Reflections On Journalism
by Richard Whittaker

Paul Van Slambrouck is a distinguished journalist. He began working for the Christian Science Monitor in 1976. From 1989 to 1997 he was with the San Jose Mercury News. In 1997 he returned to the Monitor as San Francisco bureau chief. In 2001 he was made the editor-in-chief of the Monitor. He is currently an associate professor of Mass Communication at Principia College, a correspondent for the Monitor, a contributing editor for works & conversations and a volunteer with ServiceSpace.

Paul entered my life in 2006 thanks to his offer to help me in my struggle as an independent publisher. It was a pivotal moment for me, and for the magazine I founded. Part of our connection involved a mutual love of photography. For years, Paul told me, he'd get up before sunrise and go to downtown Boston with his 4x5 camera to get in some time photographing before going to work at the Monitor.

Journalism is the topic for most of the interview and then the conversation turns to what evolved from a story Van Slambrouck did in 1999, his interview with Nipun Mehta about a new non-profit that began in Silicon Valley. It was called CharityFocus in those days and is now called ServiceSpace. It had important consequences for both of us.

Richard Whittaker: What do you think were the roots that account for your becoming a journalist?

Paul Van Slambrouck: It wasn't a direct line, by any means. I think my first attraction to the world of journalism was via the images I saw, particularly in the Christian Science Monitor (The Monitor in the day was black and white.) They were not really news photos, per se. The stuff was just so beautiful—poetic images from around the world, particularly of an artist named Gordon Converse who was, in The Monitor tradition, sort of a legendary photographer.

RW: The Monitor came into your home?

PVS: Right. My parents subscribed. I was in high school and that's when I remember looking at the images and going, wow! I don't think I was even particularly reading the stories. It was the imagery and their elegance and composition.

RW: Did your dad discuss things with you from the newspaper?

PVS: Yes. He was always plugged in. He worked for the McClatchy newspaper chain, which owned The Sacramento Bee, a very high quality newspaper. He was in charge of marketing for all of the McClatchy newspapers.

RW: And you lived in Sacramento?

PVS: Yeah. I remember as a kid going to the office with him. He would walk me around. My father loved the newspaper business and I think he kind of wished he'd entered the journalism side of it. He had great reverence for what they did.

RW: What was it he revered do you think?

PVS: He respected the writing and he liked the character of the newspaper.

RW: And he subscribed to The Christian Science Monitor also, right?

PVS: Yes, but mostly his conversation would have been about his work place. He would talk about the newsroom, and this and that. I think, fundamentally, it was his admiration for people who were independent—independent seekers of the truth.

RW: That's a big thing.

PVS: In high school, I just took it for granted that people were supposed to act independently, and according to their principles. He would talk about a story in the paper and how some people were upset about it. He admired, not the idea of getting somebody upset, but the idea that, really, that was the newspaper's function.

RW: Courage and truthfulness, I take it.

PVS: Yes, to tell it. I mean truth is always, in a way, a variable thing, because you only know the truth that you can come to at a particular moment. It's not always an ultimate truth, but the pursuit of the truth is a pretty pure thing.

In today's world there's a lot of muddiness because of conflicts of interest. There really was a time when a journalist could be pretty well cushioned from pressure of any kind. Most reporters I've met are independent thinkers and lone wolves, to some extent. They're not easy to manage, and they don't like to be managed. They're after the story. They're after the truth.

That's what I came to incorporate, and I didn't realize then how unusual it was to have a group of people being paid simply to go find out what's really happening. And who are cushioned deliberately within the institution so that they're not unnecessarily influenced.

I don't believe that anybody is completely objective. But within journalism there's a way toward objectivity that isn't so much about the character of the person, but almost like the way a scientist conducts an experiment. The scientist is not necessarily objective either, but they can construct an experiment that's independent of influence, or they can try to do that.

There's something comparable in journalism, a method of doing things that is, let's say, as objective as possible. So you can't just dismiss journalism as being not objective, because we know that no person is neutral or objective. That's the truth. But there is a process; there is a professional way of doing it.

RW: So there was a time when all that was still in place. I'm thinking that in the 50s this ideal of objectivity was really pretty strong in the world of journalism.

PVS: I think so. It was only over time that I began to appreciate what a special thing journalism is. In most functions people are advocates for something. Right? I've seen a lot of that over a lot of years.

I tell students that as a journalist you are an advocate, too—but it's for the truth. That's your advocacy. You're not an advocate for your institution. You're not an advocate for the organization you represent. You're really an advocate for the truth. That's your job. There are very few professions or occupations that are as clearly about that.

RW: The phrase, "freedom of the press" comes to mind. We sort of take this for granted in this country. But it's really quite an amazing idea and it goes way back in this country. What you're saying reflects very much on this and I wonder if you'd say something about that?

PVS: Yes. Well, it's true. The first thing to say is that it's like American democracy and the system that has grown up here. It's something rare, freedom of the press. And by press, we'll mean journalism, right?

RW: Okay. And ink on paper?

PVS: Increasingly what we're talking about really isn't ink on paper anymore, but that function of the press being protected by an amendment to the Constitution is a rare thing. If you consider the press—even of that day—as an industry, it's the only industry mentioned in the founding documents, right?

RW: Okay, I'll assume so.

PVS: Can you think of any other right in the Bill of Rights or anywhere else that really talks about something like the press, which is a clear protection of a function.

RW: The only thing that comes to mind is the protection of freedom of religion.

PVS: Right. But religion is more like an idea than an organization. I mean press is very specific. It could have been freedom of expression, right? But it's "press." There are different models of journalism, and its role. In many countries, media is viewed as being part of nation building, and that can provide a justification for limiting its ability to say the wrong things about people in power.

RW: Yes. I mean in China that's probably how it works right now, for instance.

PVS: Exactly. What possible good is there from information that, from the government's point of view, is destructive to the State? But that's not the way we look at it in this country. This is rare. And at a certain level, it would be logical to wonder: why is that? I mean why wouldn't you see the role of the press, or journalism, as a fundamental building block to a healthy state? I would say it actually is, but it has to be independent of the State; it has to be fiercely independent itself, acting as a watchdog for the people against all the inclinations of the powerful.

RW: Right.

PVS: Because if it doesn't serve some kind of a watchdog role, who will? What will? And who will tell us what is really going on in the world?

RW: This gets to the philosophical question of the value of truth and freedom. That seems to be one of the bedrock principles upon which the whole idea of democracy and this country is founded—that at a very basic level there is something inherently necessary and presumably life-giving about the truth.

PVS: Yes. Yes. That's a special thing to embrace, and a difficult thing to embrace. You have to be able to look at the situation straight up, squarely in the face, and really have the facts—to the extent you can have them—before you can hope to move towards resolution of whatever the issue is.

I think we all kind of know this personally, right? We all know the traps of denials. We all know the traps of deliberately keeping things a little fuzzy. To the extent of the way society functions, journalism's job is to say, no, no. That's not good enough. We really need to get to the bottom of this, as painful as it might be. I mean the Pentagon Papers is a classic case. It was a clarifying moment for the nation in terms of what we mean by freedom of the press, and most particularly the inappropriateness of prior restraint. (Believe it or not, before the Pentagon Papers, there hadn't really been that muscular of a test of what we mean by freedom of the press.)

RW: Really? And that was definitely a muscular test.

PVS: It turned out that it wasn't really about Daniel Ellsberg and whether he was a traitor or not. It was really about can the government tell the New York Times to stop publishing this? They tried to do that and the Supreme Court said no, you can't do that. They pushed it right to the limit. That was a seminal establishment of what we mean by prior restraint. That was really important. And as the national security apparatus invades an ever greater portion of our lives, this protection is clearly more and more at risk.

If you believe in the power of the pursuit of the truth, no story is ever done. So that's one of the questions I ask myself now. Nobody ever has the complete truth, right?

RW: Right.

PVS: Tomorrow things look different than they did today. It's just your best shot at what the situation is right now. That pursuit of that is a really honorable thing. Purists can point

to flaws and right, it's imperfect. But the motive matters, and the pursuit matters. We all want outcomes these days, but maybe being involved in an honorable process is really what it's about.

We all have a stake, I think, in doing everything we can to make sure that the pursuit of truth remains a really vigorous thing, because it's not easy. It takes support.

RW: How does that stand today as you see it in the field of journalism?

PVS: We're in the middle of a tsunami. It's almost impossible to get your arms around what's happening and say something definitive that will hold up. Except that everything is undergoing such radical change that it may take a long time to know. This change has been going on for at least 20 years now. We might think, oh, it has to be clear sometime soon, but in history 20 years is less than the blink of an eye. So it's not clear where it's going to come out.

I'll give you an example of a paradox at this moment. For the last ten years, most newspapers have radically reduced their foreign reporting capabilities, because it costs a lot of money. There's no evidence that foreign reporting actually helps on the bottom line. So you could say we're in danger of having less reliable information about what's going on in the world, which is probably true.

But looking at it from the vantage point of the reader, the audience, now there's more than ever. Right now on my computer I can tap into 20 different free sources of news from Argentina, or Kenya or India—including local sources of news from those places. I could never have done that before. Big media have fewer reporters in the field overseas—a fact. But are we able to be more globally literate? I would say, absolutely. Are we more globally literate? I wouldn't go that far. That paradox is about a lot of things that have nothing to do with media, per se.

RW: Right. But you're saying that the possibility is there today.

PVS: I have more information at my disposal than ever before. I mean, this is sort of obvious, right? And even in an area where conventional traditional media has radically reduced its reporting power.

In a journalism class of mine I ask, "Are 20-year-olds more globally literate today than they were in my generation or the generation before? What do you think?" It's not a simple question, and there's not a simple answer. I think we know more. The availability of information is exponentially more than it ever was. But I'm worried about dedicated reporting power in those places—which is drying up.

You get citizen journalism, and that's great. But it's not filtered. It can be a huge asset. We never had the capacity to have somebody holed up in a building being shelled in Damascus and still able to post so we could see in real time what that's like. But that

cannot substitute for having a person there trained in an objective methodology who is trying to help us understand what is actually happening there.

So we've added a tremendous new resource while a traditional resource has been greatly diminished. What's the net there? I don't think we'll know for a while.

RW: Right.

PVS: I'm certainly not discouraged. We're riding this huge wave of new information, new ways of doing things, new relationships between producers of information and consumers of information so that the distinctions between these are not clear anymore. This is all tremendous stuff, but I wouldn't go so far as to say that the net is that we're going to be in a better place.

RW: As you say, there's an exponentially greater amount of information out there through the Internet, and there's also, I think, a human tendency to want to be entertained. So there's a competition going on for our attention in all kinds of ways with advertising and so on, in order to make money. In other words, there are big forces at work pandering to our weaknesses.

PVS: Oh, yeah.

RW: This is a huge thing going on.

PVS: I couldn't agree more. The good news in all that might be—and I see this with students—is that they've grown up in a world where this is happening. The marketing is so 24/7, so relentless, so sophisticated that I think there's a fair chance that, without even knowing it, we'll come out on the other end so savvy that all this won't have as much influence on people as we fear it might. I say this hopefully, because like I said, we're in the middle of a tsunami.

I think people could be developing almost an innate filtering mechanism where they can sort of get the good stuff out of it without really thinking. Whereas I think you and I grew up in a world where advertising was more primitive, and it was separate. Now that it's joined, we see a lot of danger there. And there is. But we may just not have developed the skills that the kids have where they can see.

The New York Times just redesigned its front page yesterday, or its web page. There's a lot of debate about something they're calling "paid posts" which are included on the page. An advertiser pays them to put a post there that's clearly labeled, but the legacy media—as we would call them—are wrestling with how to include some of this material,

which is not journalism. However, the audience nowadays is totally used to getting material from all sources. A key life skill these days is to have a good crap detector so you smell a sales pitch however sophisticated it might be and at the same time filter useful information even from sources with ulterior motives. I don't know about you, but when I was reading newspapers, I didn't really pay much attention to the ads. They were just in the way until I got to the next story, right?

RW: Right, definitely.

PVS: Well, now this stuff is all flung together. So I do think that there's a reasonable chance here that the audience, as this moves along, is getting savvier to all this. Whether or not that means they'll be able to separate the truth out from all the salesmanship—I mean there's a question for society as a whole. Right? Do we know the truth anymore, even when we see it?

RW: That's a huge question. It's a very hopeful idea that people will develop the discrimination to somehow sense what's bullshit and what isn't.

PVS: Right. I think they have that detector, but it isn't even something they're that aware of. It was Manuel Castells, a professor at Berkeley, who wrote a huge volume early on about what the Internet was doing. He saw that we were entering an era in which people were going to receive an uninterrupted flow of disconnected messages. In other words, nothing was compartmentalized anymore.

Go on the Internet and you might see an image of somebody dying in Syria, followed by a pornographic image from tonight's reality show TV, followed by an ad to sell you a product. There's this fire hose of information. There's no filtering. There's just one thing after another.

So people, without even knowing it, are learning something about filtering. It's almost like if you point a fire hose at somebody and they need a drink of water, they'll find a way to get some water out of that.

RW: That's a very hopeful thing. But it seems like there are a lot of places where that's not happening. Let's take the news that panders to the far right and take some extreme examples, like people who deny the Holocaust.

PVS: Or the Obama citizenship thing.

RW: The “birthers,” yes. I mean it seems that huge numbers of people are susceptible to believing in complete nonsense. And it seems there’s an industry that panders to this. It’s sort of startling. But if there’s an angle to be worked, someone seems to be out there working it. It’s like a no-holds barred situation.

PVS: Particularly in the political realm. Groups like that can be recruited for a particular political cause even if the people behind the recruiting know the issue is sort of bogus. I mean they are ripe for the picking. Right?

RW: Yeah.

PVS: Let’s say you have a fairly sophisticated agenda of kneecapping Obama, just making sure that he’s a failure. The “birthers” could be very helpful. In other words you can recruit a group and manipulate it to bring it into an end game that‘s really about debilitating Obama more than it is seriously about the birth issue.

I think that happens across the political spectrum, and it can happen now to a degree it probably never could have before. The political sophistication is available and the tools, along with the money.

RW: In the context of this, I just suddenly feel the shining necessity for the ideal of the pursuit of truth. What’s going to save us from a train ride to hell?

PVS: Yes. We have a kind of Tower of Babel. So much stuff is going on and the nobility of the pursuit of the truth becomes apparent in the middle of all this information. I think the real question now is how to make sure that those people who are involved in that kind of noble pursuit are heard and protected.

RW: Yes.

PVS: So what is the most effective way for those people to be heard? It used to be that we had a more orderly world where you could look at a reputable network or newspaper, or whatever. In a way, they had a stage they’d earned and could say something and people might listen. That’s hard now.

I think that pursuit still happens, but the question is who hears it? And who can distinguish it from the rest? Because it can easily get dismissed. I mean this whole era of talking heads on television has really numbed us. It has fooled us into thinking that the truth is just another point of view—that there really isn’t anything other than another opinion.

RW: That's really a big thing you're saying there. And in terms of a platform that has earned people's high regard, the Christian Science Monitor is a good example. What would you say about the Christian Science Monitor in this respect?

PVS: Well it is an example. And it's facing a lot of challenges today for that exact reason. You know, there are a number of respectable information sources, still. How do you speak so you're heard above the din? How do you separate yourself? Just speaking for The Monitor, I think its founding mission is one of the reasons it has such stature. It's over a hundred years old now.

RW: Can you say something about its founding mission?

PVS: In a nutshell, and this was the phrase used by the founder of the paper, their mission was to injure no man, but to bless all mankind.

RW: And what was the modality of the blessing?

PVS: I think the modality of the blessing is grappling with issues of consequence and looking for the truth so that a wide audience can both know about and address what needs addressing.

RW: Looking for the truth, again. That goes back to the reverence your father had for the truth.

PVS: Yes, and his admiration for people who have the courage to stick with the pursuit of the truth.

RW: Integrity.

PVS: Integrity, yes.

RW: What does that mean, that word “integrity”? It’s a beautiful word.

PVS: Yes. I think it’s pretty close to what we’re talking about. The integrity to be pursuing your highest sense of what the truth is, not being blown off course in that pursuit by either the difficulty of it or the competing parties. I mean journalists are in the real world. They’re dealing with people who all have vested interests in whatever the topic may be. So it’s not like they’re information virgins.

RW: There has to be something impersonal there that transcends the subjective views and desires. And if there isn’t, we’re kind of lost, in a way.

PVS: Right.

RW: The ideal of freedom of the press is grounded in a belief that there’s something greater and more important than anybody’s dog in the race.

PVS: Right. So I think this is part what I was talking about where the process can be objective. And part of that objectivity is for it to be impersonal. But part of what is important about something that’s impersonal is that it also can be humane.

“Impersonal” can often be misunderstood—you know, the journalist goes into a chaotic situation and doesn’t feel anything. This is where the idea of objectivity breaks down, because you think, how can you not feel something in some of these situations? You can’t. And if you could, you probably wouldn’t be a good journalist. So impersonal doesn’t mean that.

RW: No. Impersonal is not cold or inhuman. In Plato we have the True, the Good and the Beautiful as the three faces of the Divine, or the Real. So this impersonal thing could equate to the greater good.

PVS: I think you’re into something there. I mean journalism in its highest form is, to me, highly inspirational. It sort of enters your consciousness at a higher level than your personal interest. For everybody it’s a little different, but it’s sort of like how you feel when you have an epiphany. You feel like you just sensed the truth about something. Right? You feel lifted out of where you were at, which is this personal “I think this” or “I think that” or “I don’t like him”—this opinion-based-view of the world. I think you transcend that.

I think good journalism is like good art. When I say “good journalism,” what I really am saying is good communication, good writing—whatever it is for me to enter your consciousness at a slightly elevated level.

Imagine the challenge of doing that in journalism when a very ugly story is being told, like reporting on a war. I’m not going to sugarcoat it.

RW: Right.

PVS: But there still can be a way to do that where you see something that isn’t just a body count. You recognize something universal. You recognize something about humanity. You recognize some connection between you and some higher level of consciousness. Then I would say, okay, that’s what it’s about.

In its most effective form, it does that. But it’s always a work in progress. In a way I think all good media are striving for those moments, but it’s rooted in your mission. What is your mission? To injure no man and to bless all mankind. Those words were written in 1908. Those are not sound bites from today’s marketing world.

I have the highest respect for other media, new and old. There’s a lot going on in the non-profit world now in the media space, by the way—the Center for Investigative Reporting in Berkeley, for instance. It’s a non-profit run by experienced journalists who found their work harder and harder to do in the conventional media industry as resources were being drained away. It’s a very different arrangement, but they’re still performing this function of being a watchdog. That function is alive and kicking, and it’s morphing into new forms—and there are new risks. I mean, non-profits are raising money all the time. If I write the biggest check, what influence do I have?

RW: Right, right.

PVS: Those are the things you’ve got to guard against. But their mission is pretty pure. Investigative reporting, in particular, is beyond just informing people. It’s really about changing for the better, stripped of an ideology. There’s a lot of stuff we could agree that doesn’t work right. Corruption, for instance. Nobody is going to say, oh that’s okay.

RW: Well, that brings me to asking what are some of the highlights in your own career? The stories you’ve done that have been the most meaningful?

PVS: Probably, like in all careers, it comes down to people that you’ve met in your line of work. I was fortunate to work in South Africa during the ending years of Apartheid from ’81 to ’85. It was a highly segregated, restrictive, oppressive society. But those

circumstances often produce heroes and some of my biggest heroes were there. Interviewing Alan Paton was sublime. He talked about how he came to write the first paragraph of his book Cry, the Beloved Country, which just sings. It's from the heart.

He was in Europe at the time and had gone to a church service in this huge cathedral and had one of those experiences where he felt light pouring in on him and the words were just coming. He went back to his hotel and wrote it. I always look at that first paragraph when I read it. It's so beautiful, and his story behind it.

You have to appreciate that white South Africans who stayed in South Africa always carried the weight of the question: am I complicit? And what was the right thing to do?

I met Beyers Naude, an Afrikaner. He was a high-ranking member of the Dutch Reform Church, which provided a kind of theological justification for Apartheid in South Africa. He was a member of the Broederbond, which was the secret society of Afrikaners. He was at the center of Afrikaner power and then, fairly late in life, he woke up one day and said, "It's all wrong!" And he said it publicly. It would be like a senator standing up right now in Washington and saying, "We're all bought and sold by the lobbyists," or something like that. He was basically banned and put under house arrest.

So I got a chance to interview him. The rules of house arrest were that people could only see him one at a time. I went to his modest home in a working class white suburb. It was just a remarkable encounter. It took so much courage to do what he did at a late stage in life. He stood up to the entire establishment, and to all of his friends and social circle. He had become a pariah and was banned at home.

RW: Wow.

PVS: In contrast, Winnie Mandela was banned in the same way. She was put in a god-forsaken, dusty township in Bloemfontain. She was from Johannesburg. So that would be like taking someone from New York City and putting them somewhere in the middle of Kansas. Through a contact, I was able to arrange an interview with her. To be a reporter in South Africa at the time, you had to break the rules all the time. I was supposed to get permission to interview her, but I would not have gotten it.

RW: Were these interviews all under the aegis of The Monitor?

PVS: Yes. So I went to visit her. It was funny, because we'd made a date. I found the township and there was a check-in station, but I just drove past it and nobody said anything. There were a bunch of dirt roads out in the middle of nowhere, dry and wind-blown, with no street signs or anything. In asking a couple of people, I found her house and pulled up outside. I sat in my car and waited—and waited and waited and waited. Then eventually somebody from the house came out.

RW: You didn’t knock on the door?

PVS: No. I was being careful. I figured they knew I was there. My real concern was I didn’t want to get her in any more trouble. She wasn’t supposed to see anybody.

RW: I see.

PVS: I figured that if she came out, she’d know how to handle it. When somebody finally came out I said, “Is Winnie here?”

“No, no. She’s not here.”

Anyway, to make a long story short, they thought I was an Afrikaner, a security guy just keeping an eye on things. As soon as they realized I wasn’t, she came out. And because I was not supposed to enter her home, she just sat in the car with me and we talked. She ended up having a very controversial trajectory later on. But she was a very impressive person, very impressive. She sort of kept the flame going while Nelson Mandela was in prison.

I’ll tell one other story. There was a Member of Parliament named Helen Suzman. She was of English heritage and was also a liberal in opposition. Most of the English in the white population were either vocally, or at least quietly, opposed to apartheid. And she was also, but she was vocal about it. She was doing it in a legal way; she could stand up and say things—you know? A tough, tough lady. Very impressive. When I met her she was in her 60s, steel gray hair. She was the one who over the years made a point of always going and visiting Nelson Mandela in prison. She never stopped. She became kind of a conduit of what he was thinking and saying. Being a Member of Parliament, she had some protection. She also delivered The Monitor. The Christian Science Monitor was one of the few newspapers that Nelson Mandela read in prison.

RW: Wow.

PVS: The reason he could read it was because the guards there saw “Christian” in the title. They figured it was a religious publication, so that was okay.

RW: That’s great.

PVS: In fact, later in his life—after he was president—Mandela was in Boston and wanted

to see where The Monitor was published. So he came to the grounds of the Christian Science Monitor just as a tourist to see where the paper was produced that he'd read in prison. I mean, that's a fitting example of him, right? He didn't make any fuss. He didn't ask to see anybody. He just came.

RW: That's very touching.

PVS: And Desmond Tutu was also extremely accessible. I saw him on a number of occasions. He worked in a small office. He was working for the Council of South African Churches at the time. You could just walk in and talk to him.

He was also pretty fearless about saying what he thought. There were two things about Desmond Tutu—his great sense of humor, which is always appreciated with people in high and important positions. People said that about Mandela, too, that he had a very impish sense of humor. But Tutu did, as well. He was having a laugh about everything, and he had great humility. When I would interview him, he would say, "I'm a leader only because nature abhors a vacuum." Meaning the real leaders were all in jail.

So South Africa for me was like, "Wow! This is the real deal! These are people!"

When I came back to the States what struck me was our heroes were like Hollywood people playing a role. I was always grateful that in South Africa I felt that I actually saw the real thing—people putting it all on the line for something.

Steve Biko was dead by the time I got there. He was a young black nationalist who the government was very afraid of. Mandela and others, Walter Sisulu, they were the ANC leaders, and they were all in jail. But of course, the black community was going to create new leaders. Steve Biko was a very impressive young man. And he didn't last, but I got a chance to talk to the mother of his child who was a doctor and political activist. She started a clinic out in the middle of nowhere with no resources; and she was alone with a child. She was under some restrictions also, because of her connections to Steven Biko. She started a health clinic out of nothing.

RW: So you were there while history was being made and, like you were saying, this was the real deal.

PVS: South Africa was such an incredible story because, in a sense, it was a moral tale where the moral issue was so obvious. And you could see it playing out. I had a lot of white friends and you could see their conflict. None of them were apologists for Apartheid. But because they had children, where would they go? When's the right time to leave with children? A lot of them did. Or should they stay and try to make it a better place. But how do you live in a system like that without compromising yourself?

RW: Did you ever go to a war zone?

PVS: Yes, but not like Iraq, which was an official war zone. There were wars all around South Africa at the time. Namibia was still controlled by South Africa and Jonas Savimbi was leading a war of independence. Angola had its own insurrection. Rhodesia had recently turned into Zimbabwe, and there was a rebel movement in Mozambique. Southern Africa had become a proxy war between the Soviet Union and the US, with Cuban troops sent to Angola to resist the rebel movement of Jonas Savimbi. That projection of Soviet power—via Cuba— into Africa was, in many ways, a key event in the Cold War.

RW: Oh yes, I remember that.

PVS: It was not quite the Cuban Missile Crisis, but I think it was Kissinger, he basically said okay. The Soviets were projecting military strength via Cuba into Southern Africa, into Angola. It was its own kind of Southeast Asia moment. Where is this going to go? I mean it gave South Africa a great distraction as in, "It's not about apartheid. It's about Communism."

RW: I see what you're saying.

PVS: It complicated how the United States would play this. Zimbabwe was brand new. It had been Rhodesia and they had had their own revolution. And Mugabe and others had taken power. Mozambique had been a Portuguese colony. There was an insurrection going on there against the new black government. So South Arica was both trying to preserve Namibia and it was fomenting unrest against new black governments in Mozambique and, to some extent, in Zimbabwe. All of which was to create a region of enough chaos where they could say to the West, or at least to the United States, you need us. You need stability. Let's worry about Apartheid later.

RW: Yeah. That's interesting.

PVS: So every day there was something. I think it was early on in my tenure there that the ANC planted a bomb and blew down some electric pylons up near Pretoria just to make a statement. The ANC had embraced violence as a legitimate tactic. It wasn't suicide bombings and stuff, but South Africa started having this feel of instability.

RW: Fascinating. Now, I realize that you were at The Monitor when 9/11 happened.

PVS: Right.

RW: Would you talk about that a little bit?

PVS: I had been there only a few months.

RW: And your role there was?

PVS: Editor-in-Chief. I'd left the Mercury News and had become the bureau chief in San Francisco for The Monitor. So I'd left a writing and reporting job.

RW: I see. And you'd gone back to Boston?

PVS: Right. 9/11 was a great moment for The Monitor because it drew on The Monitor's strength, which was a lot of international experience. This was a global story and it drew on people with a lot of experience in the field, which is something that should not be taken for granted. I mean you can't have an event like that and really understand what's going on in the Muslim world unless you had somebody paying attention—living, working, reporting on that part of the world—for some time.

RW: And The Monitor had that?

PVS: Yes. The Monitor had been in the Middle East for a very long time. So we had some expertise, not in great numbers, but we had expertise—and that was a huge asset. Also I think The Monitor always had a mindset which was, first of all, let's not over-react.

RW: Not get hysterical.

PVS: Not get jingoistic. Let's actually try to play a role here that, as ugly as that event

was, a role that has a slightly higher purpose. And I would say that the reporting staff and the editing staff there really rose to the occasion. When 9/11 happened—I mean you could imagine what it's like in a newspaper with a story like that. People were exhausted. It was all hands on deck non-stop. Right?

RW: Right. Did people sleep in the office? I mean how did you…?

PVS: We had reporters in the Middle East in that different time zone. And the editors were dealing with those reporters, basically, around the clock. And things were moving fast. I mean I've never seen a newsroom work harder, or for longer hours. Just imagine the sea of information coming out. It was wall-to-wall. But probably every newspaper can say that about 9/11. It's just what you do. And before you looked up, a week had gone by.

But my training had taught me—and this was largely from The Mercury News— that even a day or two into that you start asking yourself, what can we do that's really valuable rather than just keeping up with the torrent of information? In other words, what is going to be our contribution?

RW: Right.

PVS: How do you distinguish yourself in the middle of something like that? So towards the end of that week, I knew that we needed to do something special. I didn't know what it was. But it was my challenge for the staff. "Okay, you guys are doing a great job, but what's The Monitor's story in this big story? What's our story? What are we going to bring to this?"

Towards the end of that week I said, "Let's do a special edition." I was talking to the managing editor. He was the operational guy. I said, "What do you think about doing that?" It would probably mean that we needed to work through the weekend. How would that fly? We had an exhausted staff. He appropriately said, "People are pretty fried. That might be asking for too much."

You've also got to realize with a story like that you've got to pace yourself. It's not going to end in a week.

RW: Right.

PVS: So I thought about what he said. I decided the way to go was to simply to make an announcement to the entire staff that there would be a meeting on Friday at the end of the workday. It would be about doing something special for the Monday edition. I understood how hard they worked. This would be after hours, a brainstorming session,

and it would be voluntary. So I get to the meeting and, of course, it's standing room only. Everybody was there.

That told me, okay, that's the character of this place. And I think that's the character of the higher end of journalistic organizations. So what did we do? We did several things. We did a special edition. It was the first time The Monitor had ever done it. And we had an entire front page that was just one story, which we'd never done. And the question we formulated was: "Why do they hate us?"

RW: Why do they hate us?

PVS: And that's what we had our reporters ask—in Pakistan, in the Middle East and in Europe: basically, why would they do this? That was very different from where American media was at that point.

RW: Yes, definitely.

PVS: All the coverage was about this as an atrocious act, which it was, and about retaliation, and the military. It was just blowing past the question: is there something that we really need to know?

RW: Right, right.

PVS: And we discovered that there was. In our story we ended up having this great anecdote by a college-educated, middle class man in Pakistan who we interviewed. He said, "This is outrageous. This is not what Islam is about…" and so on. But then he went on to say, "But I've got to tell you, deep inside everybody over here, when they saw it happen, part of them said, yes." That was the germ of the story. We're not talking about, why would Al Qaeda do this? We're talking about why, throughout the Muslim world, there was a kernel there where people felt like we deserved something.

You don't have to subscribe to that logic to feel like it's an important question—how do moderates in that part of the world really see the United States now? Following that we asked another question, and this was the headline: "What is the right response?"

It was sort of a given that the response would be military. But looking back at it now, you can wonder, was that the right response? I mean, will a time come when we feel strong enough to approach something like that in a very different way? And how might that actually change the world?

RW: That's something special to have played a role in that coverage and in raising those questions.

PVS: Yes.

RW: Now there's a Pulitzer in your career, isn't there?

PVS: I shared a Pulitzer at the Mercury News for our Loma Prieta earthquake coverage in 1989. The whole news staff got a Pulitzer, me included.

RW: Okay. Well let's stay with The Monitor. Did it get some kind of special recognition?

PVS: It was recognized in the journalistic community—and elsewhere. It had a ripple. That question suddenly got put out there. There was some controversy, which there always is if you're asking the right question, because somebody is going to say, "Why are you asking that question? Are you doubting that it's an outrage that we need to respond to?"

That's the kind of thinking where you just want to fast forward to taking military action. So pausing for a moment and asking, "What do they actually think of the United States over there? Even the moderate Muslim community that we think is kind of on our side here? What do they really think of us?" I think Americans had no clue, no clue.

RW: It was courageous to ask it, and to publish that. Of course, it's in the direction of what's the truth?

PVS: That's getting to a truth in this whole thing. There is this big swirl, but down at its root, there's something bigger than just the act of it. You can consider the people that actually did the bombing crazy. Okay. But there are concentric circles around them, and I think we found in the Muslim community that there was a kind of reluctant, unspoken satisfaction that somebody gave the United States a bloody nose. Why would that be?

RW: A big subject in itself, to say the least. Now my getting to know you came out of an interview I did of a friend of yours. You asked for a copy and I sent you the issue it was in [works & conversations, #12].

PVS: And the rest is history [laughs].

RW: Right. And in getting to know you, I heard about Nipun Mehta. Of course, after hearing a few stories, I wanted to meet this guy. Now you're the person who broke the first big story about Nipun and the little group of volunteers he'd gathered around himself. So would you reflect a little, first of all, on meeting Nipun and what that's meant for you?

PVS: Well it happened during this transitional period when I'd left the Mercury News and had returned to The Monitor. I was still in San Francisco and was writing about Silicon Valley, among other things. This was during the dot-com era. Right?

RW: Right.

PVS: So I'd gotten interested in the question: where are the Carnegies and the Rockefellers? You know? There was this tremendous wealth being generated, and by 20-year-olds. This is all very new, still. I started asking where is the philanthropic side of technology in Silicon Valley? I wanted to be there at its birth, but it was not easy to find. The money was ridiculous, but these weren't people at the end of their careers deciding to give lots of money to something; they were just beginning.

RW: Right.

PVS: So Tom Mahon, you know him?

RW: Yes, I've met him.

PVS: I'm so grateful for having had this chance encounter with him. I think it was at an organizational meeting he happened to be at in Silicon Valley. I introduced myself and we met. He had worked for one of the big technology companies in the communications field. He knew the field extremely well and was involved in communicating about technology. So I asked him that question and he said, "Oh, I know this group called Charity Focus. They're just starting."

I don't think he described much of what they did, but he provided the contact with Nipun, who was still working at Sun Microsystems. I contacted Nipun and he responded very quickly with, "Yeah, we'd love to talk about what we're doing." I didn't have any

expectations one way or the other. We met at a café in Berkeley. He was very engaging and it seemed like it was going to be an okay story.

Then he said something that sort of blew me out of the water. Just off-handedly he said, “CharityFocus is really not about helping anybody. It’s really about engaging in generosity to help yourself.”

It wasn’t the construct I had in mind. It was going to be about these brilliant young engineers helping, right? Then the more I thought about it, wow! That’s a radical view of what generosity is! You could call it the transformative power of generosity rather than I need to help you”—which can also be very noble, right?

RW: Right. And this was not the philanthropy you'd imagined, a young Silicon Valley guy with tons of money. But someone with very different approach.

PVS: He had sort of flipped that equation. And that’s what did it. I mean, the interview was great. Then I brought a photographer out from Boston and we went to his office at Sun Micro for the last piece for the story. As I was leaving his office, I noticed a little tennis trophy on his desk. “Oh, so you play tennis?”

And he said, “Oh, it was just an employee tournament.”

I said, “We should play sometime.” Usually it would be left there, but he said, “Definitely.” And we did; it became kind of ritual for us.

RW: And thanks to you, I’ve gotten to know him, too. He’s remarkable—along with the people he’s attracted. So what is that kernel he embodies that’s turned out to be so powerful?

PVS: I’ll just talk freely here. Just to preface it, Nipun is an extremely deep person. You sense that right away. But he’s also very approachable and pretty transparent. When I think of Nipun, I just think of clear water. And he seems to have an instinct for what’s meaningful to talk about in any given moment. And he’s a very joyful person. Yet what he’s doing is profound. I think he would hate to think that he’s a model for anybody, but I think all of us who have watched how he does things can’t help but feel a certain amount of just deep respect for the clarity and transparency with which he does things.

So my connection with him that started with tennis really grew. I feel like he’s a brother. It grew more from the quality of that relationship than it did from being really impressed with the externals of what he’s doing.

RW: Okay. Let’s look at some of the externals. A basic one is the idea of a “gift economy” which is a fundamental part of ServiceSpace [formerly CharityFocus]. I know you’ve

reflected about that. What would you say about that?

PVS: To start with, ServiceSpace has created accessible opportunities to be generous in a way that's irresistible. That's a really big thing. And I don't just mean activities, but an environment that, in a fairly effortless way, nurtures and calls forth the generous spirit that's in all of us. The brilliance of ServiceSpace is that it can meet people wherever they're at. That's part of its design, which is not necessarily a conscious design, but an ever-evolving one that almost organically corresponds to what the community needs just in time to provide it.

I think it comes from the people, like Nipun, who have fostered and nurtured this thing, and have watched it grow. Their own generosity has created these multiple forms and levels of opportunity for people to participate wherever they're at in terms of their consciousness and time and interests.

It's like they've removed any reason not to be generous. There are just multiple opportunities to be generous in what you do. And what they call "the ripple effect" of that is huge. It can be so simple. And it's profound. They've taken a lot of this to a high art, but to me, the social contribution of this—at its root—is that they've found a way to engage people of all cultures, races, genders, ages, experiences, ideologies—and engage them in something that's universal. And engage them in a way that's just so comfortable and natural. And as you do it, you strengthen your own capacity to do more of it and keep doing it. In a sense there is no desired outcome and, at the same time, there is this vital outcome.

RW: And this focus on the giver continues, don't you think?

PVS: I think that's still absolutely true that it's about the transformative power of generosity for the participant. That's still very radical. And the results are profound, but the results are internal for the people who engage with this kind of activity. I think ServiceSpace's collateral results are of secondary importance.

RW: I think ServiceSpace stands apart from other organizations in that there really isn't any hidden agenda. It's really what it says it is, a no-strings-attached thing.

PVS: Right. I'm glad you brought that up, because I almost don't mention that. The no-strings part is almost impossible to believe until you get involved with ServiceSpace. You can say that to somebody and they'll go, "Yeah, I've heard that before." You know?

RW: Right.

PVS: There is no quid pro quo. There's not much else in my life I can think of I can say that about. But I really could say that about ServiceSpace.

RW: We can use the word service here.

PVS: This is real service. The only outcome is to create opportunities, create this ability, create this system that meets you at whatever level you're at. I think it calls forth something that maybe you parked somewhere.

RW: I just realized how related that is to the mission statement of the Christian Science Monitor.

PVS: Well, yes. That's not been lost on me. I don't want to morph these one into the other, but it's certainly consistent with blessing all mankind. That sounds really big, and it is, but doing any small thing from a space of real generosity is a blessing.