

VERN

5<sup>th</sup> November, 2015

*If you could just start with your name and a short life story...*

My name's Vern Hopkins. I was born in Rockhampton. I'm an Aboriginal, on my father's side I'm a Muddigan person and on my mum's side I'm a Bidjura person. I am a proud Aboriginal man. As I said I was born in Rocky. Left school when I was thirteen, Mum and Dad couldn't afford it. I was the youngest of nine. Joined the army when I was seventeen years and about three months. Three years in the army, tour of Vietnam. Went over there 70/71. Come back here to Brisbane and stayed in Brisbane. Lived in Brisbane and basically worked a lot of different jobs. I wasn't in academic management. A little bit longer down the track in 87 I asked to go and do a course and worked in Aboriginal Legal Services; local, national and state, and that was quite an adventure that. We had NGO status so we went over to some of the conferences overseas in Seoul and one in South Africa. So, yeah, I retired when I was fifty-two years old. I went and got my TPI pension and about five or six years after I retired I went and did a security course and then I worked in security for about five years. I gave that up about three years ago, so I'm just a man of leisure now and that's about it.

*Were you drafted into Vietnam or you  
joined?*

No, I joined.

*Can you please describe what peace means  
to you.*

When Elizabeth rang me up and told me about this project, I thought about it. I thought about what it meant and I had all these things in my head. It's a difficult one. I think you find it's a difficult question to answer. To me, geees you know, I'd have to go back to my childhood and where I was born and how I was raised up because I think it all stems from there. I've always known freedom as such, as we all do in this country, but we all have to ask ourselves this question. And I ask myself this question. Because it means that I'm at peace with myself and I think you have to be at peace with yourself. If you're not at peace with yourself you find it difficult to be able to want anything. As I said, it can be a very complex question to try to answer truthfully and holistically.

*Do you think that peace is linked to other values and conditions?*

A lot of people don't have choices. As you know, we just took in three and half thousand people from Syria. No children there would know what peace is.

*Can it be linked to social conditions? You went to the word freedom after peace, so you link those things, perhaps. Are there other things? Some people talk about love or God or other values they might have, and so on.*

I go to church every now and again. I've never read the Bible, Well, when I say never, I've looked at it. But I've always had faith in the Lord. Everywhere I've gone on my journey through life, I've always realised that He's been by my side. He'll take me from one part to another. Like today, there was a calling for me to come and do this you know. I always believe in them things. I was talking to my sister, my sister knows Noel and Noel rang me up and said, come and talk to Elizabeth and come along here. I always said I wouldn't leave this earth until the Lord called me home. And I was with a lady a few years back now and I said to her that I will always know when it's my time because the Lord will call me

home. But in the mean time, He'll always put me on different paths. So, if you do something, like if we do this thing today, I'll have peace of mind about it. I'll feel good about it, not only because of me but because I'll think along the lines that it will help you people to fulfil what tasks you have in front of yourself. This is the project that you work on and once you start on a project you want to finish it and do the best you can. So, when it all comes together, and I'll come up to you, and I'll see it, and I'll speak to you people again. I'll see it in your own faces, see that peace in yourself, knowing you've done the best you can.

*Oh, that's wonderful. Has the significance of peace changed for you over time?*

I've battled with my own demons from the way I was brought up. I wasn't brought up badly, but I did see a lot of violence. When I joined the army I also got into that culture, if you can call it that, with all that smoking and all that drinking you know. You also learn how to be ready to fight. You get trained up to defend yourself and you get trained with the best of them, trained how to go war knowing what sort of tactics you need to know. So when I came home I was still over there because every time there was

confrontation, an argument, I'd stand to and be ready for it and confront it. So that tormented, that's always tormented me. Anyway, twenty-five years ago a lady I was seeing at the time said, "Vern you need to go and seek help", because I wasn't a good bloke. I had a lot of relationships. I was violent towards my women. Not violent like putting them in the hospital or anything, but you know, I was one of those cowards that went along the domestic violence lines. I think what saved me from pushing myself to that limit was my faith in the Lord. He comes along and tells me it's no good. And she told me I need to go and seek help and I basically said, "Well, gee wiz, what are you talking about? I don't need any rotten help. Blah, blah."

*Tough guys don't need help...*

Yeah, yeah. And something happened. I don't know what happened. But I just realised that, probably, she was right. I needed to go and seek help. So I started to see a counsellor and then I started talking about the demons inside of me, especially the demons that I got from over in 'Nam, you know. Look, I go to that black hole every now and again. I've worked at strategies where I've been able to find the peace within myself, to bring

myself back on the plain level where I'm a good bloke to be around. But that's my struggle with peace at the minute, is trying, you know. You gotta have peace within yourself all the time.

*And is peace an active thing for you?  
How do you lead a peaceful life? Is it a  
conscious choice?*

No. Because I've been seeking help now for twenty odd years and because I've learnt the strategies and because I've put them in place, going into the dark hole is less and less. Or I go into the dark hole, and if I get a confrontation I will be able to walk away. So, consciously, have I been thinking about peace? No. It's just the mechanisms that I have put in place, through the help of professionals, through support and family. Ninety-five percent of the time I'm at peace with myself, but it's not a conscious thing that I think about all the time. When I'm in a bad place, I'll stay at home and I'll put them mechanisms in place. Then eventually, I'll come through the other side and I'm at peace with myself again. It's not something that I will constantly think about.

*Do you think peace is best found alone or with others?*

I think you couldn't divorce one from another. You can't. In the end it's left up to the individual, but you can't do it without, in my case, professional support, family support, friends support.

Do you have any memories of intense peacefulness? Experiences that stand out where you were really at peace?

Every time I see my grandchildren. In some of the relationships I've had I've been very peaceful. Unfortunately I've lost two ladies to cancer. Somebody comes up to me and asks me where I come from and I tell them and they want me to tell them a little bit about my culture. That to me brings peace, I find peace in that.

*So is there a difference between personal peace and social peace then?*

As I said, I think it's easy enough for us in the Western world to find peace with ourselves because we're fortunate. I couldn't say. You're asking the wrong person. If you ask people that come from war torn countries, the people that have just come over from Syria maybe, you wanna ask them that question. You'd get a whole



different bucket load of answers. Most of them won't have known peace in their lives. Lebanon and those places, people sleeping with AK47s under their pillows. South Africa same thing. Vietnam. When I was over there, you never knew who was good and who was bad.

*It's different when you're being invaded, when you're the country that's being occupied.*

Absolutely. Some of those people will never know peace. I was at Church a couple of weeks ago and we had a lady there, they work with young girls and boys that have been sold in the sex trade. She was saying that there is something like between thirty-five and forty-five million people that are enslaved in the sex trade today. And if you ask one of those people what peace means to them, they wouldn't know what the word meant, because they would never have experienced it.

*Can I ask a question of you as an Indigenous man, as an Aboriginal man - do you carry that conflict, of the original contact and the genocide that you've faced as a people in Australia? Do you carry that conflict in you and is there a particular peace struggle there?*

I think I'll always carry that conflict because knowing the facts of it all. As I said, when I was in the Legal Services I did a lot of research into the genocide and all that stuff, through black deaths in custody and all that stuff. I go back to my Great Grandmother knowing that she was stolen generation, brought up by a German gentleman and an English lady. That's on my Mum's side. On my Dad's side my Grandmother there was married to a Muddigan man, same tribe, a station owner took her away from that. She bore him five or six children. I don't know what happened to him, he probably died or something. Then she bore two children to the fellow who is my Grandfather, but I don't recognise him. I know it's a terrible thing to say but that's the Welsh side of me that I would never even consider looking for him. It's probably because of that conflict inside of me. Because they never knew peace too, you know. Same with the black deaths in custody thing and the Aboriginal Welfare Fund that was created, you know, for the

people that were underpaid and stuff like that. Well, part of my job was to go around and meet communities everywhere, all over Queensland, and interview people in regards to where they worked and things. And some of the stories that the old women told me were just atrocious. If I told you one or two of them, you'd be crying. So, knowing that, knowing those atrocities, of course you're going to carry it. But if you let it burden you down, that's what I'm saying about the Lord now. When I think about a lot of them things, when I get angry, I ask the Lord to carry the burden. It's unbelievable how that works at times, you know. So, a lot of times you find peace in that way because knowing that He's always going to be standing beside you.