

## 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 third interview in this series is with Dr. Edith Eva Eger, 'The Ballerina of Auschwitz', famous psychotherapist and author of 'The Choice. Embrace the Possible'.



# I turned Auschwitz into a classroom

*'If we do not permit ourselves to grieve over our sorrows, our wounds and disappointments, we are doomed to keep reliving them. You can find freedom in accepting what happened. Freedom means gathering the strength to break down the walls of the prison, brick by brick.'*

AUTHORS: MARNIX REIJMERINK, KLAARTJE VAN GASTEREN & JAKOB VAN WIELINK

These words may sound like a platitude from a book. And they do come from a book, written by a woman who survived Auschwitz and the horrors of the camp in which she lost both her parents and rebuilt her life brick by brick, by breaking down the walls of her trauma. She became a renowned psychotherapist who in turn invites others to embrace their past and find healing. We read her book *De Keuze. Leven in vrijheid*, which became an international bestseller within a few weeks of publication and we were *stupéfait*. Her book is a radical appeal to live our lives not as victims, but as free people, unshackled. We called each other and said: 'we want to meet her!' That was the catalyst for our flight to San Diego and the first of a series of in-depth meetings about personal leadership on which we report in this magazine this year.

We meet Edith Eger and her assistant Katie at her home in La Jolla on a sunny Tuesday morning. We are warmly welcomed and take a seat in her living room that overlooks the bay of San Diego. This 91-year old woman's energy is palpable and makes a big impression. When asked why she was prepared to meet us, she is very clear: 'I receive everyone who wants to meet me and assume it will be a healing encounter for everyone.' 'People do not come to me, they are sent to me'. In those first few minutes, we could not have guessed that the interview we flew to the United States for would turn into a six-hour meeting.

## What no one can take away from you

Eger was sixteen years old when she was deported to Auschwitz. A 'normal' teenager who

lost more and more freedom in the months preceding deportation, yet still kept focusing her attention on the possibilities after the war. 'I did not know about Auschwitz. I knew nothing about such a place'. Her parents were murdered the day they arrived, while she and her sister were imprisoned in another part of the camp. Edith Eger was overwhelmed with grief over the death of her parents and, for the first few days, she searched anxiously for something to hold onto, which was virtually impossible in that environment. Thinking of her mother, she finds comfort in a sentence that will remain with her for the rest of her life: 'No one can take from you what you think and feel inside.' This sentence served as a mantra throughout her entire incarceration in Auschwitz. It also gave her a lot of strength on the death march to Mauthausen.

### There is always a choice

Having being separated from her parents at the gate, Edith Eger and her sister were stripped of their clothes and had their heads shaven along with hundreds of others. When a naked Magda looked at her, still holding locks of hair in her hands and asked 'How do I look? Tell me the truth.' Eger realised she had a choice. This was an opportunity to give an inconceivable answer, to tell the truth without causing pain. Staring into her sister's blue eyes, she spoke the only truth she could. 'Your eyes. They are so beautiful. I never noticed them when they were covered by all that hair.' It was the first time she realised she had a choice: 'to focus on what we have lost, or to focus on what we still have.' In the safety of her internal world, Edith Eger discovered the seed of freedom of choice, which is still the most important theme in her life and her work.

This inner freedom to choose how you react to the circumstances life throws at you forms the crux of Eger's message to the world. It is a message of love that beckons us to enjoy every

moment of our lives. She encourages us to live in the now - not to forget the past, but not to be stuck in it either. Not to fight or flee from our past, but to confront it. 'Auschwitz is the greatest gift I ever received in my life. I learned everything I needed to know for the rest of my life there' she tells us as she looks at us with an internalised smile. She also spoke to us via Skype later and added: 'I turned Auschwitz into a classroom. An inner place of learning and discovery. Through all the pain.'

### True liberation

When Edith Eger was 53 years old, by then a renowned psychologist with a successful practice, she flew to Germany at the invitation of the US army to give a presentation to

soldiers on post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSS), which she refuses to refer to as a disorder). She

had not returned to Germany since the war. Encouraged by her husband Béla, she returned to the country of the man who wanted to kill her. Her husband said: 'if you don't go, it means Hitler won the war.' It was this journey that also took her back to the place that was her prison and healed her.

Eger received her PhD in clinical psychology in 1978. After years of study, she opened her own practice and soon realised she would not achieve professional success with theories and techniques. She realised that 'it had to flow from the whole, authentic me, the me who was vulnerable and curious, the me who accepted myself.' This realisation challenged her to enter into a new relationship with her trauma: 'it was not something to conceal, to suppress, to ignore, to deny. It was a source from which I could draw a deeper source of understanding and intuition out of respect for my patients, their pain and the road to recovery.' In retrospect, she describes this boon as follows, 'not only did I survive, it gave me the gift of being able to coach others.'

"No one can take from you what you think and feel inside"

### **Our potential is concealed within our vulnerability**

Sitting on the sofa with this strong, vulnerable woman, all three of us are overwhelmed with emotion. It is difficult to comprehend that someone could view the traumatic experience of a concentration camp with gentleness, acceptance and even curiosity. When asked whether there are people who hold that perspective against her, she answers: "Yes, there are. And they have their own story about what happened and what they experienced. All I can say is that I tell and share my story the way I choose to look at it: with love.

In her view, love is the ability to let go. For Eger, the essence of letting go is about abandoning the wish that things had been different in the past. And abandoning that wish, and the forgiveness inextricably linked to it, can only happen if you choose it, if you exercise your freedom of choice. The freedom to say: I no longer want to be a victim, I want to live a full and joyful life. Eger calls on us to reclaim our innocence and to leave the guilt of painful and traumatic events with the people who inflicted them upon us. We need not be victims of our past.

### **When you put trust in someone, it is reciprocated**

Meanwhile, it is time to eat and Edith Eger invites us to lunch at her favourite Italian restaurant. She decides to drive us there herself. And before we know it, we are sitting in her large American car together, being driven by this tiny but energetic and courageous old lady. When we get out, without saying anything, she grabs Marnix's hand and crosses the road with him. He is initially a little blindsided by this, but soon regains his composure. The trust she puts in him is reciprocated. It is an image of an elderly woman being manoeuvred through the traffic by a young man. But the question is: who is leading whom? The casualness with which she attaches herself reveals her secret: curious, playful love. And by living her life this way, she is an inspiration not only



### **About Edith Eger**

Hungarian-born Dr. Edith Eva Eger was a teenager when she was deported to Auschwitz in 1944 with her parents and older sister. Both her parents were murdered on the day they arrived at the camp. Edith's courage kept both her and her sister alive. Towards the end of the war, Edith was transferred along with other prisoners to Austria, where an American soldier saw her hand moving amongst a pile of corpses on 4 May 1945. After the war, Edith went to live in Czechoslovakia, where she married. She moved to the United States in 1949. She graduated as a psychologist from the University of Texas, El Paso in 1969, after which she obtained her PhD at William Beaumont Army Medical Center in Fort Bliss, Texas.

Dr. Eger – at the age of 91 – still runs a clinical psychology practice in La Jolla, California. In addition, she is attached to the University of California in San Diego. Edith Eger specialises in working with war trauma victims in the US army. Viktor Frankl was one of her great mentors and secure bases who encouraged her to fulfil her dreams.

to us, but to the world. Her message is that you cannot always control the circumstances in your life, but you can control how you respond to those circumstances. 'You can only be right for you!'

### What is your calling?

We can learn a lot about taking ownership of our lives from Edith Eger. She calls on us to consider our calling and embrace our unique self. What are you here to do in this life?

What is your unique contribution? And what hurdles do you need to overcome to live out the full potential of your calling? A meeting that triggers intense emotions for the three of us because it touches the very essence of our own calling: supporting people in the most personal aspects of their development. After lunch, Edith takes us to the next interview in San Diego - with Azim Khamisa, a man whose son was murdered and who chose the path of forgiveness. This the first time they are meeting each other face to face, but they are soulmates. More about this meeting in the next edition of this magazine.

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