

Interview with Vishant Shah

**Interviewed by Polly Sonifer
April 3, 1997**

PS: This is Monday, April 3, 1997. This is Polly Sonifer, and I'm interviewing Vishant Shah. Hi, Vishant. How are you tonight?

VS: Good.

PS: Good. First of all, tell me a little bit about yourself, where you were born, the date of your birth, and some general information about your family when you were born, at the time you were born.

VS: Sure. My parents were part of the 1965 immigration from India to the Western world, and my dad got a job in London and then in Canada. My parents were kind of unique from the rest of the group because, at least they claimed, they wanted to see the world and not necessarily for a better education or better jobs. They did get a better education, better jobs, but they were restless, and actually I think I have a part of that wanderlust, because I like to travel, also.

Anyway, my dad got a job in Canada, and my dad and my mom were corresponding, and my mom really wanted--she was in English class, and she was really wondering what it was like outside of India. So she came, and they got married as a result. It's kind of two different parts to the story. I'm not really sure--it wasn't an arranged marriage, but it was, and I'm not really quite sure what happened. Anyway, they came to Nova Scotia, they landed in Nova Scotia, and then my dad, who had not actually traveled a lot, got a job in Syracuse, New York. That was his next job. And then that's where I was born, in Syracuse.

PS: What are your parents' names?

VS: My mom's name is Shanti Shah and my dad's name is Ramji Shah.

PS: And so their marriage wasn't really arranged?

VS: It's not clear. My dad said immediately when he saw her, he loved her. And actually, my dad's oldest brother and my mom's oldest sister were married first, and that's kind of how they knew each other.

There's two different sides of the story, of course; my dad wanted to marry her, and when he was in Bombay, he was an architect and he was doing reasonably well, and then she

said no. Actually, there's a reasonable age gap between my parents, and it would have been better for my dad to marry my mom's older sister. She had a large family. But he wanted her, and that was it. She kept saying no, and my grandfather said, "I can show you a thousand other more beautiful women. Don't marry my daughter." And the family was kind of against it because they both are very strong-willed, very strong-willed, and I probably have that, too, of course. And the stars just didn't say it was a right marriage.

So he left. And then he was writing as the ship went to Africa, the tip of Africa and went through the Red Sea or whatever and all that, and they corresponded. She was looking for an out, and he said he would sponsor her. And she wanted to travel, and suddenly she was in Canada. Of course, my uncle, her brother, traveled with her, and so then they were married. It was a civil marriage in Canada, so my marriage will be a big deal, because that really wasn't for her. You know, when you have kids, you place your dreams in them and your hopes in them. So it wasn't arranged, but it was. I'm not sure exactly. But kind of--I mean, this isn't a big deal, but they were strong-willed and the stars were kind of weird, subsequently they divorced. So who knows? I'm not sure if you believe the stars or whatever is in there, but they were right.

PS: And that's fairly unusual in the Indian community, isn't it?

VS: My parents are very unusual for the Indian community. So, yes, I think that there's a--this is kind of tough to say, but I think that there's a lot of people in the community who don't have very healthy marriages, and the culture just does not allow for that.

But my mom and dad were in a situation where my mom is very strong-willed, and she is a very unique individual, and has done a lot in the Indian community. I mean, she is my role model, definitely, all the way--because she traveled so much. He was traveling so much, you know, we went to Indiana and then we came here, and my mom really liked it here. That's about the time, I think, when I was kind of starting to think about school, and she really liked it here and the education is so good. The weather is so cold, but. And then he moved on to St. Louis, and she didn't like that at all, really did not like St. Louis. And there's been a couple other families who moved to St. Louis and moved back, but I don't know why. And it was kind of like we just stayed here and he kept moving on, and so it wasn't like, boom, there was a break.

I guess I would say this more for my generation than the general Indian community, but it's just that, it was my experience that you just can't have those kind of strong-willed people married together. It's not possible to last very long. They love each other a lot still, which is really neat to see. I don't think you see that a lot, the way they care for each other. I mean, it's still very hard for them to be together, like at my graduation and other functions, but you can still see the love, which I think is really amazing. And I've been affected by it, definitely, but I really appreciate that.

What was your question? Your question was, that's very unusual, and it is. Actually, subsequently they both have remarried white Americans, which is even more unusual. My dad and his second wife actually have adopted an Indian child who is about eight years old.

There's a lot of ways to look at it, and the culture will tell you a certain way to look at it. I kind of look at it as I have the best of both worlds and I know a lot more about traditional American culture because I have part of that, and I know a reasonable amount about Indian culture because I know part of that, and so it's kind of neat. It's not necessarily the easiest thing all the time. You have to remember so many birthdays and anniversaries, and you end up with a lot more grandparents than you ever expected. But, yes, it's pretty unique, and I think in general it worked out for the best overall.

PS: How old were you when they divorced?

VS: You know, that's a good question. I think, like I said, there wasn't like this line that said, "Boom, here it was." Kind of the way I remember it is that during school I was with my mom and my stepdad--his name is Stefan. I just call him Stefan. And during holidays, I was either in India or with my dad.

I think it was kind of that time frame of like 1975, 1976, somewhere around there, because they were married in 1969, I think, and I was born in 1971. Actually, I was my parents' anniversary gift to each other, because I was born December 1, 1971, and that's when they were married in 1969. I was supposed to be a Christmas baby, but I came out early. And so it's kind of funny, but I think it was around that time, because he just kind of moved down to St. Louis, and then he was there for a while. And then she kind of--actually, I remember one of the Diwalis, which is kind of the Indian new year. It's actually more of a Hindu Indian new year than a Moslem Indian new year, but the Jains and the Gujaratis, everyone celebrates it, because it's all so interwoven.

But it's just that I remember him being there and us being in an apartment in Burnsville, and then I remember him not being there. And then one of my cousins from India was there, and my mom and I shared a one-room apartment. She is really an incredible person, and now we kind of laugh about how bad it was. She talks about how she could have applied for assistance, but her pride would not let her. In the Indian community, you're, heck, no, they're not going to do that. And even at that time, I was still going to Montessori, which is a private, like pre-school. And we'd go to Edina, too, every day, and we'd sit in the parking lot and have breakfast before it opened, and then she'd go to work and I would go to pre-school. And they talk about scholarships and all that, and she wouldn't have anything to do with that; she paid for it fully. So education was very important to her.

PS: So you were the first born and the only born?

VS: I am the single child, yes. Some people say only child, and I think that they're all only children who are very privileged and have a lot of resources. I think the key is to recognize your privilege and not to necessarily say, "Oh, yes, I have these things or I had all these opportunities."

I had a lot of opportunities and I really had a lot of things go my way because I was a single child. I had a lot of opportunities to travel. My mom thought that was the best way to get educated, that the public school is okay, but really where you were going to learn things is going back and forth to India and spending time. Actually, through that process, you have to have these two huge bags you take every time with you filled with all kinds of stuff. Inevitably, in there would be my toys from last year, and I had to share them with my cousins and I didn't get to bring them back.

So I kind of had the experience of having other siblings, because your cousins are like your brother cousins, your sister cousins. And actually, I have a cousin who I am really close to, Vimal, who now has a kid, which is just unreal, and we're the closest in age. My mom's family spans a couple of decades in cousins, and in my dad's family it isn't that far. So I had the kind of experience of a single child, but also an extended family very much, but I didn't have somebody pounding on me every day. And people who have those families have totally recognized that I am a single child. It's kind of like I can't put up with that kind of noise. People are just talking noise at you, and I'm just like, "Why are you saying this?" And they're like, "You didn't have an older brother or sister, did you?" and I say, "No."

But I have Suvarna, and actually she's coming in June of this year, '97. I'm really excited, because she's in second grade, and they go to school all year long in North Carolina, and so she's on nine weeks and off three weeks. She is incredible. I mean, her perspective.

PS: She's your half-sister, your adopted half-sister?

VS: Yes. The labels, it's so hard to kind of figure out what she is, but she is my dad and his second wife's adopted daughter, and she's my younger sister. And before it wasn't too good, but now it's just like she's totally opened up and she has lots of questions, and she has totally loosened up on the phone, and that's really cool. I know it's different than having her real close, like ten and twelve, but it'll be really neat to have her come and visit, at least.

I'm really excited for her to visit with my mom, actually, which is kind of weird if you think about it. But I think she can really learn, because my mom is such a strong Indian woman, and for her to see a role model like that is so important, especially when she's so young. I think that'll be just incredible for her. Because in North Carolina, they have so many Gujaratis, in the Research Triangle, and so many Indians, but my dad doesn't really

utilize those resources.

I think when you marry outside the community, whether it's outside the Gujarati community or outside the Indian community, whatever Indian means to you, there's just very slowly a disconnect, I think with men more so than women, because women are supposedly the traditional vessels of culture. I know that my Indian culture is a lot stronger because my mom was like, "This is important, and you're going to do this." And my stepdad, Stefan--he was president of the India Association before my mom was--president of the India Association. This was back when Zeke Stenek was running the organization, and this was like, you know, fifteen, twenty years ago.

I think part of the reason why she's involved is because we don't have this traditional Indian family. You know, the men have these roles. But actually, I really prefer this a lot more because I see some--and this isn't meant to be totally harsh on the Indian community, but I see a lot of Indian males playing tennis and not volunteering in the community. And whatever is your deal is your deal, but like for me, community service, that's very important.

I think growing up in the Twin Cities is a lot different than growing up in Chicago or New York or one of the large communities, because here we didn't have the luxury of having to bicker between the Gujaratis and the Punjabis. I mean, there are only so many of us. I mean, Godan [Nambudirupad] Uncle was an uncle, because even though he was from Kerala or the south, he was the only Indian in Burnsville at that time.

Even though there's drawbacks that you don't get as many video selections or whatever, you don't get all the Bollywood stars coming through, which I don't appreciate as much as others do, but I think things like SILC [School of Indian Language and Culture] have never been successful in any other community. That's because they're just so big and they get to enjoy those regional ethnic differences and they just don't want to get along. And here, cooperation is a lot stronger than it is in some of the other communities, because there just isn't very many of us, and when you're small, you have to struggle and you have to leverage and you have to get along. My mom was a big proponent of that, even though she still reverts back into her regional ethnic association. She'll say, "Oh, those Gujaratis," or "Oh, those Bengalis," or "Oh, those--you know. They all do that."

PS: What is your family's regional origins?

VS: My grandfather, both my grandfathers, my mom and dad's fathers, came from Kutch, and Kutch is a region, a desert region on the Indian-Pakistani border. It's kind of that little cleft that comes up right on the coast, and it's in the northern part in the state of Gujarat.

It's the typical story of any emerging country or developing country with the rural urban

migration, and my grandfather did it I'm not even sure how long ago, but probably in the forties or something, the thirties or something. I'm not sure how long ago. He went from Kutch, which is all these villages of just farmers, to Bombay.

So all of my family is in Bombay, and I have an aunt in Dallas. My dad's in Raleigh. Otherwise, everybody is in India still, and they have no interest in coming here, which is kind of funny, I think. You think about so many people who want to come to this country, and we can't even get them to visit, because they know where the life is good. And actually, they have a book on my mom's side that goes back thirteen generations that can trace them all the way back to Rajasthan. So it kind of went Rajasthan, Kutch, Bombay, and then to Canada and the U.S.

PS: What was your parents' mother tongue?

VS: Kutchi, which is a poor, desert man's language. It's an oral dialect. There's no written version, and the written version is Gujarati. So you have these Kutchis who are writing in Gujarati, and that's possible, but it's not quite grammatically right. So I can struggle through Gujarati, but Kutchi I can also struggle through. But I really want to go back for an extended period of time and get the language down in India, because I can't do it here and I think that's really important, especially for future generations.

PS: How would you describe your level of fluency in either Kutchi or in Gujarati?

VS: It's being able to struggle in a 911 situation.

PS: So you wouldn't say you're fluent at all?

VS: No. I can understand it. When we were in India in January, after a couple of days I could understand what everyone's saying, and I can respond kind of on a basic level, but that's about it.

PS: When you were a little child, your first language that you were spoken to, what was that?

VS: That was Kutchi, and I was speaking Kutchi, and probably Gujarati, better before I learned English.

PS: So when you went to preschool at the Montessori, what language were you speaking at that point?

VS: Oh, by then I think it was English. My mom talks about, I think my grandfather, my mom's grandfather, passed away in 1973 or 1972, and I made a trip there right before he died. That's when I wasn't speaking any English, probably. It's a couple years of probably

the native tongue, and then it just went to English.

I don't know, for some reason my mom has very little accent at all. I know they've done some studies and linguists have kind of said it totally depends on your whatever. There's a lot of variables. But she has very little accent, and I think that really played a role in my development--and also from very young, like when I was five, when I was first grade, Stefan was in the picture at that point. Having an English-speaker and my mother speaking very good English with very little accent, I think kind of cemented that my English was going to be fine. I mean, not fine. I have a Minnesota accent, if anything.

PS: Tell me a bit about the early childhood years. You said you were like three or four when your dad left for St. Louis.

VS: Uh-huh.

PS: And you and your mom lived in Burnsville in an apartment?

VS: We lived in this crazy little apartment off of Burnsville Parkway, and I don't think anybody was really proud of it. I had a good time, because you could play out in the back and there's a park close by. And then I could walk to my elementary school, and that was nice.

I guess, what about my childhood? I remember in Indiana, I think it was Hammond, Indiana, my mom used to work at the Gap store in Hammond, Indiana. I still have the button that says "The Gap" and "Shanti." It was in a really old strip mall--you won't even see Gap stores like it today. It's kind of a relic of Gap. And I remember playing in these huge snow piles. I guess Hammond doesn't get a lot of snow, and we must have been there when there was a ton of snow.

At that point, I was going to India every year, and that was a lot of fun because I just got to be with my cousins all the time. And actually, I used to have a pretty bad temper when I was a little kid, and they nicknamed me--they still call me "Mur-chi," which means chili pepper in Gujarati. So whenever I get upset, they always bring that up, of course, because that's a great rib.

I guess growing up in Minnesota--the reason I'm being hesitant is, there's so many different things. There's the good and the bad. The good is probably that I started skating when everyone else was skating for hockey, and Stefan was dragging me out to the ice rink. Actually, there was a rink really close by.

The bads are just the typical any other immigrant story, which is the really yucky stuff, the words and the slang and everything else. There was some of that, and I guess another variable of that was, when I would go to India, that my family would try to get me to

mediate between my mom and my dad, and, you know, a kid who's five or six years old can't really do anything. But the family was really well intentioned, and they're family and they want good things.

I spent a lot of time--I mean, that's one of the strongest memories I have, probably, is a lot of time with my stepmom, trying to figure this whole thing out, and with my stepdad--there's a lot of emotion wrapped up in everything.

I think that whole experience has really--not tainted me, but affected my outlook. I have no interest in getting married right now, and definitely that's an outcome of that. But I just think that there are different ways to care for people and there are different ways to have families and things. And culture is very important to me, but I don't think there's really a good way for me to, right now, kind of marry my culture and my family and everything. There's still so many things I want to do before I have a family. Unfortunately, I feel like some of my peers marry their culture, not the person, and I don't think that's the right thing. I'm glad they did what they did, because they learned a lot in that, but I can't make any sense of it and I really don't have an interest, and I think it's because there's a lot of junk going around, as there would be in any concentration like that. I know they [my parents] tried to kind of, you know, patch it up. I remember they took a trip to California, and I stayed with the Gadas, actually. It was kind of like a sleepover with Ketan and Lisa at the Gadas, and that was kind of neat. But that's kind of messy, and that's really hard for anybody to go through, I mean all parties around and concerned.

PS: So you don't remember at what point actually the divorce was legal?

VS: No. I mean, at that point it just became that I would visit him like on spring break or summertimes. I'm sure it was probably clear that this is how our family is going to be. My mom started working at NCS, National Computer Systems. They're the ones who do the scantron, the dots. They're the ones who developed that technology.

And that's where she met Stefan, and Stefan, you know, he was really great. In the community really, they kind of--like my peers now talk about, if they don't marry in the Indian community and they marry in the white community, they want to marry Stefan-types, because he was so involved in the community. He was making mango shakes and perfecting the whole process at the Festival of Nations before we even knew what was going on at the Festival of Nations. And he and I were in the back, making mango shakes in the early eighties.

In 1979, we bought a house together, which I'm sure was really cutting edge. But my mom and Stefan weren't married, and it really didn't matter. And like the Gadas and the Patels, Vinu, uncle, and Ranjan Patel, everyone just kind of accepted it and we kind of moved on, and it wasn't such a big deal about who was divorced and who was married.

I'm sure there were people that were like, "Ooh," whatever, but it just didn't matter. It just didn't matter.

There were a couple of years where it was kind of hazy, but then we got this house and it was kind of like, "This is family." My parents, Stefan and my mom, really treated me like a person, not like you are--I mean, there were times where you had to be like, "Okay, you are the child. You screwed up, and now you are going to pay the price."

Because of the whole process, I did mature very quickly. You just have to step up to the plate. And that's why I have a real hard time like screwing off, I think, with like my other co-workers, goofing off or just being a screwball, because I had to mature really quickly and step up to the plate. I don't really feel like I lost this childhood or whatever. I think that is a childhood, as opposed to eating sand and getting buried in childhood.

But there are huge benefits, which is that we got to do a lot of stuff that a lot of my peers weren't doing, and we did a lot of adult stuff. We went to the U Film Society and we saw risqué movies and we did all this stuff, and that was really neat because it really opened up my world and horizons, and through the traveling and through my parents kind of being open and stuff.

A couple of months ago, I was with my dad in Raleigh, and I told him that I don't remember him in the house together, like putting me to bed, basically. And that was a really hard thing to say, because, you know, you have your kid say that, that's like, "Oh, my God." And he did. It's just that I don't have a recollection of it, and that's really a powerful thing. And now our friendship is getting better, and we're doing a lot of stuff, a lot more stuff.

I remember the vacation stuff with my dad, but, I mean, in Burnsville, in that house. We used to actually have a house--I'm sorry, this is even before. We had a house in Apple Valley. I forgot about that. We had a house in Apple Valley, and that was probably that kind of 1973, 1974, 1975, 1975-76 time period, probably 1975-76, when my cousin came over. We had a house in Apple Valley, and I remember sled riding. We used to have a really big hill in the back, sledding down and having those typical red toboggans. I came down there and I hit the house, and the sled just cracked right down the middle and just went down. It was one of those cheap plastic ones. I was just so close, you just go, boom, and then it cracked.

I think what must have happened--yes, now I remember. We must have sold that house after things kind of fell apart and then moved into the apartment in Burnsville, and then tried to reconcile. I think that is the chronology. That's a better chronology. It's Apple Valley, Burnsville, and then we bought this house in Burnsville that was a mile away, and that worked out really well, actually.

PS: How did you see your mom--and your dad, as well--maintain their connections to India when you were a young child?

VS: What India are you talking about?

PS: In India. Bombay.

VS: So the subcontinent.

PS: Right.

VS: That was traveling and letters. I probably spent, my longest trip was probably maybe two months or something. I went back for most of my cousins' weddings up until like high school. Either I was sent or my mom and I went or I went with my aunt or I went with, you know, some other families in the Twin Cities, and that was the maintenance vehicle.

PS: So how many times would you say you've been to India?

VS: This trip in January '97, I think was my fourteenth trip. If they would have had frequent fliers back then, I would have been set for life.

My dad has not been back for ten years, and his father has passed away. I've really been trying to push him to go, because things have changed so much. In a sense, that's why I asked you what India you're talking about, because my parents' generation and all their peers are circa 1965 India and not 1997 India. They go and visit 1997 India, but they're not seeing 1997 India they want, and so as a result, they create a 1965 India here in the Twin Cities.

PS: What does that look like? Describe that for me.

VS: I think a part of the way to describe that is, if you look at some of the Indians that are coming over from India, they're more westernized than some of us in the cultural values, the religious values. My cousins, my mom was telling me, "I wish you could understand what they're talking about, because if you understood--and my ears are burning--what they're talking about."

Because we took this bus trip, and because our family has gotten so big and everyone's married off to all these different families, instead of going to every family's house for a meal when you're there, because it takes so long and we're there for such a short time, that we rented this big bus and went to the beach and had a beach party. It was kind of like a nice family reunion, actually. Not down to the beach. We went up into the hills of Bombay. It was actually really nice in January. It was a mango/papaya plantation or a

farm, and that was really neat.

I guess they're just so much more westernized, and they stay out later. I think the Indians here are a lot more conservative than a lot of the Indians in India. I mean, you'll get the whole realm, of course, and as you age, different things happen. All of my uncles and aunts started becoming more religious in India, and that's being reflected by here you see a stronger Jain community here now across the U.S. You see like Ram [Gada] Uncle aging. He's getting more interested in religion, and that is the cycle. You grow up. You get educated by fifteen, you know. And then you get married. You do the work for twenty years, and then you take an interest in your family and your religion. The cycle is there. The cycle is here.

PS: So you are watching this 1965 India that your parents' generation brought over here and seem to maintain. If you were going to change that, how would you wake them up to the fact that they haven't moved forward?

VS: Oh, I don't think you can change anything. I think they slowly kind of realize it and they give up. Like I did a paper at Carleton. It was my best paper I'd ever written, and it was for a South Asian Diaspora class. It was a great professor, Aisha Khan. I think she's now at SUNY [State University of New York], one of the campuses at SUNY.

We studied a couple of communities. We studied the South Asian community in the Caribbean, in Fiji, and East Africa, and that was really neat. You could see the Indians that emigrated circa 1920s or 1890s India in the Caribbean, and there they were indentured laborers. And then you look at the East African communities, and you have a really neat sense, and the Fiji Indians and the Indians who came here in the 1920s to work on the railroads and all this. And they all have different takes on it, but I don't think you can change much. If anything, I think it's really neat to watch.

Anyway, this paper, one of the best things about the paper is doing the research, because I learned so much about the immigration and about how things changed and how the economy needed this educated labor and so they adjusted the visas and everything for this flow to come in. And then in the seventies, it was adjusted even more so that these people could have their culture brought in. So then you imported the shopkeepers and the video store owners, and so their brothers and sisters could come. Because you had the engineers. Then you needed their groups. And so it was really neat to see how the visas changed and what visas were being granted. And now, of course, they don't grant many of them, especially if you've got a last name like Patel or something. They've got those blackballed.

The one thing in the paper that I discovered is from this guy out on the East Coast. I forget his name. He's a sociologist and had done a bunch of research on this and found that the Indians will view this cultural maintenance activity and what they'll do is, at

work they'll don the Western garb and they'll be very Western, but at home they'll be very Indian, and 1965 Indian. It's very interesting because other cultures have done that, but not to the extent that the Indians have done that. Of course, we're so new, you know, and that's a unique project, because in history, generally, the winners write the history. The losers never write the history, and generally it's always written like 100 years after the fact. And here, we're only thirty years behind, which is a huge improvement, and we haven't lost totally all the stories, although every day, like tonight at the funeral, you lose another story. But, I mean, this is incredible just because it's happening, just to know that.

And I can totally see that with my mom's friends. Their houses, and then you look at them at work, and it's because of the education. It's about all these different variables. But I don't think I would change it. If anything, it's really neat to watch. I just hope that future generations have an appreciation for where they came from and they know where they came from. Like mom, I know in her heart she wants brown grandchildren that satisfy these ten different variables of different lineages, of different religious, regional, ethnic associations, and I know that even though she married white and all this, everyone says, "How can you?" But I know where her heart is, and I can truly understand that. It doesn't make it easier, but I totally reflect that.

I just wish that I know there will be assimilation. I know all these things will happen. I just want to know that whatever the group down the line, will appreciate where they come from and what those people have done for them and how far they've really come, because it is huge, it's incredible, and I wouldn't change anything. I think we're all prejudiced. Of course, I wish my mom wouldn't say something or I wish those people wouldn't, but everyone does that. That's not particularly the Indians, and it took me a long time to figure that out, you know.

I think being interested in your culture and being proud of your culture helps, and not everyone's going to be like that. I have peers who totally are not proud of their culture, not interested, and they don't like the accent on "The Simpsons" show and all that or of the Indian shopkeeper stereotype or whatever, the taxi driver or whatever. But we have really totally built--I mean, the computers in this country, there were a lot of Indians behind that.

There are a lot of different parts of this economy we can be proud of. Like in my industry. Depending on what sector of the investment industry you're talking about, some of the top research analysts are Indian. And that's incredible, because I grew up with, there were nine Scandinavians and then there was one other, and I was part of that one other when I grew up. I went to a large suburban high school, and you had a couple groups of Hmongs coming in at that time. That's when a lot of the churches were helping the Hmong come over and the Southeast Asians come over, and you had some churches helping out with the East Africans, like the Ethiopians and the Somalians.

There's good and bad to all, and it's not easy all the time. There's different times where you just are crying. Like when you're at the arena and someone says a stupid thing like "Gandhi" or something.

PS: They refer to you as Gandhi?

VS: Yes, yeah. I mean, just stupid stuff. Like when we do this PIC [Parents of Indian Children (adopted)] stuff now and the kids ask, "What do you say when the kids are like that?" All you can say is that you just have to be kind of tough to it sometimes and you just have to take it, and it's the process of growing up.

But if anything, I really think the neat part--and that's why I hope the future generations know a little bit about it, and that's why I'm glad my parents are kind of stuck in 1965 India--is because there's so many rich things about it. I mean, the Chinese and the Indian civilizations are the two longest and most continuous. We are still doing something that's related somewhat to Sanskrit and to China, are still doing somewhat related to what they knew as Chinese, and we're not speaking Greek or Latin today in our Western lives, you know. There's a disconnect. It wasn't continuous. And I think in the next century that's going to be powerful, and that's so neat that we have so much to be proud of. And our food is great, you know, and our music is good. Of course, that's a really rosy way to look at it. You've caught me on a really good day. I think there's a lot of neat things going on, and if you kind of sit back and look at that, it's sometimes a lot harder to realize that.

PS: Tell me about what school was like for you.

VS: Yes.

PS: Especially focus right now on elementary school.

VS: Yes. Elementary school, it was neat. I could walk to school, and that was fun. I played sports. I didn't really like team sports, but my mom made me do team sports. I really wasn't strong in math, so she always brings up those tables, "I wanted you to memorize those multiplication tables."

I had a couple of friends. Actually, on my street I had a couple guys who would always kind of drag me out of my house, because I was a TV junkie, and I loved TV. Now I don't have a TV in my apartment, and I hate TV, actually.

I think one part of it was that my schoolmates could never really understand like when I went away to India or to my dad's. When I came back, it was kind of like, "Oh, where were you?" I'd say where I'd been, and there wasn't really an understanding of where that was, because people just didn't go--I mean, this isn't like the Depression when people didn't get on a plane and go somewhere. You did it, but you really didn't do it, and it's not

like you got on a plane and went to St. Louis or you went to Dallas, where my dad went on next to, or you went on to wherever. You went to India every year. That just really was kind of weird for them. And so there was kind of a difference there.

But also, my mom and I did a lot of--because I would miss a fair amount of school--a lot of projects about what happened on my trip or do a show and tell, an extended show and tell. I really consider a lot of my education was outside of the classroom, on those planes and being stuck in London for four hours and talking to a Swede or something, you know, and having a conversation.

I went to Vista View Elementary. Actually, I've seen a couple of teachers there kind of occasionally. I had Mrs. Larson [phonetic] in first grade, and she was my favorite. We studied the microprocessor in fourth grade, and this thing was huge. My mom actually, because she was in the computer industry at that time, brought one, and that was the show and tell for fourth grade, and that was totally wild and hip. Now, of course, they're so much smaller and so much faster. But that was pretty neat.

And then in sixth grade, we had--actually, a couple things I remember is doing the Olympics, when you did those little elementary school Olympics, and also seeing the eclipse, the solar eclipse, and being told not to look up at the sun. You're sitting there with your pin-hole paper and you're like, "What the heck are we going to do with this?" And finally it works.

And then a couple times I remember kids chasing me down, because I walked to school. I was kind of an easy target. I really don't like talking about this, but because my last name is Shah, and in 1979, 1980, I think it was like 1981 was the Iran hostage crisis. Of course totally no relationship at all. I mean, maybe very historic relationships many centuries ago. So people, really dumb smart people, would look up the phone book and see Shah, and they'd give us a call and give us their advice, which was helpful, but not needed, and they'd hang up the phone.

PS: What sort of things would they say?

VS: You know, I took a couple of the calls, but it was just like, you know, "Let our boys go," or, "Bleep, bleep, bleep, get out of our country," and all this. It was just kind of, I mean, yeah, our last name was Shah, but, you know, so what? Actually, Shah has a couple different meanings. In that Middle Eastern part of the world, it means more like king or ruler. But in Bombay and in Gujarat, that name is associated with merchants and traders, and you tend to be of that class.

Because we're Jains, we don't have a class system--Jain actually was a reaction to the excess invading the practices which we now know as Hinduism. Jainism and Buddhism sprouted up at the same time. Gautama Buddha and Mahavir were sitting under the same

tree around the same time, having the same thoughts and saying, "Gee, why don't we do something else." Because Hinduism at that time was only being practiced by the priests and by the very elite, and a lot of people said, "Wait, that isn't really right." So in Jainism, there is no caste system. In general, they tend to be merchants and traders, and they run the diamonds and they're bankers and all that because they could be trusted. They're kind of like the Jews of India. But there is no caste system and there is no hierarchy, and it's flat. I mean, there's a difference between lay people and the priests and the monks and that's it, which I think is really neat, you know.

So elementary school, I mean, was okay, but I really--you always come back to the question of why am I getting picked on or why can't they pronounce my name right--I remember my mom always being proud of my name and my culture. The point was, she'd never say, "Change your name." And some people did change their name, and that's fine for them. But I forced people to pronounce it right, because it's important. If they pronounce it right for me, when I name my kid, and they name their kid something, they're that much more likely to be able to pronounce that name right. That's really important, because I always get John and Dick confused. It's all the same to me. But, you know, there are a lot more interesting names and a lot more unique. My name is made up. It doesn't actually exist.

PS: Vishant?

VS: Yes, in Kutchi Gujarati. As most Indian names are done, what happens is, the kids that are born here, they send back the exact time and date to the family's astrologer/holy person, and then they figure out where the positions of the planets are and the stars and everything. Then they give you prefixes and suffixes, a couple sets of them, and you get to choose what you want, you can mix and match. My parents kind of looked at it, and so I was known as "Baby" for the first few weeks because they didn't have the opportunity, the "sets" yet.

I don't know how they got from the sets to my name, but basically my mom's name is Shanti, which means peace, and then they lopped off the "i" on the end and then they put it up in the front and then they added "vi," or they just added "v," to the front. "Vi" is the prefix for more or greater, so my name means more peace, which is kind of funny because my mom is not peaceful at all, and so she should have never been named that. It's kind of funny that she's named Shanti, and I'm named Vishant, which means more peace. I've met Vishals, but I've never met another Vishant out there. And you'll hear Prashant and you'll hear other names that are close, but it's not Vishant. So it's pretty unique.

All along they were kind of saying with the name game and with the harassments. You had a good time in general, but my parents kept on saying, "Wait till you get to junior high school, wait till you get to high school, because then it will be less." And it was better, but it was still--I mean, it was just kind of, yeah, it's better, but it's still there. It

never kind of goes away, you know. Even when you work, they are still the same. Maybe it's even worse, who knows? But at least you're kind of able to deal with it.

PS: You expect more from the grownups than you did from eight-year-olds.

VS: Yes. At least with the kids it's just little things. It's not like you're not going to get that promotion. It's just a little deal thing. But no one ever told me about that part.

PS: What values did your mother communicate to you--and your father, as well--when you were growing up that you still really embrace?

VS: It's the typical first immigrant generation--you know, hard work. You put your hopes into your kids. They just don't differ that much from the rest of mainstream America. But, I mean, the focus on education I think is so extreme, especially the first generations, because they come here for a better opportunity, and so they just pour that in exponentially. And so then they say, "Why are those kids so much smarter?" It's just because the parents are on them that much more. There's so much pressure. Not pressure, but just so much love and caring interest, and I think if you take an interest in your kids, that goes so much further. They've shown mentoring and interest in kids helps so much.

One thing that was really helpful is something my mom said to me. One time--this is so funny, but, I don't know, I said something really stupid, and she called me a male chauvinist pig. My mom said this to me, and I couldn't believe it. It just totally set me back, and I was like, "Whoa." I don't remember what I said, but, I mean, she totally put me in my place, which is what she should have done.

But I think I connect a lot more with females because my mom was certainly a big deal, and so I think you learn that form of communication, which is different from the male form of communication. If that's something you've had for a long time, you may have a better chance of doing that kind of communication, and just to really respect women a lot more. I mean, compared to, especially like in the Indian community. There's so much bright talent, but just with the culture and with other things, there are these set pre-defined roles. And one could argue, well, you know, the deference is to the women, and so therefore she has more power. Well, if that's more powerful, why don't men want it? You know, you can make the argument however you want. But she really drove everything and she really taught me how to kind of keep pushing. She really is a pusher and a driver. So those are a couple things that she taught me.

Also, I remember very early on that even in the Indian community there is a certain amount of low-level violence that's tolerated. You know, if your kid screws up, a slap here or even a threat of force. And I remember--this is really embarrassing, but I think this is important so I will put it on. I'll just show everything. Not everything, but a lot of things.

One time we were at the grocery store, and I was sitting in the Vega. We had this really old red Vega. She went into the grocery store to get something. She said, "Wait. I'll be right back." I suppose I could be classified as a current-day latchkey kid, because I came home and there was nobody there. But whatever, I just watched TV or whatever, you know. I think people do survive despite their circumstance. And I peed in the car. A little kid, you know. And she got really upset. I think she hit lightly, I remember it as a light slap on my thigh, and then she got so upset at herself that she had hit, and she just started crying. In fact, we got home, and clearly something was wrong. Okay, error, error, penalty box time. And she went in her room and she closed the door and she just cried for hours.

I mean, that was a very clear indication that violence is just not tolerated in our house. Obviously, there were a couple things going on there, and that's never been a problem ever since. I think that's really neat, because that's a part Jains have to maintain, which is nonviolence. And I think that, I mean, when I hear some of my coworkers and other people saying, "I got so mad I could have hit them or punched them," I totally cannot at all appreciate or identify with that, because it's just not at all tolerated--I mean, I would be probably pretty upset or I probably would be just like, "Whoa. I need to get away," or whatever. But I could never do that, and I think that's one of the examples that I remember really vividly.

From my dad, I know that, through our course, he really has said that ever since the divorce that they had tried to kind of reconcile. He didn't want to reconcile, and that was his biggest mistake. Today he still gives me advice to keep trying. Whenever I'm telling him something, he'll say, "Keep trying," or "You should change," or "You should be more flexible," because that's what he sees as his biggest error in this whole thing, and I think he feels responsible. I don't think it's anybody's fault. I think it just happens, and that's a fact. Yes, it just happens. Divorce is a fact of modern society. And so I think he really has taught flexibility, and I try. I'm not very good at it, but I try, and I really do try to at least try to see multiple perspectives.

Stefan really raised me, and he's a really interesting individual. I mean, here's this kid who came from Grand Forks, North Dakota, and went to Spokane, Washington, for graduate school. But really, I mean, what he does today, he shouldn't really be doing, and he's interested in the things he shouldn't be from his background, if you look at it. That doesn't mean he shouldn't, but if you stereotyped him, it wouldn't. And so I think because he's so unique and he's very caring, and he really did provide a male role model for me. His father died very young in a horrible car accident, and so he really didn't have a father figure, so he was kind of doing this father thing on the fly, too. That's why I don't think that there was a strict kind of, you know, "You are the kid and I am the parent," because we were all kind of like thrown together and, "Okay, we're just going to kind of do this on the fly," type of thing.

Because of that, I think I really am not into hierarchical structures. Like when I volunteer for organizations or when I'm working, I don't get into labels, I don't get off on the labels. Who's really doing the work, that's what I want to know, or how can I get the thing done. And that's why I think I may not--like, at work, we really respect our administrative support group. If I've pissed off those people, our total labor does not get out the door, because they will help copy it and print it and get it out. So they are a very critical link, and I don't always do the best job in respecting them or doing everything I should, because they come from a different part. They live in the suburbs. That's where they spend most of their time. They're very caring people, but they're just a different group of people.

But I think I really try, and that's what you have to do, as opposed to some of my peers. I'm not sure how much they really try or respect those guys, and that comes from having kind of this flat family. I mean, I have my uncles or my mom's side and have all this family in India that's very boom, boom, boom, with the extended family. But in terms of my family here, it is pretty flat, and I think that's kind of carried into my life.

Religion hasn't been a really huge deal until lately, like the last couple years, but I think the reason why I like it is because, I mean, religion, you could say, just fundamentally has a problem, because it has to make you believe something that, "You'll be okay after you die," and therefore it's kind of in the business of doing this.

But for me, I think it's really tied into the culture, which is so interesting, and it's also flat. There's no hierarchy, like only these castes can preach this. Basically, you set out what your goal is, and then you achieve it. You put yourself on that plane, and then you will reach reincarnation if you achieve those goals that you set out for yourself. And one of the tenets is non-judgmentalism. So I can't say, "You're a bad Jain because you eat meat," because if I say that, I've violated one of the main tenets, and then I'm a bad Jain.

PS: Even though they're breaking a tenet by eating meat?

VS: Yes, but I can't judge them. I mean, you have to lay the cultural interface on that, which is they'll say it because of their culture, and they'll do that. But the religion says no, and that's really neat. And, you know, there's the whole science thing, and it's so old. And you can be Jain and Christian. It's very open. You don't have to be born Jain. I think that's very interesting.

I think that the Jainism that I practice or that I know is a very different Jainism than what is in India, because you overlay the culture, and the culture's got a lot of prejudice and it's pretty opinionated. It's pretty strong, and that's not flat structure. That's very, you know, boom, boom, boom.

PS: How did you learn about Jainism?

VS: Ram Uncle was really instrumental, because he got the Jain Society started here. There is about like maybe ten families in the Twin Cities that are Jain. There's only like five million worldwide. It's a very small, old religion.

Before Ram Uncle started the Jain Society, or Jain Samaj, that we would meet for the big holidays in someone's basement and do our--Prati Kamar is one of these times, what Lent is to Christians, where you say, "Okay, I'm going to give up something," and then at the end of it you do a lot of prayers. You ask for forgiveness and all that. And that's about a two-week deal in the fall. And we still do that, but Jain Samaj just kind of formalized all that and got more people together. And then Mahaveer Jayanti, which is Mahaveer's birthday, is coming up here in a couple weeks. All those dates always flowed because it's a lunar calendar. Diwali is a part of the culture. Mahaveer Jayanti and Prati Kamar are part of the culture, and it's religious. And we're vegetarian, which is part of Jainism.

For a while, I wasn't vegetarian, and I guess I kind of feel guilty about that, but it just kind of happened. Like you want to fit in, so you eat hamburgers with the kids, and you want to fit in, so you do that stuff. But then what happened is, my aunt in India had become very religious--she had come from a bad marriage and got out of it and came back to the family and was doing a lot of community service work and basically wanted to take the path to becoming a nun. For any family that's very hard, because you give up all worldly possessions. I mean, you don't have a family at that point. You just have a couple things and that's it. And it's a very hard life, and there's instances of some abuse within that system, also, and, you know, our family was like, "No." And so for ten years she was on the march. It requires a lot of preparation because they learn the scriptures and they eat so little. All that takes you about ten years of preparation. You have to find a guru and all that.

When I heard that she was doing that, we didn't want her to go, because it was Uma Masi, Masi meaning my aunt on my mom's side, and Uma Masi was so great. She cared so much. Because when we would come and my cousins would come, she was the one that took care of us directly, because she didn't have any other children and she didn't have a family. We were her family. But she totally took care of us and she totally taught us the religion and taught us the language and would feed us when we were sick. I mean, she's an incredible person, and now she is getting to do what she wants to do and she's totally happy. But it's still hard to see her. She's not Uma Masi because she's part of this thing.

Anyway, we made a bet. She said, "If you stop eating meat"--because in India I didn't eat meat, but she knew that I came back here and ate meat--she said, "If you stop eating meat, I won't become a nun." I mean, as a kid that sounded great and I kept it, and that's how I became a vegetarian. And I knew that I would lose, because she would become a nun and all that. But it was a good bet, and I actually benefited.

PS: So has she become a nun?

VS: Oh, yes. We went back in 1993 and went to the ceremonies. It was very emotional and a big deal. And so she's been a nun for a couple years here. My cousin and my aunt took the vows at the same time, and actually they're together in the same kind of, there's an apartment with no electricity and no running water, and they're there with a couple other gurus or higher priests.

It's kind of interesting because you'd think that they'd change so much and be like, boom, they're not your aunt anymore or your cousin, they're these nuns. But they're still like--I mean, I just can't touch them and I can't do certain things. It was really neat--we went in January. I actually took this hellish twenty-four-hour trip up to visit them and come back. It was really worth it though, because it was really amazing. Actually, you could take a bundhi, which means you take an oath, and for example you'd fast for some reason, and if you're with a nun or with a priest or if there's something, like Prati Kamar comes up and you want to give up something, then you give up something. In this case, they took raksha, which is a red string that goes on your wrist and has a little package, a little red cloth wrapped up very tightly, and I always call that the package of magic dust, but there's some significance there. The bundhi, and that's what gets tied over it. Your sister generally ties it on, and they do it in the fall at Diwali. I think that's right, Diwali. It may not be right totally. But anyway, and they have elaborate ones, and you do it sometimes after Prati Kamar, also, to kind of show that you've taken bundhi for something.

And actually, when I came back from this trip, she tied bundhi on me, and my cousin did, my cousin's sister. Goody, who hasn't gotten married off, quite a family scandal that she hasn't gotten married off, and she's only twenty-three. Oh, goodness. Her bundhi there was to give up dairy, and I've been trying, but was losing a lot of weight, so I kind of had to take dairy back on.

It's real interesting to try to keep on coming back. More recently I've been going to some Jain event--every two years the young Jains get together and have a conference, and they had a session on veganism. Sometimes these things are more on marriage junkets. But I learned some stuff about Jainism, and that was pretty neat. I think, if anything, it's focused my attention more on animal rights and some other things, and the environmentalism and that kind of stuff.

PS: Going back to this red string that they tie on the wrist. The brother ties it on--

VS: No, your sister ties it on to you or your brother. It's always your sister who would tie it on to you.

PS: And since you didn't have a sister, your aunt could do it or your cousin?

VS: In that case, it was a religious, it was more a religious way, and that was okay. Actually, my cousin did tie that one. But like for Raksha Bundan--I don't know what holiday Raksha Bundan is tied to. I think it's in the fall, which would be close to Diwali, but it might be in the spring. At Raksha Bundan your sister would tie it.

You wear them basically until your fast, or whatever vow you've taken, lasts. If it's a month vow or it's a three-month vow or whatever. But if it falls off, because it's just cotton, it'll wear out, then what you need to do--I just found this out. I sound like I know this, but I just found this out. If it falls off, then you need to take it and then deposit it in the nearest river or lake or stream, and it's kind of like getting it and then letting it go back into the system.

Jainism, if anything, is very environmental. Everything is kind of one system. They were talking about molecules and atoms a long, long time ago, before they even had microscopes. They knew there were things out there, and they talked about them as the organisms we can't see. But during ceremonies, for example, we should put a handkerchief over our nose and mouth in order not to breathe them in and cause violence or harm to them. And so therefore, they knew that there were things out there. They just couldn't exactly tell you what they were.

PS: So that's the practice of Jains, wearing a face cover?

VS: Yes, or the mopiti. Basically in the big ceremonies, that's when they do it, when you're really hard core. But, you know, lay people, every day don't do that. The household doesn't do that.

You can think how you want, but part of it, for some people is the yoga. For some people, it's very ritualistic, going to temple every day and washing the god and doing the whole ceremony.

For some people, it's meditation, and for me, I really enjoy the meditation, and that's every day. You have some beads, like most religions, and then you recite the No-kar-mantra. The No-kar-mantra is a series of stanzas or bows. It's a, "I bow to the highest priest. I bow to Thirthankars," which are all of the--there were thirty-three Thirthankars, which are the main kind of the Christ-like figures, the big boys, and actually there's one woman in there. Mahaveer was the last Thirthankar, the thirty-third Thirthankar, and his birthday's coming up in a couple weeks. He is kind of our, not our generation, but our current time period person. They don't have a time, a beginning and ending. The time was just kind of continuous. They are three up and three down pieces. Right now we're in like the I think it's the fourth or the fifth down, so it's only going to get worse from here. We're pointed down. So anyway, all of these thirty-three, they've come through all those different cycles. So that's how it is.

PS: Going back to talking about your school years, what kind of friendships did you have when you were a kid? You said you went to SILC?

VS: Yes.

PS: The School of Indian Language and Culture.

VS: Yes. I had a couple friends through that, like Sujan Kamaran, who now is going to write Intel's next greatest and best chip out in California. And Suman Ganguli. I'm not sure what Suman's up to. I know he graduated from the University of Chicago, but I'm not sure what he's up to. And like Aparna Ramaswamy and all the people that are in this, Raka Mustaphi and all those guys, we all met through SILC.

I think, if anything, SILC was real important because it was just a chance every Sunday to hang out, you know, and just to talk or just to screw around or to go to dance class or do whatever. But SILC was fun.

In elementary school, I started to have a couple more friends. In elementary school I had okay friendships, but in junior high school, I really had a lot more friends, just because I think things opened up a little bit more.

I had this one friend, Craig Ruesink, who always used to drag me out of my house and say, "Okay, we're going to go play street hockey or go to the ice rink or go play whiffle ball or go play touch football." The only problem was, Craig was a lot bigger than I was.

And we had another guy, Nick Johnson, and we did a lot of stuff, kind of fourth and fifth grade up to about probably eighth or ninth grade, and we were always playing. The only problem was that there was always three of us. There was never a fourth. And so we always had to have these games, I think we called it Power Man or Third Man, which was that whoever had possession of the ball or whatever, that third person would switch to that side. So we always had to kind of create these games.

But we used to play street hockey with other people behind our fence, on the other side. We lived on Irving Avenue in Burnsville, and there were these guys on Humboldt behind us who played hockey, who were also bigger. But then, because they were all a year ahead of me, so there weren't a lot of people that were in my grade in my little neighborhood. Basically, once I got to high school, they were older. Once you go and you're not still in junior high school, because junior high school was seventh through ninth, and they were in tenth and they were in high school, and that was a totally different scene, and it's all over from there.

PS: So junior high was a little bit better in terms of the social acceptance?

VS: Yeah.

PS: Did kids stop teasing?

VS: It got a little bit better. But I had a really great teacher. I'm still in touch with her now, Mrs. Wolters, Mariel Wolters, who in eighth grade, basically she got me into the [YMCA] Youth In Government.

Seventh grade is such a trauma because you went from elementary school to junior high school. Seventh grade was okay. It was still very awkward, and a huge amount of hormones that mom totally didn't understand at all. And that's kind of nice to have Stefan to temper my mom a little bit, because he knew what was going on. My mom didn't at all know what was going on. "Hormones, puberty, we didn't have this in India," type of thing. Of course, it was there. I don't know how they realized it. Or maybe it's just an American thing. That was nice to kind of, like I said before, have the best of both worlds.

Seventh grade was pretty awkward, but in seventh grade I started to kind of win some awards and start to kind of get some recognition on speeches, making speeches, and I did some other stuff that you didn't have the opportunities in elementary school. You had some, but, I don't know, maybe we just didn't have all those opportunities. But like Rotary. I started to do some stuff with Rotary. Maybe that was a little bit later. Actually, that was when I was a sophomore in high school.

In eighth grade, I started doing Youth In Government, which had a really big impact on my life. And model United Nations was the first thing I did that kind of made sense, because I was interested in international stuff. The first year, I think, we were like Ethiopia or Djibouti or something. Or no, we were Egypt. But it was something because you got to study that country and then you got to be that country for three days.

We went to Superior, Wisconsin. It was so cold that weekend. Oh. And Superior is a rough town, too. You're locked up in this hotel, and for three days you're running a little mock United Nations. And from there, I just met friends. I had friends in Red Wing. I just was in Red Wing over Easter last weekend, and it just reminded me so much of the friends I had made in Red Wing and in Winona. I just continued with that program, doing model legislature, where you run the state capital for a couple days. And I ran for offices, which meant you'd have to go on the road and you'd have to campaign. And so we went to Mankato, and I had friends in Mankato and I had friends in Duluth. And that was really neat. My phone bills were really high in high school.

PS: What was high school like for you? Did that get better and better from junior high until you moved into high school?

VS: Yes. High school was pretty good. I went to a sports factory. Burnsville was, and is, a sports factory, so there wasn't a lot of support for other things.

Part of my story of my life, up till now, has always been that I've always kind of gotten things through the back door. Like in, I don't know, maybe junior high school or elementary school, when they had those accelerated programs or whatever, my mom, of course, wanted me in that program, because that was the better program. But I wasn't smart enough. I mean, I just didn't test for it. I'm a bad standardized test taker. I'm a horrible standardized test taker. And basically, she wanted me in that program, so I would always get in through the back door for some reason, like they had one more spot open or I was really good friends with the teacher or I was able to show that I did have a brain on something else, whatever.

My interest was always social studies, and I had Mrs. Shelerud in seventh grade, and she realized I had an interest in social studies and totally exploited that, totally pointed me in that direction. I mean, geography is what I loved. I have this box of flash cards that we got in a garage sale, and I loved that, and looking at maps and atlases. I don't do that much now. In my job, I research international equities and emerging markets and emerging debt. I'm fortunate enough to remember the most mundane things about other countries, and it's only because I have an interest in that.

So I was in high school, with Youth In Government coming on line. I cross-country skied on the ski team, and that was a lot of fun, because I started skiing at Cleary Lake at Hennepin [County] park when I was five. Stefan taught me to ski, and my mom to ski, which was incredible, because Indians really don't get into the outdoors very much.

I'm totally giving you this stuff in backwards form, but, I mean, at least it's coming out.

You know, it would always be that first kilometer I'd always whine and complain and not want to go, and after that, I was beating my parents around to get back and ski some more.

And so I got to ski in high school, and that was really neat. I was really looking forward to high school because they had a ski team. I never competed, but it was just the--I mean, I competed, but I was always on the junior varsity teams and the B teams. But it was the opportunity to just ski every day, which was so beautiful, because we had Terrace Oaks. I remember that park. It's close to Burnsville High School. It's a great mountain biking place in the summertime. It was just so beautiful, and I loved getting outside.

I think Stefan was really a champion of being outdoors and camping, and as a result, there was this ripple effect. He got my mom involved and I involved in camping and sailing and water sports. Most of my fondest memories with my mom and Stefan are on the water, either canoeing or about to sink on a sailboat or getting flipped off the sailboat

when we came about, and there I am in White Bear Lake and there the boat is, you know. As a result, I'm interested in it now as an adult. The Gadas, Stefan taught the Gadas how to ski and how to go outdoors and stuff like that. He got them interested in it, and the Patels, and there's this whole spillover effect.

I think that's incredible. That would have never happened if--this is what I mean about these different opportunities, and, you know, like, oh, the divorce was bad, but all those opportunities are so incredible. I know they would not have happened. I know that I would not have gone to Carleton, because it was a liberal arts school and Indian children don't go to liberal arts, or very few. If they do, they're pre-med or pre-engineering, and I just don't have an aptitude for that.

I also got to travel a lot abroad. I got a grant when I was in eighth grade. I went to a music camp in North Dakota. Stefan had gone there when he was a kid, Peace Gardens Music Camp in Peace Gardens. It's near Lake Metigoshe, on the border. Half the lake, the north half of the lake is in the Canadian side, the south lake is on the North Dakota side. My grandmother, Stefan's mother, has a lake cabin up there.

So I played in the music camp. Through that, I got a scholarship to go to a music camp in Sweden the next year. I think that was--it's hard to keep track, but let's see. That was either eighth or ninth grade. And I went to Sweden. My mom shipped me on a plane, and I spent two weeks. I spent two weeks at the camp in Sweden, and it was in the lake region in Sweden. And you know why there's so many Norwegians and Swedes here? It's because it looks exactly like there, and like this makes sense where they move. The lakes region looks exactly like Minnesota, and it was really beautiful. I met people from Eastern Europe, and that was in the Cold War, when we had no interaction. The saxophone player right next to me was from like Belgrade or something, and all you'd hear about at that time on the news was like all this bad stuff, like, oh, they're Communists and all that, and you're sitting there and talking to somebody, and that was so incredible.

Then I took the train and I went to Oslo and I spent a couple of days in Oslo. I mean, an eighth-grader. My mom's like, I guess she told Stefan after that, "Was I a bad parent to send him on the trip?" And that was incredible, that was an incredible opportunity, and I would not have had that if I had other siblings.

Sweden was like eighth or ninth grade, and then in eleventh grade I had another opportunity, the summer of my junior year in high school, because my dad worked at Honeywell and they had a relationship with Youth for Understanding. They do the student exchange. And so Honeywell, they had this corporate scholarship program. I got a scholarship to spend the summer in Ecuador, and so I spent a summer in Ecuador, and that was incredible, too. So I had, let's see here, Sweden, Ecuador, and then in college I studied, in 1992, I spent the spring of 1992 in Beijing and the summer of 1992 in Taiwan,

studying Chinese economy on the mainland and then Chinese language, and then kind of tacitly the other stuff, but from a Taiwanese perspective in that summer.

And then I took the train. I basically took the trains from Hong Kong to Berlin, and I took the Trans-Siberian Railway from Beijing to Moscow and then slept in the train station in Moscow and then continued on through Eastern Europe from Poland.

That was one of the first trips I'd actually saved up for, and I had worked three jobs my summer before going to college, after high school and before college. I worked three jobs, saving up for study abroad, because I knew I was going to go somewhere. I had no idea I'd go to China. That was the last place I would have ever thought of. But between Ecuador and Sweden and China, and trips to India in between, I mean, that's very unique and very, very fortunate. But I paid for that trip.

PS: When you were in high school, did you date? And what were the values about dating in your family?

VS: I did date, and I had a really good group of like three or four friends. Actually, one of those--there were five of us in total. It was Nikki Villaume--she is getting married in October, and I'm going to be giving her away, which is so cool; Brian Dwyer, who I haven't talked to for a couple of months, and that's kind of bad. Todd Wallace is in Iowa, and he's totally like on this religious circuit and it's kind of weird. Then Rachel Felt, and she's in Japan, teaching English, and she got married a couple years ago. She went to St. Olaf, actually, and so we kind of saw each other in Northfield when I went to Carleton and she went to St. Olaf. Not very much, but a couple times.

Anyway, we all played in a band together, because I started playing the saxophone in fifth grade, and then I played in junior high school. Music was a good thing, actually. That was probably one of the better equalizers, because you're all kind of band geeks and so you're all kind of--someone is pounding on something at some point, and so you all kind of get along better. And we all played in a concert band like in the middle of my term in sophomore year, and that's how we all met and started hanging out, and that was such a close group of friends. That was incredible. We were really close.

My mom, when she hung out, she was really rebelling from her family. She was hanging out with Muslims, and she was the first person, the first female to go to school. And basically, my mom's oldest brother cut a deal with her dad, saying, "Look, if she does okay, then we'll let the others go." And so there was a lot of pressure on her, because she had a lot of older brothers and they married wives who were okay raising kids, but not very good, so all my cousins were actually raised by my mom, and then she went to school. And so they have a lot closer connection to her than they do with their moms. It's kind of funny.

When she finally got that freedom, she was doing all kinds of things that were really kind of forward for that time and that thinking, and she said, "I don't want you to miss out on those friendships," basically. And so I understood that, but you still want to date.

And actually, my relationships, I kind of have this weird history of never dating anybody, except my senior year, that went to my high school. I always dated people through Youth In Government. So I had a girlfriend that was in Red Wing and I had a girlfriend that was in--most of the time they were really good friends and then they kind of became romantic, because when you're always talking on the phone, it's more a friendship because there's not a lot of anything else to do. When you see each other, you see each other through Youth In Government.

But also, some of those people were in speech, and I also knew friends--and that was great. That was also really key. I went to state my junior year. We weren't even supposed to go to the state. We had such a small team, and Apple Valley was this huge team. They had a ton of resources. We weren't even supposed to be there, and we were there. We took fifth and sixth at state, and it was incredible. And then the next year there was all this pressure, of course, to do well, and we lost at the final, the last round of the sectionals, to the people we beat the year before, and they went to state and it was kind of payback. But, I mean, speech, skiing, Youth In Government, those were all good times, and that's how I had the relationships.

My senior year, I dated somebody who was in band, and then she went to Japan that next summer and then broke up with me after she came back, and so that was kind of hard, somewhere between high school and college. And then I didn't date at all in college until I went to China--I mean, until after I came back from China. I made some really great friendships that I still have. It's five years right now since I was in China, and we couldn't even imagine what it was going to be like five years from now, because this was when Hong Kong was changing over. So we were always trying to think about what was Hong Kong going to be like, and we could never imagine what that would be like. It felt like such far away.

My roommate who I roomed with in Beijing actually still works in Beijing now, Michael Wenderoth, and he wrote me an e-mail a couple days ago, saying, "Oh, I just had a bagel and cream cheese, and I was just wondering how you were and I was thinking how are you doing?"

I was like, "You're getting so soft." Bagel and cream cheese? We would have never had that in Beijing five years ago.

PS: Could you date openly? Your mom was fine with that?

VS: Their focus was on having this group of friends, and the dating kind of came out of

that, but it was more like it was very secretive. My dad knew, and Stefan was my confidant kind of. Like he knew kind of who had become good friends and kind of girlfriends and not, and he kind of said, "Look, you know, your mom's not really okay with this, but I'll kind of prepare her." Like I said, that was again kind of the tempering balance of it.

Her focus was just like, "The friendship is so important, and I don't want you to miss out on that, so focus on the group." So she kind of knew, probably, but we never really said who Meri was or who Lisa was, if she was a good friend.

PS: So it was very covert?

VS: Yeah. I mean, she maybe knew, but we never really said what was going on.

PS: But she would pretend like she didn't, and you agreed to pretend, as well?

VS: Yes, I don't know. I guess it just was like, "As long as you have your friendship." As long as I satisfied what her thing was, which I had this set of friends, that it really wasn't that bad, I think, not as bad as I know my peers who had an Indian mother and Indian father who were traditional and conservative, who loved their kids a lot, you know. And I wasn't a girl. That was huge.

PS: How is it different for Indian girls?

VS: Supposedly, they are the vessel of our cultures. Obviously, I think it's that they bear the kids, and the kid has a lot stronger relationship with the mother, although you can have a strong relationship, if you really try, if you're the father. But, yes, they have a lot more constraints on them. You know, driving privileges, being out with groups privileges, being out with boy privileges or the opposite sex privileges, that's a lot different.

Plus, I don't think I was, like I wasn't really into drinking. Drinking wasn't really a big deal for me, because my parents are always, it's typical to have like a glass of wine once in a while, and it wasn't like, "Ooh, taboo. Really bad." And so it was kind of like, "We trust you that you'll make the right decision. If you do screw up, obviously there will be something, but we trust you." And so like in terms of relationships and dating, my mom was okay. Prom was a big deal. We had to kind of overcome some barriers there with her. But we made some compromises and kind of got through that.

PS: Did you go to prom?

VS: Yeah. Actually, I went junior and senior, yeah. I had a really, this great group of friends really helped a lot with that, too.

PS: How did you work that out with Mom?

VS: About the--

PS: The prom.

VS: The prom? Basically, I took my girlfriend, or this woman I was involved with from Red Wing, and her parents were conservative, too. So basically I said I wanted to go, and it was like, "Whoa, what's this?" you know. And then Stefan kind of explained what it was.

I think I remember there were kind of like this kind of staring at each other, because, you know, you have a byproduct of two very strong individuals, and what do you have? You have very strong individuals having conversations and confrontations, and, you know, we knew which buttons to push, because I had my dad's blood and my mom's blood combined into me going against her. And so we knew the buttons to push, and she, I think she kind of--I was going with my friends, this group, and that was better, you know, but it still was kind of hokey. I think Stefan just said, "Look, you know, we need to make some compromises. You don't need to call Meri your girlfriend. Just say you're going to prom with her and you're going with other friends, and that's okay. That's how you can couch it, and that's fine." And that was fine with me. The labels weren't that important.

In fact, I still don't date. I don't have girlfriends. There are people I'm involved with. I have good friends, and then there's people who I'm involved with a little more intimately. This again just goes back to the labels.

I should probably mention--I mean, this is a pretty big event that happened. After I came back from Ecuador--and actually, I had gotten involved with one of my host cousins who lived in Germany when I was in the program in Ecuador. Again, it's just this hysteria of having these long-distance relationships. My current relationship, she was in China for two years after she graduated, so we were carrying this long thing on. Part of the reason why she's in Minneapolis now is so that we can figure out if we actually like each other being in the same city, because we've never done that before. That's probably one of the first times it's ever happened to me for any extended period of time, and I'm not sure why. I'm not sure if there's any relationship between the divorce and me having these long-distance friendships, but maybe. I guess I never really thought about that, but it could make some sense.

When I came back from Ecuador, I started to run with the cross-country team. I had never run. This is right before my senior year in high school. And I biked. I really liked to bike. I had long legs, and I was kind of, you know, hands are dragging on the ground. I was biking. I got back on like a Thursday night from Ecuador, and on that Monday I had

gone to practice and practiced with the team. On Tuesday, I rode my bike, hanging my running shoes on my handlebars, sprinted to make a light. It was Burnsville Parkway and Nicollet Avenue. I sprinted to make that light, and there's a curve and there's a decline. As I made the light, because it was turning orange, my running shoes were kind of bouncing around and got caught through my fork and I went over, and I went from the road to the sidewalk and cleaned up the sidewalk with the left side of my face.

That was a pretty major event. I broke pretty much every bone in my face, and I'm lucky to be alive, because nothing else, amazingly, was hurt. I could have lost my sense of smell. Kind of a lot of things could have happened. The Gadas and all the other families were right there with food in hand. That's the amazing thing about community.

This group of my friends, this group of four friends, they immediately knew, when I didn't show up at practice, that something was wrong. Todd was there because of soccer practice, Rachel and Nick were there because of volleyball practice, and Brian was there because of cross-country practice. And actually, Brian left a message on our voice answering machine, saying, "I know you weren't at practice today, and I know you're probably just sleeping in because you're tired from traveling." His dad worked for the city. "My dad heard over the CB that there was an accident on Burnsville Parkway with a bicycle. You better not have been that accident."

And so when he came in, they all came in from practice, they immediately knew something was wrong. It was just like that fifth sense or whatever. And they were in the hospital room. I mean, it was really amazing. Basically all my bones were wired together and my jaw was shut, wired shut for a month, and that's a pretty big deal.

I guess the only things from that were that it was an incredible show. My dad flew in the next day, and I woke up and there he was. It was just like, "Wow." And all he was doing was just crying, and I remember that when I was in the emergency room, because at that point my face was huge. And they got things under control, because immediately I didn't know what happened. I was awake, but I didn't know what was going on, and then everything just swelled up. And I just had my braces done. I had to have them done again. My orthodontist loved me, of course. But basically the insurance spent equaled a year of my college education. That's how much all of that was.

What was the point? Oh, that when Stefan and my mom came in, it was incredible. They came into the emergency room when they found out what was going on. Events just moved so quickly. They came in. Stefan fainted. I mean, Stefan was about to faint. The nurse said, "You sit here," when they showed the x-rays, because basically every bone on this side was broken, even into the jawbone.

And my mom was incredible. Again, just another show of force. She just was like, "Okay, give me the ice," and just started holding the ice, just rock-solid all the way

through. And it was just incredible, because Stefan's like, my dad's crying, and she's just like super mom. I'm sure at home she probably fell apart, but that's where Neena [Gada] was, with the food on the stove, and that's where all these other people were, and Lisa and Reena and all those guys were there late at night. There was always somebody when I woke up.

Except one night I woke up and--this was incredible. My face had swelled, and they wouldn't let me look the whole time--because I was in intensive care for two weeks, or for a week or whatever, I was always being taken care of. I woke up one night. I was thirsty, so I went in and I got a drink. And I just happened to look in the mirror, and I saw my cousin in the mirror, because my face was really huge. I didn't see me. I hadn't shaved and all that, and it was incredible, because when you look in the mirror, you expect to see yourself, and I saw my cousin, Deepak. He had stayed with us when I was in Apple Valley and in Burnsville and went to Mankato State. But that was incredible. That had never happened before, and that's a really eerie feeling when you don't see yourself in the mirror. So it was pretty incredible.

But, you know, now everything's fine. I have a couple false teeth, but it's nothing. I have very little scarring, almost no scarring, and they didn't do anything on top. Everything was underneath. Modern technology, I am totally an output of that.

PS: You're the bionic man, huh?

VS: Yes. I have a couple wires in my face. My dentist, of course, loves me, too, because they got to do some fun stuff. Every six months I get reminded of it, which I guess is pretty good, because I don't appreciate how fortunate I really was. I didn't need any plastic surgery. Everything healed up perfectly. I mean, my pictures from the fall homecoming dance, I had a little button right on my left eyebrow, because that's where they took the wires and they sewed it up. I had this little white button--and my face is huge, of course.

But that's where my friends stood up for me, and they took me to homecoming. They were like, "Come on, Vishant. You should go with Nikk to homecoming." And so there's this picture of Nikki and I. My face is huge still. But, I mean, yeah, those guys were great.

That's what I remember of high school. Social studies really took off. That was still my strong point. Math and chem and those guys were okay, but, I mean, that's totally, that was my interest.

PS: Tell me what college was like.

VS: I went to Carleton College in Northfield. I started in the fall of 1990. I graduated in

the spring of '90 from Burnsville. Coming out of Burnsville, I'd given a speech that I thought was really good for the commencement or whatever. I didn't get selected. It was a comparison of Dr. Seuss "Oh, The Worlds You Will Know," or "Oh, The Worlds You Will Go," to kind of our thing. I thought it was a great speech and whatever. I didn't get selected. And then the summer, I was working three jobs and my girlfriend broke up with me. So I went into Carleton with some baggage. I really wasn't sure of myself.

Actually, how I got to Carleton was that I had applied to eight schools, mostly on the East Coast. Stefan and I had gone out there. We went to visit Haverford [College] and Amherst [College], and went to those liberal arts schools on the East Coast. And I got rejected from all of the them, except Carleton, and I think Carleton accepted me probably because I was from Minnesota and I wasn't white. I mean, I think I had some other skills there, too, but I'm not sure if I met all their aptitudes and stuff like that. Maybe not. Maybe I should re-read my application. American University in Washington, D.C. also accepted me.

But basically, I hadn't done any of my work, and Christmas before they were due, Stefan said, "Okay, you're going to get this done," and he helped me out a lot with it.

PS: You hadn't done any of which work?

VS: I hadn't done any of my applications or my essays or anything. I was way behind in the process. And mom really had an idea of where I should go, and she did not want me going to Carleton, did not want me going into liberal arts. There's a kind of joke among my peers that if you're not a doctor or if you're not a lawyer, if you're not an engineer, you're kind of a failure, but they're kind of loosening up on that.

She didn't think that, and I know now she is very proud of me, and I don't feel at all like a failure. But, I mean, it is definitely quantitative that is, that's how you can make some money. Really no one can argue with you on that. The other softer stuff, it's a little bit more tenuous, and if you're a first-immigrant generation and there's a need, that's what you know, that's what you do. She's a computer geek, and she's very good at that.

Carleton, I did not want to go to Carleton. It was my last choice, actually, and I totally was not into it. My first year, I totally had horrible grades, and I considered transferring. I had to consider a lot of things that first year, which I'm sure a lot of people do. But I really had a rough first year, and my mom was like, "Look." Because when my parents got divorced, their assets were split three ways, which is very egalitarian, one for my dad, one for my mom, one for me, and part of that helped fund my education. But what also happened is, my dad kicked in some, my mom kicked in some, Stefan kicked in some, and then this fund also kicked in some. So I was pretty fortunate, and that paid for my education. So a lot of people had an interest in what I was doing, and she said, basically, "You're going to go to the University of Minnesota if you're going to continue these kind

of grades."

She also wanted me to take harder stuff, and what I did really well in was political science. I got A's in political science, and it wasn't that hard. I mean, it just kind of came, and that's what I ended up majoring in.

Basically, I was like on double probation going into my sophomore year, and what happened is, I got accepted in the China program, and the China program—there are two programs at Carleton, and they're very competitive, the China program and the Australia program, where they spend a term on the Great Barrier Reef. It's a bio[logy] program. And then there's this China program—it's political economy.

Carleton has about eight study-abroad programs. That was one of the things that really impressed me with Carleton was that they have their own faculty developing their own programs. You can also do the consortium programs, but the fact that they really dedicated resources to their own programs meant they're really interested in doing things abroad.

And that probably, you know, my trip to Ecuador and Sweden and all that stuff, and India, I'm sure that helped my profile as a candidate. But I got bumped from all seven, and then Carleton--and I also got accepted at American University in D.C. I really wanted to go there, because it wasn't Minnesota. I really wanted to get out of Minnesota. It was in D.C. My mom and I visited. It was great. I loved it. She hated it. And it was a lot less money than Carleton was. But the thing is, it was only good in political science. Everything else, it was mediocre. Carleton had a reasonably good poli sci program, but everything else was okay. I mean, everything else was very good, and you're going to get a very good education overall. In hindsight, Carleton was the right place for me.

I got accepted in the China program, and everything changed dramatically. I got into a very competitive program. I loved China. I met some great people from it.

But I actually ended up traveling more at Carleton than I would have if I had gone anywhere else, because I did that, and then after that, I got a grant to go to South Africa the next summer and retrace Mahatma Gandhi's footsteps in South Africa, because it was the centennial of 1893 to 1993. That was the summer of 1993, and they were doing some activities celebrating the centennial. I didn't really technically trace his footsteps, but that's how the grant was written.

Professor Roy Grow was a great mentor, and he was my professor at Carleton on the Beijing program, and he helped me get the grant. It was a Larson Fellowship to send students their junior summer and go be somewhere. Not to technically study something, not to go do something in a library. It's to go be somewhere.

And so what I did is, I kind of chased Gandhi's ghost, and I did two things. I went to Durban. That's where Gandhi was, and that's actually where all of his family is--he went there to be a rich lawyer. He wanted to be a lawyer. And that's where, after spending twenty years--he thought he'd only be there for a year or two--everything changed for him. That's when he went back to India after that. So his South African experience is very important in Gandhi's life.

So I got to talk to people, and I talked to one of Gandhi's grandchildren. They've got a lot of grandchildren, so it's not very special. But Ila Gandhi is very special, because she does kind of--she's an animal rights activist. She's kind of doing nonviolence resolution, and so she's kind of in that circle.

That was the year before elections, that was the summer before elections in South Africa in the post-apartheid era, so it was a really tremendous time period. And I wasn't white, so I could go in there and most likely get into there and not have a lot of problems--because there was a lot of violence and there were a lot of concerns.

But what ended up happening is, because I didn't look white, they weren't going to target me. I didn't have to say anything, and I could move in and out of communities a lot easier. As a result, the other part of my grant was to go and talk to people, because all you heard here was about the violence. You didn't hear the real story about what was going on, and I wanted to know what was really going on there on the ground. So I got to stay in the richest parts of the real estate around the world in Cape Town. I always went to the townships and the poorest places in the world. I spent time with black families, with white families, with Indian families, with colored families, and all I did is, I just sat at the dinner table and talked, like this, and just said, "What's going on?" and recorded it. So my journal is one of my most treasured things, that journal from that summer and my journal from China.

I've kept journals from very early on, from my first trip to India in 1979--or my second trip, the first trip that I can really remember, and going with my dad to India. I still have that journal. I've always kept journals of my trips, and in Ecuador and Sweden and all those places, which I hope I'll just kind of use with this document, kind of compile it and put it away.

That's when it really turned around for Carleton, and then junior year was very good. And then I ended up doing my senior thesis at Carleton. That was the other thing that was really impressive about Carleton is that they required you to write a thesis. Other places, that was kind of fluff, whatever. But you had to do something, either take a really big test or write a comprehensive paper. And I did political leadership, comparisons of Mao and Gandhi, which are pretty interesting, kind of soft political science, but I think it's pretty interesting.

Yes, China was the turning point, and my mom was okay with Carleton after that. Like I said, I traveled more at Carleton than I would have at probably somewhere else, and given really unique opportunities again. So, I was pretty lucky.

PS: Yes. As you think about your own future, which of the values do you want to make sure that you pass on to your kids?

VS: I don't think I'm a really good person to think about that, because I'm not very tolerant. I mean, I can be tolerant of other people's viewpoints, but like if I really believe in something, I'm not very--like in relationships, I tend to be a little bit more lenient, and I'm getting better about that. But I've still got the pigheadedness from both my mom and my dad. When you really believe in something, you're very passionate about it, and I think that's one thing that we really need is the passion.

Part of this China thing at Carleton is that I took a Tao freshman seminar, and it's kind of, you know, you get to do all these fun things. It was about the Tao, and it was so incredible. That's kind of how it sparked the China thing, and I would have never done it. I just backed in, again going through the back door. Like I was trying to register for something, and it was like, "Oh, what's this? Okay, I'll do this," because supposedly it was really good. It was with a Chinese professor, Professor Zhao, who's incredible, and Professor Bardwell Smith, who was a religion professor. And I asked him, "What are your goals for your grandchildren and your hopes?" And he said, "My hopes are that they live a passionate life." And I think those are my hopes for my children, or my children's children.

You know, one of the things I have trouble with is adopting, and there's a lot of things with that. There's, you know, your own blood, you're not the right blood, and this or that, whatever. But I think that you have to be just kind of true to yourself, because if you really want, if you're really true about wanting to do good things or being helpful or whatever, I think that's a part of it. That's kind of the full circle that you have integrated that into your life. You don't just give money. You do the whole cycle.

You may disagree with me about this, but I think that Indians should adopt Indian children, because those are our children, you know. And the other adoptions are fine, but there's this huge prejudice because the blood's not clean or something, but I think that's just total, you know, that's not right.

I think, yes, just kind of a passionate life. I have some very strong ideals about riding bicycles and environmentalism and all that, and I think I kind of know, although I'm still naive about that, that future generations might not hold that. But I really want them to be careful about the future and our resources, because we have so--that's what Jainism is about. We have such a short time, and everything is in such a limited quantity. If you think about it, it may be a little more work, but you just feel so much better at the end of

the day when you kind of live this life. Obviously, everyone cuts their lawns. They draw their own lines, and that's respectable.

I feel like Carleton really--I wouldn't call myself a raging Green, but I was exposed to those elements. I never was very passionate about anything, but at Carleton, I just kind of did my classes and I did some stuff. I tried to start an Indian group, an Indian students' group, because no one ever talked to anybody on campus. It was like pathetic, and I was like, "We should talk." Basically, the goal was, "Well, the food at the cafe is horrible. What do we really miss? We miss our mother's food. So let's just get together and eat. I don't care if you don't want to identify with your Indian past, but I'm willing to bet you like your mom's food. So just come and eat once a quarter. That's all I'm asking." We tried to do some more stuff after that, but that was the beginning.

When I was in China, that was when the Rodney King verdict was issued in 1992 in Los Angeles, and then there were riots in L.A. I know that kind of started a bud of "I can't imagine what it would have been like if I was on campus." One of my roommates, subsequent roommates, Jordi Comas, is a really good friend of mine and just got married over Christmas. The Gulf War happened our freshman year, and he was really protesting that, and I didn't really identify with the Gulf War very much. I remember when the U.S. started dropping the bombs, that was when we started to realize that we could be drafted. That was a real--like I started talking to my dad. There was something about he didn't get drafted to Vietnam, but he lost friends in Vietnam. And he was lucky. His number didn't get called. I could identify with that a little bit.

Then Rodney King happened, and then the beatings in L.A., the police beatings, and stuff happened on campus, and we started to get just really shafted on campus. And then I became very passionate about race relations on campus, and that really turned around a lot of stuff.

From there, I think I just became a lot more passionate about stuff and so many things in general. Like in politics, Indians write the checks, but with no agenda, because they think the money will save them. They think owning the apartments will save them. They think these things will save them and nobody will mess with them. But that's not really true. You have to be a little active, not totally, but just a little bit.

I mean, the fact is that we are going to get shafted a little bit in this country for a variety of reasons, but they know we have the money now. I mean, we are one of the fastest-growing groups, and unfortunately money does talk. I'm not saying throw around money. In fact, when I do donations, for example, all of my donations are anonymous. I'm very serious about that, because in Jainism, that's, you know, just give, but there's no face attached to that. But in our Jain temples, there are fights around, in this country, about how big the plaque should be. If you give more money, the plaque for the \$10,000 giver should be bigger than the \$1,000. I look at that, and some of my peers look at that, and

I'm just like, "Whatever. What is that?" And so it's that kind of feeling that you need to be passionate, but also kind of, you know, be true all the way through.

PS: So those are some values that you hold really clear and are dear that you want to make sure your kids get?

VS: I hope. It's not easy. It's not like you will like come with it, because in Burnsville I was like, "Oh, yeah, Amnesty International." We started Amnesty International. But we were suburban brats. I mean, we just did whatever. Like we put up the posters and we wrote some letters, and that was easy. And then you looked at other kids in high schools, and they were a lot more radical. They were a lot more, doing more things. I could be doing more things, and you draw your lines.

It's too easy not to think about it. And just think about it. Be passionate. Because even if it requires waking up at three o'clock in the morning and thinking about it, think about it, you know. Just do it, in that sense.

PS: What are you doing right now for work?

VS: When I left Carleton, I was either going to go to Hong Kong and try to find a job or go to India or do something, and I applied for one job, and that was this job.

I work for Jeffrey Slocum and Associates. It's an institutional investment consultant. What does that really mean? That means like your checking account with a lot more zeroes behind it. We are not brokers. We are not those kinds of things. But we work for institutions like foundations and endowments and corporate pension funds, and we basically help them figure out where to put their money. We do not invest it. We are not money managers. But we just give them advice.

I have eight clients, and I have a couple of foundations, I have a couple of corporations. I have a university, and I have a couple of religious organizations, too. We help them with asset allocation, we do performance measurements, and we just help them with compliance. We help them know whether their money managers doing what they should do, because there's a lot of graft in the industry.

I thought I'd never do this job. I thought I'd never get in this industry. But I thought if I was at a small firm, I'd learn a lot. I'd get a lot of responsibility very early on, which I have. I talk with people I would never talk to with my first job out of college, three years into it. It's incredible the amount of access information I have now.

I also do the systems, and it's kind of funny, because at Carleton I could barely print a term paper out on a Macintosh, which is the easiest to use. And then my senior spring I started learning PCs. I was like, "I better learn this if that's what's out in the real world."

And now I'm running the systems, the NT server and the web stuff and all that stuff at work, and I do the troubleshooting. And then I also do the research. I research international equities. And so it's a lot of fun. It's a small firm, so we have a lot of fun. It's also highly political sometimes, and sometimes it doesn't have a lot of resources. But it's pretty good now. I really want to go to India, and I think I'm probably going to go to India next year.

PS: Like permanently?

VS: I'm not sure. I want to go probably for like--I can't put a time frame on it, but maybe like, you know--I don't know until I get there. Probably like six months, maybe a year.

PS: And work?

VS: Yes. I think for the investment industry, it's like the Wild West. What I'd really like to do, my primary goal is language and religion. The temples are so gorgeous, the Jain temples are, because they have so much money. They have all these people working on these temples. They're incredible. I just went to Hindu temples in January. I'd never been to Hindu temples, and they're dirty compared to the Jain temples. And I want to really get to know the Jain religion, or my family's religion, from their perspective, and just get a better connection with my family there, because I think that's really important.

When I was in South Africa, there was a group of Goans. Goa is a state south of Bombay. In South Africa there's a whole group of them, and what they would do is, after the males were educated, they would send them back to India to get this cultural training so they wouldn't lose, they wouldn't be totally assimilated.

It was neat talking to people in Durban, because you'd be like, "If you have any notion of India, what is that?"

And they'd say, "Oh, I think we have a grandfather or relative in--

Okay, what village would you mention, and they all--because all the shopkeepers in Durban are Gujarati, and they all mention Surat as the same village they come from.

You come from Minneapolis, where there's hardly anybody, and then you go to Durban, where everybody is saying Surat. It's just like, "Whoa, what's going on here?" and it was really neat. Yes, that was really incredible, that whole experience, because I actually felt more Indian, or more like myself, in South Africa than in America. Actually that was part of my experience. When I came back, I had to give talks about my trip and slide presentations, because people didn't question things here, and their race relations are so different in South Africa.

I think they're like light years ahead than what we are here, and it's like it didn't matter. The questions came out after they heard my voice, because they're, "Oh, you're not South African." Then they were trying to place you. But it's not the same kind of triangulation. It's like, "Okay, you're whatever."

But at least people will tell you where they come from. If it's a white Afrikaner who's totally to the right, who's totally screwed up from my perspective, who totally hates non-white people, they'll tell you that. In this country, they won't tell you that. Maybe in the South they will tell you that, but in the North they won't tell you that, and that's so frustrating.

In South Africa, it was so incredible. For a whole summer, I just felt so much. Here it was so different, and it's hard to explain. I can't put it on a tape or on a text, but it's the fact that race relations are dicey here, and I think we're heading towards some really--it's not heading towards a good road. You know, the culmination with the Rodney King and the police beatings just all came together.

I have a funny story. Do we have enough tape? Are we okay?

PS: We've got about ten minutes left.

VS: Okay. Do you have to get through your stuff? Are we hitting all of it?

PS: Oh, you're doing just fine.

VS: Okay. I'll make this quick. What happened is, I was taking a trip. I flew Northwest Airlines from Johannesburg to New York to Minneapolis. I get to New York, on my way back. I stay at my aunt's. Stefan's aunt lives in Manhattan. Have bagels. I have a cab driver who is driving me back. He's Ethiopian. He's a dentist. We talk about Africa. We have all these incredible conversations.

I get to the check-in desk, and this woman at Northwest desk says, "Oh, you're going to Minneapolis," because after you fly in from Kennedy, you have to change from Kennedy to La Guardia, international to domestic, because I was flying on frequent fliers to kind of keep costs down because my grant wasn't that big, and you know about trying to keep costs down. And so she said, "Oh, you're going to Minneapolis."

I was like, "Yeah."

And then she says, "Oh, are you going to school?" because it was right about that time people were going back to school in the fall, end of the summertime.

I said, "No, I live there."

"Oh, really? You live there?"

It was utter shock that I could have grown up totally, because basically from 1979, which is five years old, or six years old, whatever, seven years old, I grew up in Burnsville and I am from Minnesota, and I know hockey and lutefisk like I know Fargo and I know Grand Forks. But I also know Diwali and all those other things. And she totally stripped all that away in that one comment, by saying, "Oh, really? You live in Minneapolis?" or "You're from the Twin Cities?" It was utter shock [to her] that I could be from the Twin Cities.

For a whole summer, I didn't have to deal with any of that. Kind of in one shot, she did it. And it wasn't even in Minnesota. It was in New York, you know, where it's supposed to be better. It's that kind of stuff, it's that kind of triangulation that I didn't get in South Africa, no matter what, white South Africans, colored South Africans, Indian South Africans. They had an interest where I was from, but it wasn't the same kind of thing. The questions weren't the same, or they were a little bit different. It didn't come out the same way.

So that summer in South Africa was really great. And I'd like to go to India. I'd like to go back to South Africa and really see what it's like after elections. But part of my problem is, they have such few resources. It's such a gorgeous country. That's one thing they never talk about in the apartheid and all the violence and all the conflict is that it is such a gorgeous country, and that beauty, if they ever talk about that, you'd have more people there than you'd know what to do with.

PS: Are there any aspects of being a first-born U.S. generation that you find particularly difficult, and then the flip side, that you find particularly helpful? You talked about some of those, but are there any other things that you find distinct?

VS: Yes. The hard part is that--I mean, you see this in literature. You definitely feel like you have one foot in this Indian culture and one foot in this Western culture, and sometimes that can be two very distinct things. You know, like when you're in high school and you're trying to figure out do I go to this friend's party or do I go to Diwali or do I go to the Garba, the dance celebration before--as Gujaratis, we have two Navartis before Diwali, which is a dance celebration for Gujaratis. Not everyone does it. They may have other things in other parts of India, but the Gujaratis have specifically that. There were a couple times where I really wanted to go to that party, and my mother said, "No, you're coming to the Garba. This is important." And she's like, "This only happens once a year." And so that's a real drag.

But the hard part, like I said, is that it's so beautiful, there's so many great things about it. And part of the problem with our education system--maybe it's getting better now--is that they teach melting pot. They don't teach celebration of difference. If they taught

celebration of difference, which we all have, which is a critique of PC [political correctness] or whatever in multicultural studies. Everybody has a story, not just the immigrants, or not just the coloreds have a story, and that if you try to pick that for even the whites or for everyone else, then everybody gets into, "It's okay to be different," and then you share stories or whatever. Then that's the kind of thing.

But we're not there yet. And I think if I were to put another advice for my future is that, focus on celebrating the difference, not trying to make such a big deal out of the difference, you know. I think that's hard.

I love my family, and that includes blood and other family in the Twin Cities, but sometimes they do the same things. They make those stupid comments, and that's more embarrassing, more frustrating than when it's one of your own making what you think is a stupid comment, and when you're trying to educate. Or when we're racist against another group, that just kills us. They say other immigrant groups won't support each other. They'll support the whites before they'll support their own group, and that's totally bad. I'm not psyched at all about--there's violence in our community, and especially with spousal abuse, and that's just yuck. That's just total garbage. So that's the bad parts.

I think straddling, too, is definitely there. There's never reconciliation. You have to come to a point where you have to just live with it and be like you never--like I went to this funeral tonight, and that was my Indian world. I heard the songs. I heard that, and then suddenly I was back into thinking about Indian things. I'll go back tomorrow to work, and there's nothing Indian in that environment. There's nothing multicultural. It's mostly a white environment. It's, to me, somewhat cold, and that's very hard. I mean, it's very difficult, definitely, to live that way.

But, you know, sometimes it doesn't get to you. Sometimes it really gets to you. I think now I'm just more aware of it. But I think it requires more energy to educate and to stop and say, "You know, Indians don't just make great neighbors. They are real people." Everyone will come up, "Oh, I have a co-worker that's Indian. I know an Indian friend." And so it's like they're a thing, but they're not a person, and these people have stories and these people are people, really. And I feel like saying, "You know, I have a white that's a really great friend," or "I have a Scandinavian." And that's kind of rude, because most people have good intentions like that, and that's part of Minnesota. But, you know, it's like sometimes it's just whatever, and you choose your battles and you choose them well.

One time when we were in the Rodney King situations, I wrote an incredible article and I talked about saying, "White people shouldn't be called white people. They should be called pink people, and here's why." Just be careful with that, because that energy is very precious. The hard part is that you have such a little bit of that energy. So, yes, that kind of answers, hopefully, a little bit of that.

PS: Yes. In closing, if somebody asks you to describe yourself, who are you, what's your response to that?

VS: Who am I?

PS: Remember, we have about six minutes of tape here.

VS: People always say, "Where are you from?" and I say, "Well, my parents are from India. I grew up in the Twin Cities." I make the distinction. It's not that I'm not a part of India. It's just that that's my parents. And by you doing that, you're taking away something. Because my problem is that, when people hone in my Indianness, they strip away the Stefan in me and my family in North Dakota and my family in St. Louis. I'm not saying that you should totally know that by looking at me or hearing me. I'm not saying that. I'm just saying--that goes back to the celebration of difference--that you can't know, you can't judge. You may have a story that I totally--and I will stereotype you and I will triangulate because I'm human. But if we could just decrease that a little bit, it would be good.

So what am I? I'm a person, is what I say, and my parents are from India. I grew up in the Twin Cities. But generally, I really don't--I've gotten to the point now where I really don't like to give that out, because that's really intimate stuff, unless I get to know you or you will show something about yourself. Because what ends up happening is, I get to educate these people, and they say, "Oh, exoticize me," or something. It's like, no, no, no. You've got a story, too. You've got to put something to me first and then I'll open up, because I know both of us have a lot to do. It's just after so many times of people getting in and saying, "Oh, that's so quaint," or "That's such a great story." It's like, "Look, yeah, I am happy. Yes, I am more interested in you, but that's not what it's about." Everyone's got a story.

PS: Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about that I haven't asked you about?

VS: I think you mentioned clothes or something. Did you say something about clothes?

PS: Yes.

VS: Well, okay. I think clothes are really a basic something growing up and that toggle between that and food. I know growing up, like I would wear Indian clothes at functions and sometimes I would wear them at school, but not very often. I know for women, they like to wear more stuff. Like some of my peers like to wear stuff to work. Sometimes it's accepted and sometimes it's not accepted.

The problem with the clothes thing--and this is something that someone might critique with the Indian community, is that we do more cultural maintenance than we do actually

living here, because everyone thinks they'll go back. That's what every first generation person does, is they think they'll go back. The ones in the Caribbean didn't go back because they couldn't earn enough money, and so they'd go back or they'd lose face. But the ones here, because of the technology and everything else and the money, they'll commute.

But the clothes, I hope that gets better so that you can feel comfortable wearing a jabbah. I love wearing a jabbah--I wear it with a lot of pride now at Diwali, because a lot of my peers are wearing Western clothes. But I think it's really funny how all the women wear saris, all the men wear suits, and I think it's just crazy. I think Indian clothes are so beautiful and they're so nice that everyone should--you choose what you want. They're so much more comfortable, too. It's like this is something that's been delved over 2,000 years of research. Why not go with that one, you know? And now they're doing it possibly with a Nehru shirts and stuff like that. I've tried those on, I can't wear that, because it's like cross-breeding.

What I meant about when we do and how we show the greater community what we are, we show them our dancers and we show them the face painting, but we never say what really is the bindi about. We never do the education part about it, and that's really important. We're starting to do some of that, but we need to focus more on saying, "Here are the myths out there," and they may be okay, like we're great savers and we're very smart. But there's other ones out there like we're not great team players or we can't manage people, and those are going to really hurt us in the long run.

So the clothes deal is that, you know, growing up I did wear a little bit, but my mom was really the one who drove that, and I did a little bit, too. And now I just love wearing it, to Indian functions mostly.

PS: Okay. Thank you very much, Vishant.