

VINCE

3rd November, 2015

If you could start with telling us a little bit about yourself.

My name is Vincent Emanuele. I was born in Chicago in 1984, grew up in a blue-collar background. My Grandparents were migrants from Italy. They left fascism in the 1930s & 40s, worked in the steel mills, railroads, ironworks. My Dad was an iron worker, Vietnam era vet. My Grandfather went back to Italy to fight in Anzio (WWII), two purple hearts, shrapnel in his back, all that kind of stuff. So I came from a family of, you know, union background, military background. Grew up in an industrial part of Chicago on the south-east side of Chicago and then moved to North-West Indiana, which is also part of that rust belt area. A lot of de-industrialisation.

I joined the Marine Corps when I was a senior in high school, left for boot camp when I was eighteen years old, ended up in Iraq during the initial invasion in 2003 as a young 18 year old and then came home after the first invasion. Left again for a second deployment and after, during, even before that deployment, was sort of my political awakening. And at that point, I had decided that I wouldn't go back for a third deployment, which they wanted me to do. And so I refused to go and they

administratively discharged me. I was very fortunate to get an administrative discharge as opposed to being thrown in the brig. A lot of that had to do with the fact that they just didn't want those kind of sentiments spreading throughout the unit. Once they figured out that myself and a couple of other guys were becoming disenchanted with what was happening, they kind of just wanted to get rid of us so that the idea wouldn't spread to others that, yeah, you can actually lay your gun down and say no to these wars.

So, after being administratively discharged in 2006, I started the ironworker's apprenticeship in Chicago and at the same time, became involved with the peace movement. After about a year of that I decided to put away the tools and focus primarily on peace activism. I started going to university at that time, working with primarily Iraq Veterans Against The War and Veterans for Peace and since then, all kinds of things. Working with the labour movement, protests, organizing students, the anti-racist movement. Worked with the Occupy movement, the Black Lives Matter movement and the anti-war movement exclusively, really, for the first six years that I was involved. And since then I now write full time for a Latin American media entity called

teleSUR English. It's a state funded media outlet in multimedia, audio, visual and online materials. It's akin to say, Al Jazeera. It's state funded, it's funded by left-wing Latin American governments. Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Cuba, and Ecuador are the primary funders of the media project. I've been doing that for the last year and a half.

That's more or less as a journalist then?

Somewhat, but I write for the opinion section so I get to talk about whatever I want. If I want to interview people I can, it doesn't have to be objective. It's really whatever I want to say. I love that.

You're a thought leader.

I don't know about that. But I love being able to write in that context.

So, can you describe what peace means to you.

Yes, well we've had this conversation a lot in the peace movement or the anti-war movement and that's a debate that people have, whether we should call it an anti-war movement or a peace movement. I don't know. I think there are a lot of

different kinds of peace and you know, I think it's hard for a lot of us. So some of what I've been thinking about throughout time is violence. And violence, juxtaposed with peace and what that means and what we consider to be violence. You know brutal acts, barbarous behavior like someone chopping someone's head off, like you punching him in the face, this is violence that we can detect on the surface. Even war, bombs and so on and so forth, images of dead kids, images of dead people in Syria, that's a violence that people can see. It's very up front, it's in their face, some people can call it an individualistic violence or maybe a subjective violence, but there are other forms of violence too.

I think about this when I think about peace. It's peaceful to get in your car and go to the store, but then I think of all the violence that's wrapped up in that as well which is you're filling your car with gas, which is coming from where? Well it's coming primarily, at least in the United States, from coal seam gas, tar sands in Alberta Canada, extracting oil from nations like Saudi Arabia. Fossil fuels destroying the natural environment and that's just getting in your car and doing a peaceful thing. And then you go to the grocery store and what do you have at

the grocery store? I just read an article the other day that the top ten candy bars, the chocolate that's coming from there, is coming from basically slave labour. And that's the same case if you were to go buy socks. If you were to go buy apples or tomatoes in the United States, they were picked by Latin American farm workers who are living in poverty in places like Immokalee, Florida. And that's just going to the store, which is considered peaceful. It's considered non-violent obviously, driving your car and these kinds of things. I think of that violence because in the West, at times, it seems peaceful, particularly in a country like Australia. It's facing a much different economic circumstance than say, the United States or southern Europe, or even the whole of the EU right now, and portions of Latin America, etcetera.

I really have struggled with what that peace would look like. Well, I know right away. More peace would be less drone strikes, more peace would be less wars, more peace would be less surveillance, less incarceration, less police, less gang violence, less banditry and things like this. That is more peace. But I think it's

tough for all of us to visualize what a world would look like that would be totally peaceful. And I think that brings us back to the question, what is peace?.

I mean peace here can also be wrapped up in violence, the standard of living that Australians have here today is built on. It's built on a genocide of Indigenous Aboriginal Australians, it's built on fossil fuel extraction, convicts being shipped over initially to start the Commonwealth project, the Colonial project. You know it's also built on this idea that China is going to continue to grow at seven, eight or nine per cent GDP every year. And what's that built on? That's built on ecological devastation. That's built on the exploitation of workers like it is on any country anywhere that's tried to do those kinds of things. So I really try and think about what? It's a tough question.. I mean, I'm also not a pacifist.

Can you explain that a bit more?

Yes. I mean it's very simple. If something that I loved was under attack or someone that I loved was under attack in a way that you think you can defend them, in a violent way, I wouldn't be opposed to that. You know the North Vietnamese had

every right in the world to militantly resist the US occupying forces. There can be a conversation or a debate as to whether there could have been more effective tactics. The same debates are happening in Palestine right now. Nonetheless the Palestinians have the same right, even under international law, which isn't necessarily my specialty.

So you believe in an appropriate use of force?

Well, I believe people have the right to defend themselves with force, yes. And I mean, same with the Iraqis I encountered. I mean when I was there, one of the things I started to think about when I was thinking about peace or thinking about why I was turning against the war, was putting myself in their shoes and thinking what would, I mean it's so out there for us to imagine this. But, what would people in Australia or the United States do if there were Russian troops kicking in your doors, beating your children, taking women to other parts of the house, kidnapping the men, torturing members of your family, killing members of your family, destroying your livelihood, blowing up your homes? I mean, you know, that is an unacceptable level of violence to me. It's not as unacceptable as someone picking up an AK47

and to point it at US occupying forces and to say, well, we want you out of our town, out of our region, we want you out of our country. And I've felt very strongly about this ever since.. I've had debates with anti-war activists and peace activists for the last ten years about this. My thoughts on it haven't changed. The only thing that has changed in that regard has been to have more substantive conversations with people about what would be more effective. Force should always be a last resort in any case in my opinion. But also I don't think it's an unacceptable tactic.

And I don't know, I've never told anyone that we're going to live in a peaceful world in the ten years I've been doing this work. I mean, I've never once said to anyone we're going to live in a world without war, without gun violence, without death, without torture. I mean, what I'm very interested in doing is getting people to think about the institutions that produce these things. The mentalities, the ideologies, you know xenophobia, racism, dehumanisation, sexism, homophobia. Those things have to be challenged, but that's only one part of it. I mean we live in an economic system that dictates that we're going to extract fossil fuels at a crazy rate, well that also needs to be addressed. I mean, you're not going to get

rid of violence if we have institutions that inherently rely on violence to thrive. That's what I've been more interested in the last ten years. In some ways, I've been more ruthlessly pragmatic in trying to get people to think about things like how we're going to stop the next drone strike. You know because things are becoming more violent in the US. They're not becoming less violent. There's more drone strikes, there's more wars, we've occupied more people, there are more people in prison, the police are killing more people, violent deaths by gun rates are going up and so forth.

And growing inequality, which you talk about as well.

Of course. Which feeds all of this. So you know it's hard to go into a neighbourhood like on the south side of Chicago and say things like, "We just want to create a world without violence" and a lot of those people just look at you and say "Get the fuck outa here! Don't give me that hippy shit! I just want to know how you're going to stop the cops from harassing my brothers and my cousins". Like, I know

they want more peace but the question, I think, lends itself to maybe those kinds of responses like, 'The world is generally a violent place'.

Well, I generally feel that we live in a world that has tons of peace, tons of beauty as you look around, but it can also be a violent place. And it's a matter of understanding that there are dangers out there and we can be dangerous ourselves. When I talk about peace, I think I've seen a lot of people do a lot of things both in the United States and abroad that would lead me to believe that anyone at this table would be capable of killing. In certain circumstances, the vast majority of people will pick up that gun and defend themselves or they will become outwardly violent because of the situation that they're living in. And so there's a maybe patronising and hypocritical [tendency] with people in the West, you know, saying, 'Oh gosh! These people in Africa, they just can't be civil', or even the same in the United States, 'Look at these black people in Ferguson, in Baltimore, they live like animals. They can't be peaceful. They can't even be nice to each other'. Easy, of course, for white people in the United States to say that because they haven't been enslaved for five hundred years., their histories

erased, segregated, given the worst jobs in society and treated like a third-class citizen. You're going to have a violent outburst in that context.

So, I don't know Maybe, the answer is I don't know if I believe in what a completely peaceful world would look like, what peace would look like, but I think I can describe what less violence would look like. What more justice would look like, more peace. But peace as a total condition or a concept that we can apply to every aspect of our lives? I just think it's just that we live in a totally violent context, but I don't want to say that because it's not like I walk around scared all day.

But it sounds like you think that peace is linked to privilege in our structure so the reason you're not afraid is because you're suitably resourced.

Yeah, of course, absolutely. Internally, do I feel peaceful? Sometimes. You might remember the end of the documentary film, a gentleman says, "Combining anger and optimism is a very powerful force" and that's always been my internal struggle since getting out of the Marine Corps. It's been a burning anger about injustice and what I participated in and then

broadening the scope and learning about it. Environmental injustice, racial injustice, etcetera, but while at the same time hoping that we can have more optimism, we can create a better world, looking for the best in people. I mean, that's what interested me and motivated me when I first started taking Humanities courses. You like these traditions of humanism and even the Marxist tradition, the assumption is that people are inherently good. Put in bad contexts, under bad institutions, in bad situations with powerful and oppressive institutions people will behave in terrible ways. And I still believe that today, that the vast majority of people are good people wanting what's best for their kids. But trying to keep that in the forefront of my mind while also reflecting on extreme violence and looking at what's happening in my hometown now, where we're going to have two thousand seven hundred people shot this year, eight hundred people murdered and that's just in one city. It's hard to keep that optimism sometimes. It depends what context you're in. You know, I think what you said about privilege is very true. It's maybe easier for people to imagine peace if they're living in a different context than if they're living in Syria.

And yet it's a truism that people who have less are more generous generally, they share more. Has the significance of peace changed for you over time?

Yes. As I've learned more about climate change and ecological devastation I've found a sense of urgency. Whereas I generally think that all the ills of society can be solved with time. So, if somebody were to tell me "Vince, civilization, the earth, has another thousand years to figure this out", war, racism, sexism, homophobia, economic injustice, alternatives to prisons and those kinds of forms of punishment. Without nuclear weapons in the context and without runaway climate change I would say, 'Yes, I think we can do it'. If given the time, I think we could truly create, and I think at a snail's pace. Things are getting better than they were. But with the prospect of annihilation from nuclear weapons and with the prospect of species extinction in the context of runaway climate change and ecological devastation, there is a sense of urgency. I'm wanting to create peace more, wanting to challenge people more to think about how we stop these wars, how we're going to come up with alternatives. Now we have a timetable. Of course others civilisations have thought they had a timetable but

most of this was theological lunacy. Now we have scientific data that's telling us "Hey you've got twenty years to figure this out, you've got sixty years to figure this out." Whether they're off by twenty years I could care less, the point is we have a timetable now. It's either humanity figures it out by 2100 or even the most conservative estimates from the IPCC Panel at the UN tell us you're looking at four to six degrees temperature change warming the planet, 200 species becoming extinct every year, rivers disappearing, toxification of the oceans, deforestation. It's not just climate change, it's all of the above. That for me has given me a real sense of urgency. It could also become dangerous. Because you don't want to give people this politics of fear all the time where it's like either do something now or the sky's gonna collapse or we're all going to die. But I think we also have to be honest with people and a lot of people already know this. I think the latest UN report said that forty to sixty million people have already been climate refugees in the last ten years. People, who are already fleeing their homes, people who are already fleeing islands, their home countries. This is happening now. I think we also keep talking about this like it's going to happen in the future while it's

happening right now. I mean we're seeing it in Syria, eighty percent livestock loss, ninety percent crop failure in the eastern and north eastern portion of the country.

We don't talk about the food shortages in the Middle East, because we like to talk about their barbarism instead.

Yeah. And so, I would say that there's a sense that we need to move and we need to move now. That we're running out of time, and that adds a sense of extreme urgency to what we're trying to do.

How do you live a peaceful life? Is peace an active thing for you?

I try and stay sane. I mean again for me its balance. Growing up I was doing a lot of martial arts. I loved it, still love it today. And I've watched UFC fights where people are breaking each other's arms, especially in Jujitsu it's great. But it's controlled. These are people with extreme levels of discipline, some of these people I know who are fighters spend about three or four hours in the gym every day. Some of them are the most peaceful, loving, wonderful people I've ever been around. Whereas the perceived stand-up citizen, judge, lawyer, politician, who doesn't

watch those kinds of barbaric things but yet continues to votes for people who like to drone-strike people half way around the world, are somehow considered more peaceful.

I think those are contradictions I deal with, so for me it's more of a balance. I don't want to lash out and be violent at someone who doesn't deserve it or do anything crazy or those kinda things. Those are things that I constantly think about, especially being in a context where people are being shot every day in the United States and tons of gun violence. So for me it's like, how do I stay peaceful in my own mind? Go to the gym in the morning, make sure I'm around good people, make sure I eat right. I'm a smoker so I have an occasional cigarette or I'll smoke a joint if that helps. Just with PTSD as a veteran, just dealing with thoughts, images, reflections, nightmares, dreams where a lot of it is wrapped up in violence. All those images and all those reflections and all that history, it's hard for me to think about peace individually when for that last 13 years of my life it has been primarily violence in one form or another. Either (a) participating in it or (b) trying to stop it. And so, it's constantly reports. How many kids were drone-striked in Yemen today? How many

people are dying in Somalia from drone strikes? What's going on in Syria? What's happening in Palestine? What's happening in Iraq? What's happening in Afghanistan? Hospitals being bombed, etcetera. Trying to keep up with what's going on in the US, a lot of it is violence.

But individually, I'm trying ok, but what does that mean? Ok, my partner's not going to say I'm violent. She'd probably say I'm too relaxed sometimes and I need to be more enraged by things. But it's more like internal you know. I'm just thinking about those things but trying not, as I think all of us do sometimes, try not to lash out in violent ways, trying to keep any violent thoughts at bay, trying to think well, how are we going to be productive in a context that's extremely violent? I think more about productivity than I think about peace.

Are they linked though?

Well, I don't know. There are some people that are extremely productive who are violent. I mean it's like the wars, people will say that the wars didn't accomplish anything. Well, for the weapons manufacturer, for the banks, for Halliburton, for the developers in Iraq, it accomplished a lot. For them,

they've been extremely productive. They have higher profit margins now than they had prior to the war. So, in some ways, I think you can be an extremely violent and terrible person in this world. I don't believe in karma or any of that kind of bullshit. You can be extremely violent, you can be extremely racist, you can be a lunatic, and you can do just fine in this world,. You can own a Fortune 500 company. You can run the Federal Reserve. And no one's going to punish you for it. In fact, in this society, you could be rewarded for that kind of behaviour. So, I think that's something we all struggle with. So, if I wanted to be more out there with my writing I could spend all day trying to get those extra ten thousand Twitter followers. I could be out there taking portraits of myself, you know like taking photos of myself with my cat, in the woods, or something. Like create this image and that all seems very superficial and insane but you would be rewarded for that here. That seems crazy to me. Peace of mind is trying to detach from this hyper competitiveness, hyper individuality, hyper superficiality that is the predominant culture now. It's becoming the global culture you know of consumerism, materialism, and all of this. So, for me, peace of mind, which

is maybe different from peace as an all-encompassing concept, is just to stay sane. Stay somewhat balanced, understand that, yes, I have violent urges. And so, how do you channel that anger, how do you channel that violence? Probably better to go to the gym than to beat up on somebody that doesn't deserve it. Probably better to work with people in a community doing something productive than picking up a gun and joining a gang. Those are things that I think about when I'm trying to deal with peace in my life.

Do you ever remember choosing peace?

Yeah, well, that's tough too because when I decided I was no longer gonna be in the military and in the Marine Corps, I mean, it wasn't a peaceful decision. It was more of an ethical decision, a moral decision. It was like, this is wrong, not just because it was violent, but because the entire war was wrong. The entire concept, what we did there, the politics. It wasn't like I laid down my gun and chose a different peaceful path in my life. No, I mean I was capable at that point, more than willing, to kill every single person who was in my military command. And to kill Bush and Cheney and Rumsfeld and all of them. Being around veterans who had those feelings, Iraq Veterans Against

The War and Veterans For Peace, a lot of us had those feelings when we came out of the military and realised we had been used. Not only been used, but used to make money and destroy our own lives, destroy our sanity. And for people who are more spiritual, they talk about their souls being destroyed and there are Veterans who believe they're going to have to atone for this in the after-life. A lot of us were simply angry. There were people who did take that peaceful path. There were Vets we knew who came back and they were like right, I'm a vegetarian, I'm not driving a car, I'm not going to like step on any mushrooms in my yard. I'm gonna try not to hurt as much as possible. Like I don't want to hurt any plants, I don't want to hurt animals, I don't want to see a gun, I don't want to talk about war, I just want to live this completely different sort of lifestyle. That wasn't how I came back though. I came back sort of with a mission in mind. How do we organize people? How do we stop these wars? How do we create different institutions in society? That was where I was geared at that time. It wasn't like I put my gun down and then went to live a peaceful life. I put the military gun down, and this has changed

over time too, but when I first came home I was more than willing to be in a militant resistance movement if it was around. I was so crazy with anger at that time.

Have you had any experiences of intense peacefulness?

Yeah, I think there are moments you know. I mean, I love it when you take a nap, you wake up, you feel very nice. I haven't had any moments where I'm like on a mountain cliff or standing in the midst of the ocean.

Feeling at one with the world?

No, I've never felt that way and I probably spend too much time reading Nietzsche, Slavoj Žižek and people like this to think about experiencing a moment of pure blissful peacefulness. But you know, what's happy and peaceful to me? Sharing a meal with friends, having conversations with people you love, making love to someone that you love, being around animals that you love and respect. These kinds of things are like moments of peace. I could not point to a particular moment that was more peaceful than the next. Even hanging out with Michael and Vicky has been extremely peaceful. More so searching for those kinds of moments or

not even searching, just when you see them being able to appreciate them, take them in, and then just sort of moving on. But I'm not constantly in search of that and I couldn't really tell you if that was more peaceful than say, taking a hike in the Redwoods.

Do you think that peace is best found by yourself or with others?

Both. I mean there have been extremely peaceful times that I've had by myself. I love being by myself. But I love being around people who are in motion, creative people, people who are documentary filmmakers, artists. I don't know if this is peace, but I appreciate people who are committed, people who are passionate about what they do. I don't care if you build tables, if you're a carpenter, a photographer, a writer, a journalist etcetera. If you're passionate about what you do and you're inspired to do it in a serious way, and probably sacrifice a little bit of yourself to do it in that way, that interests me. To me that's like a moment of peace away from thinking about people who aren't in motion, or how we can get more people involved, or why is the world so violent or why are there more drone strikes? I don't know if it can be

considered peace but it's inspiring for me to meet other people who are in motion and who are doing things and want to be productive and creative.