guest speakers: Gloria Ramirez, Charles Ogletree, Jon Streeter, Gloria Killian, and Azim N. Khamisa.

State Senator Gloria Ramirez announced her bid for California State Superintendent of Schools and provided statistics on the amount of taxes allocated for education versus the prison system. “They’d rather spend money incarcerating our children rather than educating them. The number of prisoners who cannot read and write is staggering”. She pledged to remedy this situation whether she wins the position or not.

The prominent law expert, Dr. Charles J. Ogletree Jr., who was born and raised in Merced, California, was the facilitator. Many in the audience knew the Harvard civil liberties law professor. He estimates that the death penalty is costing California taxpayers \$1.9 billion a year. Ogletree offered, “The death penalty needs to be abandoned in this state because it is categorically immoral, wrong and financially expensive . . .now to find 25 more items like this in the budget might solve California’s budget crisis.” Snickers and claps of approval engulfed the room.

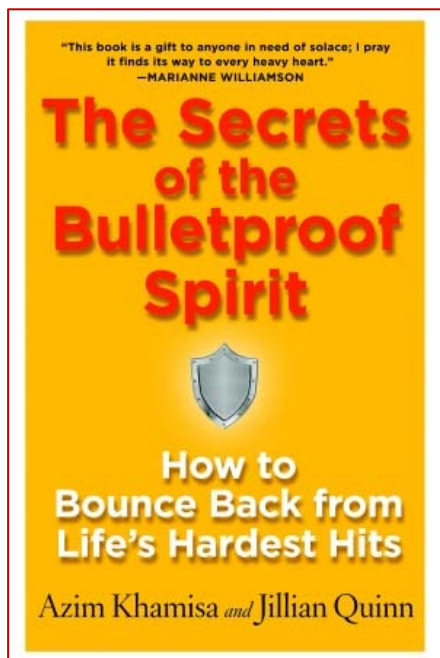
Jon Streeter, Ph.D. from the American Bar Association and mentee of Ogletree when he was a student at Stanford University reflected on the years that it takes death penalty cases to run through the judicial system, “it is slow, a labyrinth of technicalities and requires attorneys who are diligent and understand the various levels and the procedures”. He added that the expense is enormous, and the wrong attorney can greatly increase the prisoner’s chances of a life sentence, while many attorneys do not have a good understanding of the process.

Gloria Killian was a law student when she was implicated in a robbery and murder. She fought for over 15 years to get the case overturned. She at least understood the judicial process when she was wrongly accused. Her incarceration however, did inspire her to help win exoneration for other women prisoners who couldn't read, write or understand their cases. Since her release, she has started a nonprofit organization and often assists female prisoners on a "pro bono" basis.

All speakers provided riveting commentary and testimony, however one stood out more. The wisdom provided by Azim N. Khamisa, an attractive, humble and serious speaker against the Death Penalty because of its spiritual impact.

Spiritual impact - now there was a different concept. What does spirituality have to do with our economy?

"January 21, 1995", Khamisa lowered his voice and pulled up on the podium, "my life was changed forever;



it was the most that I could do, to get out of my bed after hearing such bad news". He explained the grief, disappointment, and anguish he went through when Tariq, his only son, was robbed and killed. His son was charismatic, handsome, full of life, 21 years old (at the time), a senior at San Diego State University, and engaged to be married. "He was in the wrong place at the wrong time", as he calmly states the facts of the situation. A silence fell over the audience, and you could hear a pin drop.

Khamisa was and still is a successful international investment banker, so he had the money to provide his son with all the luxuries of life but "my son was determined to work and save his own money for college the following semester".

Khamisa looked forward to sending him to Harvard University, Khamisa's alma mater. "My son had a promising future. He had the determination, grades, drive, discipline and the support of a proud mother and father. He would decide whether he wanted to become a

successful banker, like his dad or an attorney. He hadn't made up his mind yet, which profession, but he knew, he was going places". Friday and Saturday pizza delivery didn't pay exceptionally well, but it is what was available, and allowed Tariq freedom, some loose change and the enjoyment he got from meeting other people.

Along the way, Tariq met Tony Hicks, a 14-year old gang banger. Tony was to rob and kill the pizza man. Neither person knew one another and that opportunity never came. Tony did not have the promising career, the education, nor a life of luxury. His mother had him at 15 years old, his father had long gone, and he wasn't doing well in school. Instead, he was being initiated into one of San Diego's roughest gangs and Tariq was the initiation victim.

Khamisa said he beat himself up trying to figure out what he could have done differently so that the situation wouldn't have happened. Khamisa put his deepest thoughts together in a book called "The Secrets of the Bulletproof Spirit: How to bounce back from Life's hardest hits. ISBN: 9781741757934; Published by ALLEN & UNWIN April 2009. The book is co-authored by the renown spiritual advisor and radio host, Jillian

Quinn, who also shares her personal experiences. The book assures you that our thinking can also cause us to “create our own reality, and that you can use it to take control of your life”.

According to the book’s preface (www.bulletproofspirit.com) here are some of the topics:

- The potentially damaging mental routines you’re running on autopilot
- the vital connections between your upbringing and your “resiliency quotient”
- spiritually affirming thoughts that may help you make more spiritually empowering choices.

Khamisa offers that he had to go through three steps to be able to forgive his son’s killer.

“First”, he said, “you have to admit that you have a tragic loss and you can’t change what has occurred. You have to give yourself time to grieve”. Time he said is “relative”, some people take longer than others. He assured us that you have to get to the place where you realize what happened, and that denial does not help the process.

“Second”, he said, “you have to give up the resentment, rage and revenge. You have to learn to replace it with love and forgiveness.

Then the third stage, he said, is where you must reach out to the offender that has caused you wrong with unconditional love and compassion. You must learn to forgive.

Khamisa, a peace activist, insists that life is not a destination; it is a voyage that no matter how hard you might think you control the elements in the universe, the universe provides you with lessons that make the journey tug at your intellectual, emotional and financial heartstrings. He offers hope in this book of “thirty essential keys to emotional and spiritual resiliency.”



He offered that we need to be careful with resentment, quoting Nelson Mandela, who didn’t originate the words, but who made the quote famous. “Resentment is like drinking the poison and waiting for or expecting someone *else* to die or expecting it to kill your enemies”. I knew I had heard this quote before, but it seemed like he had added some additional resentment to the quote.

At the presentation, Khamisa insisted that the world is not kind and maybe was never intended to be, but it does offer those of us who believe in a higher authority the wisdom to grow. We are here to help one another, to be more grounded in our spiritual selves, and to allow the universe to use us for love and compassion. I believe we are here to help someone else who is not as advantaged as we see ourselves. And like Khamisa, I too don’t believe in the Death Penalty nor capital punishment and could understand that the death of his son only challenged him to be more still within himself, allowing the arms of God to envelope him until the explosion subsided and he was able to heal.

So how did Khamisa respond to the death of his son?

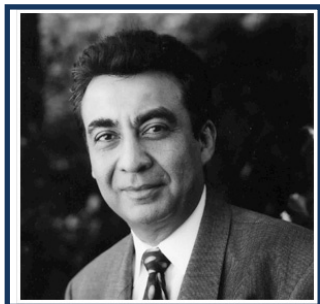
First, he had to get to the point of understanding, which isn’t easy for many family members to realize that “no matter how angry and disappointed I was, I couldn’t bring my son back”. He was determined that Tariq’s death was not going to consume his every waking hour. He admitted that it took him five years before he could go and meet the child who was now 19 years old. He said he looked him in his eyes and he

felt he touched his soul. "There wasn't a murderer there," he offered, "he saw a victim of a gang initiation, a victim of society and he realized that he, Khamisa, had to take responsibility for his share of the child not having the guidance he needed". He got to know Tony and met his family. He wrote to the young man and offered him not only hope, but also a job so that whenever he is released, he has somewhere he can go and call home.

Khamisa became a surrogate father to Tony. He provides him with materials to read, and has encouraged him to finish his GED. He also began to realize that Tony had lost a father at an early age. While he no longer had a son, Khamisa did not stop at just helping Tony.

Khamisa started the Tariq Khamisa Foundation to break the cycle of youth violence. He said the foundation has helped six million children in the past 13 years to teach forgiveness. He has six programs at the foundation. He has hired a staff of recently released prisoners, provided them with counseling, job placement, housing, and an opportunity to get a new lease on life. Several of these individuals are now spiritual counselors and motivational speakers. They can speak firsthand of the mistakes that they made in life. They can relate to young adults in a way Khamisa says that he cannot. Their life experiences can relate to the feeling of being a lost, hopeless, and isolated. Tony is scheduled to be paroled in 2027, when he will be 40 years old.

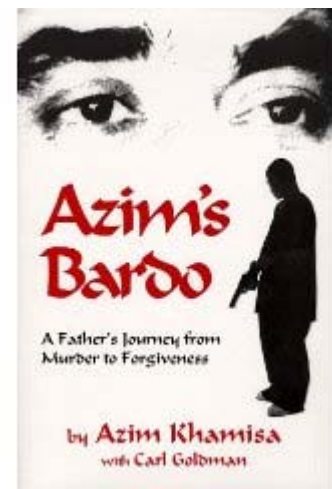
I agree with Khamisa that we all have an opportunity to study ourselves and our children to determine what is it in our society that causes us to be 'so mean, hateful, full of rage, and constantly believing in destroying people, objects, and ideas that we don't appreciate'. It is worth the challenge to watch television without the sound and observe how many negative messages are in two commercial hours of evening programming. Take time to check out the movie offerings. Which ones net the highest income? Listen to the songs on the radio. What messages are being relayed? We are a morally poor, spiritually bankrupt, and a corrupt society. Is this why some countries balk at the idea of American products?



While driving home Todd and I took a look at the reasons for our economy faltering. Does greed, lying, stealing, exaggerating costs, finding loopholes, abandoning financial discretion, blaming others, misleading investors, hiding fine print, rushing the sale, withholding the truth, passing the buck, cronyism, self righteousness, lack of spending limits and budgets, Ponzi schemes, hidden interest rates, and hidden fees all seem too familiar?

That is because these are the basis for which many American corporations are driven to achieve their business practices. No, not all Americans are doing this, but someone in the ivory castle has pulled the wrong levers and we are not only suffering in the United States, but causing others to suffer throughout the world.

It may seem odd that financing the death penalty has come on the table, not because we spiritually know that it is wrong, but because financially, we just cannot afford to spend \$140K - \$170K more in court costs, housing inmates and providing "special facilities". We were told to multiply this number by 621 inmates. Only seven on death row are from families of means who can pay these costs. The



rest are poor, mentally ill, or completely indigent. Over half (65%) are African Americans. “Don’t tell me race doesn’t matter”, Khamisa declared.

Nevertheless, deep inside we can only hope that Khamisa is right. The universe is teaching us that the transformative power of forgiveness is a lesson, that taking someone else’s life for whatever revengeful feeling we may have requires a spiritual re-evaluation. We are not God.

I am looking forward to Khamisa’s accepting my invitation to come to the Santa Clarita Valley so we can hear him firsthand.

REFERENCES AND NOTES:

NOTE: Charles Ogletree, 54, is a prominent Harvard Law Professor, founder and executive director of Harvard Law’s Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice. He was a mentor to Michelle and Barack Obama when they were Harvard students and is part of the Obama Administration’s inner circle. He is known for his frankness and outspokenness regarding legal theory, complexities in legal issues, racism in America and civil rights. He is often referred to by colleagues as “Tree” .

Quinn lives in Dutchess County, New York and is a wife and mother of three young children. She is a radio host on WHVW 950AM, excellent speaker, teacher, workshop facilitator and an associate minister at the Interfaith Temple in New York City (www.jillianquinn.com).

Khamisa Is CEO and Founder of Sovereign Capital Markets, Inc. He has conducted business ventures in Africa, Middle East, Europe, Asia and the Americas. Mr. Khamisa was educated in England in Mathematics & Finance and is a well-traveled multilingual U.S. citizen residing in La Jolla, California. He received the Search for Common Ground's prestigious international award for building Peaceful Communities, along with Archbishop Desmond Tutu. In 2006, he received the Circle of Courage Award from Reclaiming Youth International. Azim is also the recipient of the California Peace Prize.

For more information visit: www.tkf.org; <http://www.azimkhamisa.com> and <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=4833368n>. Also, check out his other book, [From Murder to Forgiveness](#).

MINERVA LEAH WILLIAMS, is a freelance writer and enjoys reading on subjects that stimulate the gray brain matter. Formerly of the LA Times, she resides in Santa Clarita Valley with her life partner Todd Hoover, a computer technician. They both oversee several websites and enjoy writing on interesting people and topics.