



Conscious Life presents

TRAUMA SUPER CONFERENCE

Empathy at the heart of healing

Guest: Vinny Ferraro

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[00:00:09] Jaia Bristow

Hello, and welcome back to this Trauma Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am very pleased to be welcoming Vinny Ferraro. Welcome, Vinny.

Vinny Ferraro

Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Jaia Bristow

It's great to have you on board. So Vinny is a leader in the field of mindfulness, specifically working with educators and incarcerated populations. So this is a topic we haven't touched on on this conference before, so I'm really excited about the conversation we're going to have. Do you want to start by just telling us a little bit more about your story and what got you into this line of work?

Vinny Ferraro

Sure. Yeah. I guess growing up, I can't remember a time when I didn't know what prison was because my father was locked up for a long time. So I spent time with my mom on the bus going back and forth to see my pops. So this is a population that was dear and close to my heart and kind of one of the populations that I feel like is forgotten about.

You know, it's easy to just not, they don't enter consciousness as much because we don't see it. People are warehoused away. So I guess that got me interested in this population and in particular, trying to serve this population.

Jaia Bristow

Interesting. And so when you say you serve this population, what do you do exactly?

Vinny Ferraro

Yeah, it's a good question because there's a lot of ways to frame that. You could say I'm an educator, that I teach mindfulness or social emotional learning, but really, I'm doing one thing in there Jaia. I'm trying to be in a relationship. Right. I don't care if they know what mindfulness is when I leave. I want them to know that we're in a relationship, that I care about them, that we're in

this in some way together. Because that's the main agent of change, is relationship. When I look back on school, I don't remember much of math or geography, but I remember Miss Harder, my second grade teacher because she used to come and put her hand on my shoulder once in a while, right.

[00:02:40]

So the agent of change is actually the relationship. So when I go in there, the lesson plan, I try to do what I'm we all have our little lesson plans or our agenda or what we hope is going to happen, but I try to have that be very secondary to the relationships that we're forming. So I try to stand at the door and shake every person's hand and look them in the eyes, welcome them into the space because we're going to go on this ride together. None of us know exactly where it's going to go, and we're all co creating it. So I like to stay in touch with the mystery of what it is. Where can we go if we just get real with each other? So we try to create that kind of high trust environment. So I think that's what I'm doing.

Jaia Bristow

It's beautiful and I really appreciate what you're saying about it's not so much about having a label of mindfulness or achieving your agenda or teaching things in a certain way and coming in and ticking off your checklist. It's really about just being present and relating and having that human aspect, especially for a group of people that, as you say, is often forgotten by society. I think there are a lot of groups of people in society that are sort of seen as inferior or try to push to the side, but this is a group where it's easier to forget because like you say, they're literally locked away.

And so we talk about all these different types of trauma on this conference. Big T trauma, small T trauma, trauma as the holding environment, how trauma is perpetuated, trauma cycles. There's all this language around it and here you are doing something very human with people. And again, I keep using the word people because I want people to remember these are human beings we're talking about who have lived through a lot of trauma, and have sometimes also perpetuated a lot of trauma. And so why do you feel that this work is so important? Why did you choose of course, you have your own history with incarcerated populations, but why do you feel that it's important? Why did you choose to pursue this line of work?

Vinny Ferraro

Yeah, so I shared a little bit about my family and in my own history, even being a throwaway kid basically, right? They locked me up too, they just kind of like... If you don't fit into the normative culture, if you don't know how to sit in a classroom or follow all the rules, then generally they have a very punitive mindset. That's really hard, it's hard for people, it's hard for us because everybody's kind of doing the best they can. And I kind of feel like just about every person that enters the incarcerated population has been traumatized in some way. And if they haven't been on some off chance, they will be when they're there.

Jaia Bristow

Definitely.

[00:06:13] Vinny Ferraro

So who needs the practice of meeting themselves with care more than this population? It would be really hard to find a population that needs it more, you know? And then, you know it doesn't pay much. It's hard to deal with these institutions. These are very dehumanizing institutions so it's a real challenge to stay in relationship with these institutions because it's a revolving door. So you might have a good relationship with the people running that institution, but they can only stay a few years because the burnout rate is so high.

And then it's just like a cycle over and over. So I've been going inside since about 1987. Very, very challenging to sustain that kind of duration. So I think the need is great and then the program is... What I hear from the people on the inside is that they're very refreshed by what we bring in. It's refreshing, they say, because we're just in there and we're just being authentic and trying to meet them where they're at, right?

And that's different from the checklists and the agenda because there's always a transmission. We just happen to know we have this intrinsic awareness, whether somebody cares about us, whether somebody wants to fight us, whether somebody wants to kiss us, right? We always know, there's something that's ineffable in presence and it's something that can't be found anywhere else, what's found in presence. So here we are. We come in, we have our lesson plan and we have our curriculum and how we're going to hold this.

And then we sit down together and we find ourselves in the present moment and we try to cultivate this feeling of relational awareness more than the practice of mindfulness, which is maybe like closing your eyes and focusing on something. We talk about the awareness that's in the relational field because that's more of what our classes look like.

Because where has most of the harm happened? With people, with other people. So of course that's where the healing is going to come from too. So how do we stitch together a safe space so we could fall back into a we? Because that's one of the really hard parts of working in these kinds of populations is it really feels like you're alone.

Jaia Bristow

I mean it's incredible what you're saying and it really resonates because like you say, like the relational aspect, one of the many things I've learned hosting these events is just how trauma is created by your holding environment, right? Which means the people who are there to support you, the people whether they create that safe, supportive holding environment or not.

And that's also how trauma healing happens. Again, it's the people whether there is a safe holding environment and that's how trauma can be perpetuated and cycles can continue or that's how healing can begin. And I'm really curious, you were talking a little bit about your own experience and about like you were talking about the punitive side. Right?

And I'm really curious to go more into this relationship between trauma and punishment, especially because, again, bringing in the human. And so maybe we can start with your own experiences and then we can also talk about obviously how that applies to the prison system.

[00:10:38] Vinny Ferraro

Yeah, that's such a big subject.

Jaia Bristow

I know. Feel free to share as much as you're comfortable sharing.

Vinny Ferraro

Yeah. What's the big picture? Right? My father was born in 1945. So what kind of modalities therapeutically might have he been exposed to? Not much. So then that rolls onto how he's going to raise me. That cycle of trying to hate myself into becoming a better person. I mean, that's just rampant with people my age, right? And so that cycle continues, sometimes he would say to me, he'd be like, I should have been much harder on you.

And it's like, don't worry pops, I picked up that mantle, you know what I mean? But I don't want to. So we always talk about breaking the cycle. We hear all this talk about breaking cycles, but how do we break that cycle where we just think, no I just need to be tougher on myself, you know? And if I can just be more disciplined and more persistent. You know, when I think about the cycles being broken, I think about the heart practices of compassion, of kindness.

They say when we read these great books that have been coming out about trauma in the last ten years, that it happens in the absence of an empathetic witness. That's when trauma happens. So I want to be that empathetic witness to what's happening inside me. And then we get to be that for each other too. One of my friends, he put it so beautifully. He said, I always noticed that he could always meet me where I was at.

And I was like, dude, how are you doing that? How do you just always meet me where I'm at? He said, look, I love you and wherever you're at I'm going to be there singing Happy Birthday wherever you cut the cake. That's what he said. And I just love that. And I think that's what we're doing inside. It's like we can't imagine what these folks are holding. So we start with that humility, right?

Jaia Bristow

Yeah.

Vinny Ferraro

So before we began, I did my little ritual where I, you know, it looks like I'm sitting here alone, but I'm not. I work with, I don't know, maybe 150,000 people over the last 20 or 30 years. I imagine them just circled up around me. Everything that I've learned from all these folks, they were so generous with me. I didn't go to school, I didn't go to college, but they were very patient with me and generous over the years and so I imagine them holding the space.

So when you talk about holding the space, they're holding the space with me, and those are the shoulders I'm standing on. And so I get to be the one sitting in front of you today talking about these things, but this is not my yeah, I'm standing on a lot of shoulders. One of the things we do is we don't surprise them. We try to tell them, all right, these are my ideas about what's going to happen. This is how long we're going to do something. This is, you know, we want to really let them

know as much as we can about what's going to happen in this field for the next hour, for the next ten minutes.

[00:14:49]

And we always offer them invitations, not commands, right? There's enough people coming at them and telling them what to do. So all of these ways we're creating that high trust environment together. We're stitching together this we that we can come back into. So when we talk about that holding environment, we get to hold that together and ask them, okay, what do you each need? You know what I mean? We're going to set up a normative culture but then there's the needs that you all are going to come with, right? Yeah.

Jaia Bristow

I mean, it's beautiful what you're sharing, that element of empathy of offering the empathy that they haven't been offered in their lives, but also empathy that maybe you didn't have in your life. And I hear that cycle that you're talking about off the punitive cycles and I think that's so common, especially in male relationships where we see it father and son relationships.

This idea that's now been labeled toxic masculinity, for example, which is a specific type of masculinity where it's this idea that to be a man you have to be tough and strong and have all those qualities and therefore, that you not just passing it down and then inheriting it and having that voice in your own head of this is the way things should be.

This is how I need to show up in the world. This is how I need to be perceived and so to have that and to instead approach with empathy is really, really beautiful and I can imagine really transformative. Again, bringing in that relational element and I also hear the humility I think is so important, and humility rather than humiliation, which sounds very similar and it can be easy to go from one to the other at times, but really that humility.

And again, towards oneself, not humiliating oneself but showing up with humility and offering that, using that quality with others. That what you were talking about, about standing on the shoulders of giants and bringing into the space everyone you've worked with, everyone you've learnt from that it's not this egoic, I do this work and I am great and everyone bow down to me, but it's like, oh, this is what I'm bringing into the field.

And I've learnt this through all the relationships I've had, through all the work I've done with these people. I'm learning and receiving as much as I'm giving. And this kind of exchange that you're talking about I think is really beautiful and that kind of, I guess, gratitude that can come in with that exchange. So I think these are all really important qualities and yeah, I really appreciate the way you talk about it as well, the way you demonstrate, I think, those qualities yourself as you talk about this work. So thank you.

Vinny Ferraro

Yeah, thanks for that reflection. Yeah, so much can be felt when we're given permission to feel. There's so much here and we talk about this masculinity piece. I have never failed to be amazed by what happens in that room when we set it up, and then because a lot of it is around courage. A lot of the sharing, it's like, if we're going to get vulnerable, if we're going to get real, if we're going to talk about some of what's happening inside us, that's a courageous act.

[00:18:42]

And so vulnerability is a courageous act. So when we begin to step into these spaces together, and there's a permission to be real, to be witnessed, to be together. Those are very meaningful feelings in a place where you can feel so alone and so dehumanized and so othered. I'll say one more thing about it. There's that African proverb that I feel like I've seen time and time again, internally and externally, which is, if they're young or not initiated into a village, they'll burn it down just to feel its warmth.

Jaia Bristow

Wow.

Vinny Ferraro

And I gotta say that I've seen that in myself as a wild kid run the streets and inside, right? And it's like when we talk about this, you loop back around about how we're meeting ourselves and how we're holding ourselves. I think I've seen the kids that I used to do a lot of work in the juvenile system, and the kids that need love the most, they would ask for it in the most unlovable ways, you know?

Jaia Bristow

Yeah.

Vinny Ferraro

And I know that about myself. Those parts of me that are just so easy to exile, just feel like there's no home for you here. Again, that cycle of punitive, of pushing away, of avoidance, of resistance. One of the things I like to do with these folks is do some of Joanna Macy's work around the ancestors. So we walk back through time and it's like, how many of the men in my family struggled with self forgiveness or self judgment or anxiety or stress?

And they say that trauma travels through families until someone's willing to feel it. So it's like, wow what would it be like if I could really break this cycle so that I don't pass it on? I have a six year old boy, my son, Valentino. And I waited till I was 50 because I didn't think I could heal. I didn't want to pass anything on that wasn't helpful. And I wasn't raised in a conventional sense by my parents.

So, anyway, some more thoughts about that. Bringing that big heart to this work that we're doing, you know? Sometimes we'll talk about the practice as being a practice of kind, awareness, mindfulness, and that takes great heart. And the courage that I see in the folks inside has just been I am sure I've gotten more than I've given. Yeah. 100%.

Jaia Bristow

It's so beautiful and the way you talk about the heart, about that courage to be vulnerable about, and what comes up for me is the word compassion as well. That compassion towards oneself and towards others because, as you say, often those who most need love are the ones who will ask for it in the most unlovable or unloving ways. And it's again that's through trauma we're starting to I

think... And that's one of the really positives about this kind of work, these kinds of conferences and summits and the way trauma is becoming talked about more in the mainstream is that people have a better understanding of that, certain reactions and responses.

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For example, what you were talking about, the rejecting before feeling rejected, for example, the holding people at arm's length. It comes from a fear or from a habit of having been rejected. It doesn't come from a bad place and we often hear like hurt people, hurt people and how do we break that cycle and all of that kind of thing. And of course it starts with oneself, right? We can do this work and trauma healing work on oneself, but we can also have compassion for others.

We can show up with empathy when someone clearly, if we've done work on ourselves and we have a better understanding of what other people are experiencing, then we can show up with empathy and compassion and heart. And I love all the things you were saying about, especially when you're working with people in prisons or incarcerated populations around, really offering invites rather than telling people, having that attunement setting the space so that it feels safe and there are no surprises because I think probably a lot of them have had enough surprises in their life right now.

And again, surprise can deregulate the nervous system which activates trauma. So there's all these very, this understanding and so not everyone has the opportunity to break the cycles themselves until they have.

And it comes back to this relational piece you're talking about until they have someone that can offer them the sort of kindness and compassion and empathy and see that and not continue to demonize them and perpetuate the cycle of their rejecting because they're afraid to feel rejected and so then they get rejected and it becomes a self fulfilling prophecy, et cetera, et cetera. So I really appreciate everything you're sharing today.

Vinny Ferraro

Thank you. Yeah, I think it was really born out of my own feelings of just using the term throwaway kid because when I was a teenager I was homeless and strung out and then incarcerated and it was really difficult, you know, it sucked. And I really felt like there wasn't anybody that had my back in this world, you know what I mean? It was just like, wow, you're outside of you don't have any relations, right? That's how it felt. That wasn't true, but that's just how it felt.

So it's like, well, how do we come back into relationship? What's the most important thing here when you've lost your sense of value? That's what we're doing is I want to reflect value back at them. So in this relationship, we're talking about relationship being the main agent of change. What are you doing in that relationship? Okay, well, we can take a kind of universal positive regard, that we know through a therapeutic presence, but we want to just keep reflecting value back.

No matter what you've done, no matter what's been done to you, there's an intrinsic value that's uncorruptible, that's unturnishable. And so that's what we want to kind of keep reflecting back at them so that they can cultivate that feeling of coming back into the homecoming it feels like for me, all those exiled parts of myself that were not okay, that were kind of pushed away, it's like, okay, can we come back in? We let all of that back in and say, I can hold this. We can hold this together, right? Yeah.

[00:27:18] Jaia Bristow

And it's particularly important and also I think, difficult, that sense of value you're talking about when all of society, all the messages you're receiving from society is that you have no value, that you are bad, that there is something wrong with you.

And when you've received that from your family, and you receive that from society, and you talked about having been homeless, I think that on house populations are another very similar example where there is that messaging, and whereas there is that belief from people off, lesser than off, unvalued, not just undervalued. But it's like you have not just you have no values, you are a burden, as often you know. And again, disabled communities often receive those same messages. And there's lots of other communities, I'm not going to start naming them all, but I'm curious for you.

You've talked a bit about now you've mentioned having grown up with a father who was in prison, of not having traditional parents and upbringing, of being a throwaway kid, as you say, of being homeless, of being incarcerated yourself, of all these things. So what worked for you? Where did the shift come in for you to help you?

And you say it comes from not just you and your father and his father and who knows how many generations before that. So you inherited a lot of intergenerational stuff, and then you were playing out the sort of patterns and cycles of trauma that are so often seen. So what worked for you? What was your story? What was your shift?

Vinny Ferraro

Yeah, I think it was when I was 20 years old, I was about 110 pounds, laying in a crack house, wanting to die and somebody walked in, and it was a person I hated, and it was a person that I wanted to kill and I had a gun, and it was my father. And he had gotten out of prison and had gotten sober, and he came to find me and I really didn't have a lot of love for this man, and he helped me get out of that situation.

So the person that kind of introduced me to that world also introduced me to the exit out of that world. And after sweating and cocaine psychosis and everything that has to happen for you to come up out of that kind of realm, he introduced me to service work. It was probably the first time I felt value as a human being when I was sharing my story and felt like I could be a part of something beautiful. Like it's not all bad, it's not all just a hell realm of crime and drugs and outlaw and criminality and manipulation. So I think that's what did it.

He asked me to tell my story and I started sharing and the people, I could see them looking at me through a different lens that I had never been looked at and so just a reflection on their faces of me sharing what it was like for me helped me come back to understanding that I had value, that what happened to me was separate from who I was. That was an important thing for me to understand. So I think that's what did it and then I kind of got really interested in that flavor of being of service to this world instead of just how I was raised, which is a much different framework.

[00:31:51] Jaia Bristow

Wow. Well, thank you for sharing so openly about your own story and your journey and what you said really touched me about that, seeing that what you had done was different to who you were as a person.

Your value wasn't about what you'd done and I think that that's so important that we sometimes struggle to separate the two and I also really appreciate you talking about how you know your father, who you had so much hatred for and who was the one who sort of introduced you to that lifestyle and who you blamed it sounds like in that moment for where you were was also the person who helped lead you out of it and who helped you get the support.

And so it comes back to what we were talking about earlier, about the importance of relationships, right? And that it can be either the same relationships that cause the trauma can heal us, or it can be new relationships because often most relationships, we're just repeating our early relationships, we know, but with other people, right? And so we have the same patterns. And so just the importance of, yes, you're a mindfulness teacher, and we hear a lot in the world of mindfulness and other modalities about finding those resources in yourself.

And we also sometimes need that external support and that that's okay. And that's crucial, in fact. And then I'm really touched as well the way you talk about the service, that by giving service that's where you found value, that's where you started seeing yourself reflected differently. And that that's what then inspired you to continue the journey you're on off giving back and that you say now that when you give you receive so much in giving as well.

Vinny Ferraro

Yeah, I feel like the luckiest person I know. I just can't imagine the conditions that I find myself in are unbelievable. From where I grew up, from what I had imagined, I just thought I would go to prison like the other men in my family. That's what I was raised to do. I was sneaking heroin into prisons when I was ten years old, so of course I thought, okay, they're readying me for becoming a man and entering the big leagues and then I would have that rite of passage.

But it wasn't meant for me. I was a sensitive kid, you know what I mean? I wasn't hard. My father bought me a weight bench, and I hung my clothes on it, you know what I mean? I was like, you know, a sensitive boy in an unsensitive world or insensitive world, you know? And it's funny to see my son because he's very sensitive, and it's like, wow, I can see that cycle too.

And it's like, well, what happens if that's not stomped out? What happens if that's just given free expression? It's very exciting to me to see who he might become if it's nurtured because there's a lot of gifts to that sensitivity. Yeah, but what's the biggest frame we can hold in terms of meeting with people, and seeing their humanity, their wholeness. In these incarcerated populations we give away a lot of our humanity just to belong. I have to cut out large parts of myself to survive.

So belonging is part of what we're doing as well. We're trying to invite people back into belonging, to seeing themselves, even in that, when I was talking about the ancestor work, it's like, okay, who do you want to be in this timeline?

[00:36:15] Jaia Bristow

Yeah.

Vinny Ferraro

When I got to California, I left the East Coast where I was raised, and I got to California, and I saw surfers and people in dayglos, it was 1990. I was riding a Harley, and I saw dolphins and seals and shit. I was like I started walking toward this phone booth and I was ready to rip into my family. Why didn't you tell me I could live anywhere? And as the phone was ringing the phone booth way before cell phones, right? And as the phone was ringing Jaia, I realized, no don't be mad at them for not telling you. They don't know yet. That's who you are in this timeline.

There's just this moment of insight as the phone was ringing, and I could feel the anger, and now it's like, oh no, you're calling them with information. And so that kind of anger or the blame that we talked about around my dad, it was just like, oh, no, you can shift that. We get to decide who we want to bring to this moment. What do we want to express? Because if each moment conditions the next, then how we are in this moment is probably of the utmost importance.

But that's the legacy that gets passed on. What are we expressing in this moment? How we tend to this moment matters, right? That's what mindfulness teaches us above all else. Have you ever seen the X-Men series?

Jaia Bristow

Some of it.

Vinny Ferraro

Yeah, there's that one guy, Magneto, and he could control metal, and he could just walk out onto thin air and metal just comes underneath his feet. Sometimes that's how I think about mindfulness. Whatever direction or orientation that I'm taking opens up a world of possibilities. So if it's positive and it's of the heart, then compassion, kindness, empathy, all kinds of worlds and possibilities open up.

And if it's toward fear, doubt, regret, then all kinds of worlds open up as I just walk into my life. So when we take care of our mental hygiene, okay, how am I meeting this moment? What legacy do I want to pass on from this moment to the next? Then it becomes exciting to see, oh wow, I do have some influence of how I meet this moment, and sometimes I find myself under the influence of regret, doubt, fear, any of these more afflictive, more negative states, but they can remind me of who I'm not.

You know what I mean? It's not that the thought occurred that's the problem, it's that I mistake it for who I am. Thoughts are just arising, I don't know where they're coming from, I don't know where they're going, but I get to align myself with them or not. So that becomes an exciting thing for me when we're in a group to explore together, because a lot of times I want to talk to the management, like, who's running the show here? You know that feeling?

[00:40:01] Jaia Bristow

And I'm really touched by everything you've just shared. There's a few things that really come to mind. It's number one, every time you give me a little tidbit of your history, I'm like, I just want to know more. It sounds like you've had a very traumatic but also very fascinating story and what really stands out for me is that with everything you've shared and I'm sure there is a lot you haven't shared that you refer to yourself as saying you feel like one of the luckiest men alive.

And it reminds me of when I interviewed Martin Aylward for this conference who I know you know, and we were talking about being grounded in goodness. He's also a meditation and mindfulness teacher and how so often we can get attached to the trauma story, to the victimization, to the poor me, or to any story, and it doesn't matter how big or small the trauma is.

So in your case, it sounds like you have a lot of experiences of what there would be no discussing or debating about whether it's traumatic experiences and then other people have maybe smaller traumatic experiences or different traumatic experiences. But A, we see through everything we learn on this conference that often it's not just the event themselves, but the holding environment and the people in one's life.

And B, we see how it is possible to break the cycle not just of perpetuating trauma in one's life, but break the cycle in oneself of clinging onto the story of I am a victim, life is horrible, is difficult for me poor me. And instead have that shift that you clearly have had where you feel grateful, you feel like you're giving back and receiving so much, where it's not, poor me my whole life has been terrible.

It's I am lucky because this is where I am right now and I have access to these resources and I'm able to give back and share and have these qualities and be in the present moment and all the different topics we've talked about in this chat. And another thing that really stands out for me is when you were talking about that moment in the phone booth of calling your family and feeling so much frustration and rage and how dare you not tell me that there was another way and then suddenly realizing, oh, they didn't know.

You have that information that is new to them and it makes me think about how often, so often in life we have projections on everyone we encounter, but especially on our family, on our caregivers, where we put them on these pedestals. And whether we love them or we hate them, we have these unrealistic expectations that these people somehow know everything and should have taught us everything. And yet these people, however great or not great, however lovable or hateable, they are flawed humans with their own stuff.

And whether we have families where there is obvious trauma or families where in theory all seems like they have their shit together, everyone has stuff they're working on, everyone is a flawed human and when we can have that shift that you have of seeing that, oh, they didn't intentionally not tell me about the fact that there was California and dolphins, it was that they just didn't know.

And there is so much that people don't know and so we can only pass on what we do know. And so if all we know is trauma and hurt and ways of being that are harmful, we'll pass that on. And then there's other ways and so you've learned other ways. You've processed this information, and now you can pass on these other ways of being to your kid. And the way you were saying about that sensitivity, that was never allowed in you, it was something you had an inherent quality. And when it was finally allowed in the way that you started working in acts of service and then that was

allowed. But now you have a kid who's growing up without being allowed and cultivated and it's really beautiful to hear and see all these shifts.

[00:44:30] Vinny Ferraro

Yeah, I think it's like, remember Paul Tillich? You know that name. He said something, he said, the first duty of love is to listen and I like that as a framework when we go inside, like I said, we don't know what folks are holding. They certainly weren't asked to hold it, right? It just happened to them, right? There's so many stories that come flooding in these moments.

We did a graduation in Oakland a couple of years ago at the end of ten weeks, and this guy, he hadn't said much, he's kind of chilling in the back of the room. And it was the graduation so it's a big, big event everybody's jovial and everybody's going to have a moment on the mic and he doesn't say much. I said, come on man, tell me one thing you liked about the class and he's just like, I like that jacket, dude. I like your jacket.

And I'm just like bro, you're going to have to come more real than that, bro. Come on man, all the stuff we put in this room, I mean, you know somebody had lost somebody in the course, you know, in the ten weeks my brother had been killed.

So we had been through some shit together, you know. I said, yeah, give me a little more, bro and he said, well I've been in this building for four years and I don't live, my family's not around here so I haven't had a visitor. And we live in a controlled environment, temperature wise. I don't have a jacket, but you come to see me every week and that jacket walks through freedom and I could smell freedom on that jacket. That's why I like that jacket.

I'll be over here being quiet, man. You know what I mean? You're just kind of humbled by what happens in that room where you realize, man, it really comes down to that quality of presence. Can we be together in this great mystery? Even with these walls that are so high, right? They don't let them see the sky. They don't let them see the horizon. They don't let them see space. We can nurture each other even within the realms of those populations. The things I've seen happen in that room, one young man came in. His hands were just bald up. I hadn't seen him before, I've been going to this place for years.

He just turned 18, so maybe he was going to age out of that population. Everybody was kind of acquiescing, you can feel that vibe that this guy had a lot of power in the room even though he hadn't been there before. He shared, he'd just come from his lawyer and they offered him a deal and it was life without parole. He was just sitting there. I didn't know what to do, you know what I mean? I didn't know what to say. I could tell him a story about how there's programs inside.

I could maybe share something about my mother's wake and seeing my father shackled down. I could share something moving or I just sat there in silence, and everybody else sat there in silence. That quality of presence that we had been cultivating was enough and over the next half hour, his hands unballled out of fists, and he shared how scared he was. And he didn't have to do that moment alone because of the courage of those young people in that meeting, that group together. I remember leaving, and he was just standing there.

The cells were about to open, he was just standing there with his fist up. He turned and he said, don't forget me. I don't get to bring in a lot of people, we don't have people come and check out the classes. That's not what they're there for, they're there for the people that are in those places.

But I always remember him. It's not about what we're saying, it's not advice, it's not the words, it's the relationships. Are you willing to sit with me in this?

[00:50:04] Jaia Bristow

I think there's first of all, feeling deeply touched by these sharing by these people you're bringing in and what you were talking about, about just the courage needed to be vulnerable in those moments and the fact that you know, you were talking about how often in these institutions people have to give away so much of themselves to belong because these sort of moments of vulnerability are seen as weaknesses.

And I think even outside of incarcerated populations, I think a lot of us can relate to giving parts of ourselves up to belong, right? And what you're talking about, about this sort of actively rehumanizing, rather than all the dehumanizing which is so important with these people, these humans, these groups of people that are pushed to the sidelines, whether we're talking about incarcerated populations, about homeless populations, about disabled communities, about black communities, especially in the US.

But in other places as well, about this is being filmed just a couple of days after another shooting in an LGBTQ plus club, which was aimed at killing trans people. There's all these people, these human beings in the world that are being dismissed, killed, belittled, dehumanized. And so what you're talking about is just bringing in presence, empathy, human qualities to sort of rehumanize and that, in doing so, sometimes that you don't even need to say or do anything.

Just sitting in silence and presence can create such an incredible transformation because it just allows for the person to be and to open up and to have their nervous system calm down in ways that they might not have had the opportunity to do so before.

So I'm very mindful of time and before we wrap up, I'm wondering if you have anything else you'd like to share about the sort of systemic element and what can change in the systems to bring in more of these qualities, to bring in more of these humanizing elements because I hear that so much change and growth can come out of them.

Vinny Ferraro

Yeah, I wish I had a good answer for such a good question, you know, because when we talk about the system, it's not broken. It's designed to do exactly what it's doing.

Jaia Bristow

I think that's so important to remember.

Vinny Ferraro

You know what I mean? It's like, wow, we talk about the privatization of the prison complex. It doesn't behoove them to rehabilitate people. So when that's the goal, to keep people at that recidivism rate high, then the programming suffers. Then the training of the corrections officer suffers. It's all meant to do what it's doing, so I don't know where to start.

[00:53:40]

I know personally it's like, okay, am I a safe person to regulate to when you walk in and you're trying to create that nervous system to anchor to and the permission and all of that. And I have trained sheriffs and corrections officers, been lucky enough even some of the clinical staff. So we're beginning to make some inroads into those relationships. But I don't know what it's going to take to overhaul this system that is built on keeping people locked up. I don't know what it's going to look like, but I think privatization is a very difficult place to start.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely.

Vinny Ferraro

Yeah.

Jaia Bristow

And so my next question, normally I ask how people can find out more about you and your work, but I'm curious, how can people support you and your work that you are doing that's so valuable?

Vinny Ferraro

I'm normally not so good at that, that marketing part, the branding part, you know? I've been lucky to be able to go inside for a long time and offer something. [The Mind Body Awareness Project](#) is who I've been working with for 20 years now and they have a website and they are doing fantastic work on the inside. Yeah, I would ask folks to just, if they can volunteer to go inside. With mindfulness, we talk about going inside a lot and so what does it really mean to go in these institutions? And whether it's juvenile halls or foster care, it has to begin with us reclaiming these folks that have been pushed out the margins and you name so many of these communities it's like just get involved. What you'll receive is much more than you'll give, you know what I mean?

So I want that for them because really, when do we feel at our best? For me, when I'm operating from a place of generosity, that's when I feel like I'm at my best. That's what I'm trying to cultivate in this mindfulness and meditation practice. Widening the circuit conditions that I get to bring a generous heart to because that's when I feel like I'm really alive. And I want that for the folks listening in whatever way we all have our own gifts, so it's not like, okay, one size fits all. Find a way to offer whatever you have to offer.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic, I love that. I love that encouragement for people to offer what they can offer, whether people are therapists or practitioners or whatever realm they work in, it's like, use what you have and give back. Give back to communities that the system, like you say, it's not broken, it's this way, but it does create this imbalance and within that system there are things people can do to support others. So thank you so much for your time today, Vinny. I really appreciate it. Do you still want to let people know your website as well?

[00:57:19] Vinny Ferraro

Yeah, you can find me at vinnyferaro.org and at Big Heart City Meditation Sangha.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. And that's also where people can follow meditations with you because you offer meditation groups to those outside the system. Well, outside I'm not sure anyone's outside the system.

Vinny Ferraro

That's right. Yeah, I do a weekly zoom every Friday night, at least Pacific Time, so maybe I'll see you there.

Jaia Bristow

Yeah. Thank you so much for your time today.

Vinny Ferraro

Yeah, thanks for your time and attention too.