

CONFESSION OF A BUDDHIST ATHEIST | A RECIPE FOR A MIDDLE-WAY MEAL | GENEROSITY (AND GREED)

● THE BUDDHIST REVIEW

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A charismatic
ex-con lures at-risk
kids away from
violence.

By Alix Sharkey
Photographs
by Douglas Adesko

the heartful dodger

One bitter night, in the rough end of New Haven, Connecticut, fifteen-year-old Vinny Ferraro and his friends were hanging out as usual by the projects, near the corner where Ferraro sold drugs—mostly coke, but also heroin, hash, and LSD. His father, a junkie and career criminal, had schooled Ferraro in the trade. “You’re the man of the house now,” he had told Ferraro over the phone from prison—meaning Ferraro was expected to sell drugs to support his mother, also an addict, and two sisters. In fact, Ferraro couldn’t remember a time before drugs or the constant, gut-gnawing menace and paranoia that came with the game: he’d first smuggled heroin into jail for his old man when he was ten.

Ferraro and his teenage gang ran these streets, ready to pounce on anybody who didn’t belong. Nothing personal, just territorial duty. That night, it was a homeless man. They fanned out and surrounded him before he knew what was happening. As the gang closed in for the ritual beating—fists, boots, and bats (nobody would bother pulling a gun on a bum)—their terrified victim looked directly at Ferraro and started pleading, “Please help me.”

“Help you?” Ferraro said. “Why should I help you, asshole?”

“You’ve got more compassion in your eyes than any woman I’ve ever met,” gabbled his prey. It was a crazy, “Hail Mary” line

by any standards, but it hit Ferraro like an uppercut. He was unable to continue the beating.

That exchange on a wintry night in 1982 is one that Ferraro continues to relive. But these days, as the Teacher Training Director of the Mind Body Awareness Project, it’s Ferraro who is looking into angry young eyes until he finds a glimpse of compassion. Based in Oakland, California, the MBA Project is a nonprofit organization that uses mindfulness and emotional-intelligence exercises to equip disadvantaged and underserved youth with the tools to make better decisions and to consider more skillful options than violence, self-harm, drugs, and crime.

“All my work revolves around the same conversation,” says Ferraro. “What is freedom beyond conditions? Beyond this school, this prison, this hood, whatever your conditions are. Do your conditions lead inevitably to suffering? No, they don’t. Only a being’s perspective leads to suffering. Two people in the exact same situation, according to their outlook and expectations, can have completely different experiences. Turn that around, and *any* conditions can be a vehicle for bondage—or freedom and awakening. And that’s fucking deep, man.”

Going back to his story about the homeless man, Ferraro says, “I didn’t know what compassion meant when I was fifteen. But I knew that that homeless guy had seen my heart. And that was scary. I’d learned early on that this heart of mine was not a

“The only thing I ever wanted was to go to prison. That’s what men do, you know?”

commodity but a liability, and to hide it. That was the science: keeping your vulnerability hidden.”

Ferraro had learned “the science” from his father.

“He hurt me so that nobody else could. He deliberately hardened me by telling me lots of hard-core shit—about how and when to hurt people—when I was seven, eight, nine years old.

“I know he was terrified by me—my mom told me later. See, my father, he’d been in drug gangs, motorcycle gangs; he’d been a drug dealer, a felon. Then I come into this world, and he looks at this smiling baby with these eyes full of love, and he freaks. His major concern from that moment on was ‘How am I going to toughen this kid up so that he can survive?’”

And the science had worked, right up until the moment when a victim stared into Ferraro’s eyes and remarked on them.

“This was the first time anyone had ever seen that side of me, or at least called it out. I was so shocked that all I could think was to get out of there as fast as possible. I mean, I panicked, but I still kept it covered. I had enough power in the group that I could turn and say, ‘Ah, fuck this crybaby.... Hey, who’s that down there?’ And we started running back down the street. But that really fucked me up. I had done my best to hide this heart, because it wasn’t safe in my world to be soft or show feelings. And he had seen right through me.”

Sitting on a friend’s sofa in Los Angeles, Ferraro’s not that big, but you wouldn’t mess with him. His arms are covered from shoulder to wrist with tattoos, although they’re not your conventional gangbanger motifs. Instead, his biceps and forearms depict the Virgin of Guadeloupe; the Sacred Heart; and four-armed Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. Before he shaved off his goatee a few weeks ago, he says, people used to say he looked like Edward Norton in “American History X.” That goatee, they told him, made him very intimidating. He laughs at the idea.

“I’m like, ‘Really? I cry for a living and I teach meditation. How intimidating can that be?’”

Ferraro’s speech is a curious mix of profanity, street jive, dharmic references, and the antiquated hipster jargon that still thrives in prison. Somehow he can talk about “cats” who “dig it” when he’s “getting down” without sounding like he stepped out of an episode of “The Monkees.” Shut your eyes and listen to the soft burr of his Italian-American accent, and you could



Vinny Ferraro, right, in 1987. Opposite page: Ferraro at his home in Oakland, California, 2009

be listening to a character from “The Sopranos.”

“Vinny’s a very high-energy, extremely funny guy,” says Fleet Maull, an MBA advisor who served fourteen years in federal prison for cocaine trafficking. While he was incarcerated, Maull completed the foundational practices of Tibetan Buddhism and also founded the Prison Dharma Network, an international group that supports Buddhist and contemplative prison ministry. “He’s from the streets, so he’s got the look, the voice, and the charisma to connect very directly with the kids. It’s one thing having the mindfulness and other tools, but the ground for using them is a relationship. You’ve really got to get the kids’ attention and respect, and quickly. You’ve got to be real, and Vinny’s very authentic. That creates the ground. They see him doing it, and believe perhaps they can do it, too.”

The story of how Ferraro swapped places with his victim—and turned that into a source of power—underscores his assertion that young people in the criminal-justice system are capable of anything, if given the tools and opportunities. Or, as he puts it: “These kids don’t need fixing. They aren’t broken.”

Of the fifteen hundred kids in Ferraro’s high school in New Haven, only he and four others were white. Not surprisingly, he and his buddies dreamed of catching a Yalie and administering some street justice. “My mom was getting \$4,000 a year to raise three kids on welfare, so we’d just hang outside that motherfucking gate and do whatever we could to rob them of their dignity.”

Everything changed when he was seventeen. His mother had a seizure one night; the paramedics came, checked her out, and left. She told him she was fine. An hour later he was about to get in a fight on the street, and one of his boys said, “Yo, the



PHOTOGRAPH BY DOUG ADESKO

ambulance is back outside your house.” He ran down and went in. She was dead.

His mother was the only person he’d ever felt close to, ever really trusted and loved. His father blamed him for his mother’s death. “He comes to the funeral with a guard and shackles on his leg. I’m like, ‘This motherfucker: he will not let me live one minute of my life in a normal way.’ But it wasn’t safe to feel that anger. I was scared to death of him—he was a convict, man, a big dude. I was still sneaking him drugs into prison, even after she died.”

Ferraro considered his future. It seemed inevitable. “The only thing I ever wanted was go to prison. To be with my father. That’s what men do, you know? My uncles, my dad, guys from the neighborhood—that’s what they did. Like, ‘Yo motherfucker,

when you’re a man you’ll come here, be with us.”

Soon after, his elder sister grew tired of his violent temper—he was punching holes in walls when he was upset—and told him, “Take your drugs, take your little gun, and get the fuck out.” He was homeless in a Northeastern winter, so he broke into cars, slept in doorways, urinated in his pants to stay warm. Then his dream came true. At the age of eighteen, he was sent to juvenile hall for narcotics possession. He couldn’t believe his luck. “A place to sleep? Somebody who cares about this piece of shit I’d become? Bro, I was grateful.”

Eleven months later, after a cozy tenure selling drugs to fellow offenders, he returned to his old neighborhood, moved in with a drug dealer, and smoked crack every day for a year and a half. At the age of twenty, he weighed 110 pounds.

Out of nowhere, his father turned up clean and sober and, despite his protests, dragged Ferraro off to a Narcotics Anonymous meeting in a nearby church basement. “I seen some junkies I knew, but they was all bulked up, where they’d been eating and exercising. I got the message. I went home, flushed my drugs, and got with the program.”

Generally, newcomers to twelve-step programs are advised to attend ninety meetings in ninety days. Ferraro attended a meeting every day for two-and-a-half years. His story was deemed so inspirational that within a week he was invited to speak at a rehab center for heroin addicts. “All of a sudden I’m the guy at the front of the room, talking about my life to these motherfuckers who’ve got more clean time than I do. I tasted that, I was sold. Like, ‘Wait a minute. You’re saying I have some value—that because I survived, I have something to offer?’”

He did the rounds: A.A. and N.A. meetings, juvenile hall, rehab and hospices, anywhere they’d let a high school dropout speak. As he got cleaner and refined his spiel, the crowds grew, until he was addressing A.A. and N.A. conventions, speaking in front of thousands of recovering addicts and alcoholics, therapists and medical professionals. Finally, he’d found something that he was good at besides fighting and selling drugs.

But at twenty-two, he realized how limited his horizons were. So he and a friend drove cross-country until they reached a little town called Capitola, on Monterey Bay. Through the local A.A. scene in nearby Santa Cruz, Ferraro met Noah Levine, now a meditation instructor and author of “Dharma Punx,” a memoir about his own struggle with addiction, recovery, and dharma practice. Levine introduced *(continued on page 111)*

(continued from page 53) him to meditation, and a book called “A Gradual Awakening,” written by his father, Stephen Levine. “That was the first dharma book I ever read. It totally floored me.”

A dry-waller by day, Ferraro volunteered in the evenings, often for hospice work. “I was trading my days for money, so I had to do something at night to make me feel like a human being.” By 1995, the meditation bug had bitten, and he, Noah Levine, and another friend made a pilgrimage to India. Since then, says Ferraro, his study of the dharma has been wide-ranging, and his Vipassana practice consistent. He includes among his teachers His Holiness the Dalai Lama and “the lineage of Stephen Levine, Ram Dass, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield—the cats who really set it up in this country. Basically the Theravada path, which is funny because I’m such a devotional character.” Lately, though, he concedes, he has been “sitting with these Vajrayana cats, especially [the Western-born teacher] Traktung Rinpoche, out in Michigan. And I’m very interested in that path right now.”

Shortly after their return from Asia, Levine introduced Ferraro to Challenge Day, an experiential, mindfulness-based program for kids. Challenge Day gathers 150 kids—generally sixth or seventh graders—in the school gym, and systematically takes them through a series of mindfulness-based exercises that open them up to their own thoughts, fears, prejudices, and vulnerabilities. It then gets them to identify with and relate to their

peers, fostering a deeper understanding and connection between kids who otherwise ignore or even revile each other.

“I’ll never forget meeting Vinny,” says the Challenge Day co-founder Yvonne Dutra-St. John. “He came to one of our workshops, and we were immediately struck by his unique personality, his vision, his voice. He’s someone who has taken his entire life, the pain and difficulties included, and really transformed it into a blessing for others.”

Within a couple of months, Ferraro was no longer a dry-walling foreman but working instead for Challenge Day full-time. Over time, he helped refine the program’s format: get 150 kids into the gym at 9.00 a.m.; invite teachers and parents to be there as emotional security, but prep them beforehand to “give the gift of silence” and “hold the space.” After a few simple warm-up games, divide the kids into groups of five or six, then divide again and regroup, until they’ve all made contact with each other. Using street jive and sheer charisma, Ferraro draws them out of their schoolyard cliques until they open up about their lives and eventually reach out to form emotional bonds with each other. Or as he puts it: “I search out the hippest skateboarder, the quarterback and the jocks, the preppy girls, the Goths, the cheerleaders...all the opinion formers, the kids who *run* the school. If I can sell them on it, everybody else will follow.

“These kids are so courageous. They get up and talk about mothers smoking crack, their father in jail again, giving their parents insulin injections, or being abused, or homeless. The



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other kids—even teachers—their eyes will pop out as some kid says, ‘Oh, y’all didn’t know that about me? Yeah, I’m living under a bridge. And I *still* go to school.’ I mean, sometimes we’re dealing with madness. Kids pulling up their sleeves and there’s cuts and burns, and they done it to themselves. I tell them halfway through the day, ‘You don’t have to talk about this shit if you don’t want to. But if you want to be free, you gotta know that there’s nothing wrong with you—that it’s not all your fault.’”

Ferraro’s streetwise persona also works, in situations like these, to break down deeply entrenched masculine taboos. First, it holds the attention of those boys with the greatest aversion to self-awareness, and often the greatest pain. Once they connect, he turns their attitude back on itself.

“A knucklehead like me, tatted up, talking guns and drugs and doing time? When guys see someone like that crying, it’s ‘What is going on? He’s breaking the rules. Men don’t talk about feelings.’ But that’s where we flip it on its head.” Ferraro calls out those most reluctant to engage and articulate emotion. “Like, ‘You talk about keeping it real? How real are we keeping it if we hide the truth about ourselves, if we can’t face our own worst fears?’ Once you connect opening up to their masculinity, they just go for it.”

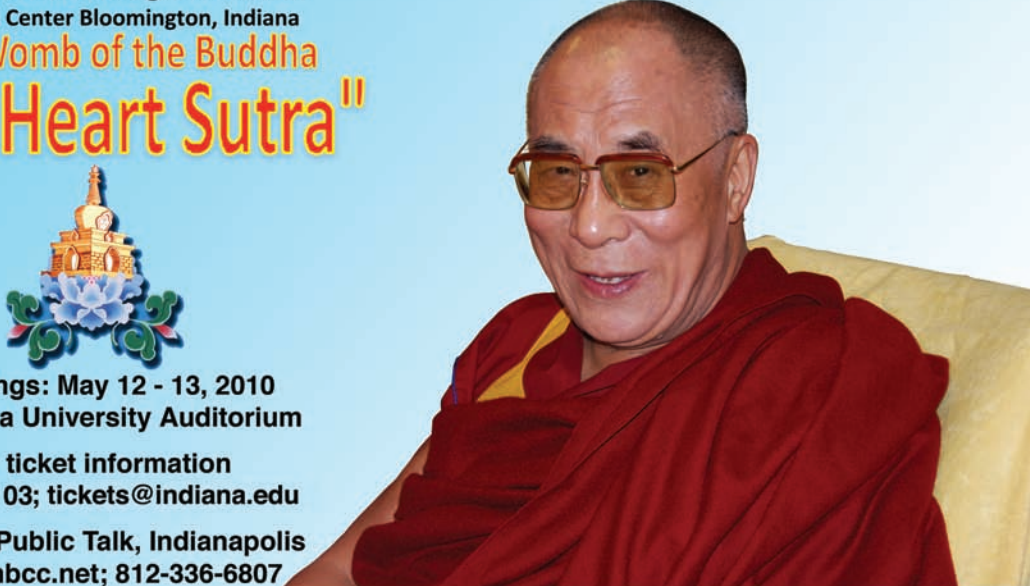
“Talk about keeping it real? How real are we keeping it if we can’t face out own worst fears?”

Noah Levine cofounded the MBA Project with a group of Bay Area friends in June 2000. Ferraro had tagged along in its early days to watch the group working in an Oakland juvenile hall, but it wasn’t until 2006 that he came onboard. By then, Levine was no longer involved in day-to-day MBA activities (though he remains on the Advisory Board, along with Daniel Goleman, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Stephen and Andrea Levine, Bo Lozoff, and George Mumford), and the nonprofit wanted to see if Ferraro’s experience with Challenge Day could be applied to updating and implementing its own program.

“There are lots of highly competent people working with adults in prison,” says Chris McKenna, the director of the MBA Project. “But they’re rarely good at working with youth too. It’s a different skill set and requires a different energy level and quality of engagement. Which is why someone like Vinny—with youth specialization, nationally recognized facilitation skills, and grounded in a practice background—is incredibly rare. And that’s why we wanted him to present our program.”

McKenna and the MBA board were also aware of Ferraro’s streamlining of the Challenge Day program, and his consistency in successfully implementing it. “This field is still in its infancy,”

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says McKenna, “Meaning many yoga and meditation groups working with the incarcerated are simply taking a consciousness technology out of the box and saying, ‘O.K., this works in the yoga studio, so let’s try it in jail.’ But there’s very little evaluation; it’s mostly hit-and-miss. Our goal was to develop something that worked every time—something we could present to a facility and tell them exactly what kind of results they could expect.”

Along with staff and key advisors, Ferraro set about retooling and honing the MBA program for working with at-risk youth. After three months spent discussing ideas with his teachers, colleagues, friends, and kids in juvie, he’d organized it thematically into a ten-session curriculum:

1. Basic Goodness
2. Mindfulness
3. Active Listening
4. Impulse Control
5. Emotional Intelligence
6. Empathy (Self and Others)
7. Forgiveness
8. Transforming Negative Core Beliefs
9. Cause and Effect
10. Interpersonal Relationships

The payoff is a range of indicators that show the program is working, says Sam Himmelstein, a cognitive psychology Ph.D.

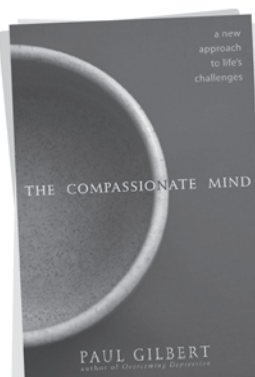
candidate at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, whose thesis is based on his study of MBA’s new curriculum and its implementation. “You see the kids reporting less perceived stress, less anger, increased mindfulness, and increased ability to resolve conflict,” says Himmelstein.

Having worked on the ten-session curriculum, Ferraro then spent another eight months interviewing, vetting, hiring, and training facilitators to deliver it. The job description is simple: “This ain’t a job, it’s a way of life.” The job interview? “You gotta convince me you’re able to stand in the middle of a room and command attention, that you got something to say, and that you’re living your life with some kind of integrity.”

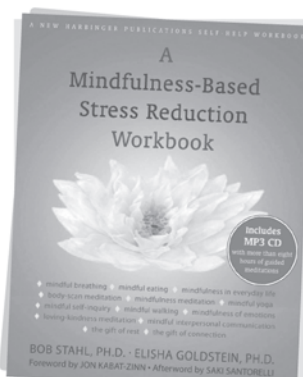
If they pass, Ferraro works with them to streamline their story and develop a distinctive voice. Incarcerated juveniles rarely give second chances: a facilitator must grab their attention immediately and hold it. Superfluous words, meandering thoughts, hesitation, self-doubt, fear, anxiety—these allow the class to drift and distance to open up. Not all of the MBA’s twenty-five staff members are dharma practitioners; part of the program’s strength resides in the diversity of its spiritual paths and traditions. But nobody lasts long without a laser-bright focus on the present moment, and a fearless attitude toward it. And, of course, whatever their story or voice, the conversation is essentially always the same: freedom and how to get there.

“The Buddha taught that freedom is going beyond conditions,” says Ferraro. “For me, the people who have been through

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the harshest conditions—and survived—have the greatest potential to transform the madness of their lives. See, that madness made them who they are. So if they can take that madness, claim it, and stand on top of its incredible energy, they can transform it into power.”

Ferraro recently resigned his senior post with Challenge Day, and now works just one week a month with the high school program. Another week and a half a month he works for MBA, with the rest of his time spent leading retreats and meditation groups, and his regular Friday night Vipassana gathering in San Francisco. Currently in the midst of a divorce from his wife of ten years, Ferraro says that leading the group has forced him to confront deep and painful questions about his personal life.

“When you’re in the teacher’s role, you gotta make sure it doesn’t become a cult of personality. It’s the fucking dharma—this ain’t a therapy session. It ain’t about me. So how do I strike the balance between that and not hiding from what’s going on? I can’t only talk about what’s happened to me in the past tense, put a big dharma bow on it, and give you ‘a teaching.’ How am I going to teach you to be present if I can’t sit in the white-hot fire of my own experience, in front of you? So I talked about the suffering I was experiencing. It hurts to weep in front of my group, but it’s O.K. Thomas Merton said that prayer and love are learned when prayer becomes impossible and the heart has turned to stone. Know why? Because that’s where the action is, Jack.”

By introducing mindfulness and awareness techniques into

high schools and juvenile halls, Ferraro is part of a new wave of American Buddhism—the dharma putting down deep new roots.

“Maybe what we’re doing now,” Ferraro says “as far as American Buddhism, is putting it into a language and form that’s new. It is definitely a very different style. When I started learning meditation in the early nineties, you’d never see anyone my age—dressed like me, talking like me—in the room. It was all these older, middle-class white people. Nice people, mentors, very serious. But not people you’d want to hang with, be friends with. Now you got people like Noah Levine teaching people all over the world that the most punk-rock, anticonformist thing you can do is meditate.”

He thinks for a moment.


“Look, my practice is simple. What if nothing is wrong? What if it all belongs—everything around you? Just see if you can approach every moment with kindness. Know what that does? That allows you to live in a kind world. And that slowly helps you deal with whatever comes up, when motherfuckers don’t act right.”

He pauses, cocks his head, and gives a grin.

“And y’all motherfuckers ain’t acting like I need you to act, most of the time.” ▼

Alix Sharkey writes regularly for the *Guardian*, *Observer*, and *Sunday Telegraph* and is presently a contributing editor of *British GQ*. His work has appeared in various anthologies, including “Transculturalism: How The World Is Coming Together” (2004). He lives in Los Angeles.

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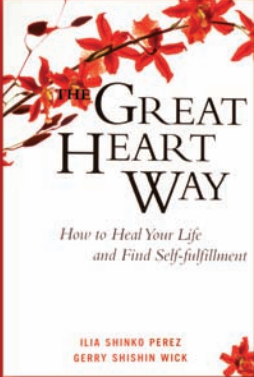


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