Interview with

VARTAN GREGORIAN

by David Finn

Finn: You and I have known each other for a long time! I think we first met when you were at the University of Pennsylvania, where you were Provost and Dean of Arts and Sciences—and then when you were at the head of the New York Public Library; when you were president of Brown University, from which many of my children and grandchildren graduated while you were there; and now as president of the Carnegie Foundation. We've been friends for all these years! And we're still going!

Gregorian: I still feel young at the age of 74. I feel that my free-spirit energy has been put in an envelope that is deteriorating, but not the letter inside!

DF: How long were you at Brown?

VG: Nine years. An angelic number—the Holy Trinity multiplied by itself.

DF: When you were president of Brown, it was considered to be the best university in the country.

VG: I think it still is. It is a wonderful place.

DF: I'd like to ask you about your early life. Where were you born?

VG: I was born in Tabriz, Iran—which is famous for its rugs.

DF: How long did you live there?

VG: My mother died when I was six and a half years old, and she was 26; my grandfather died at the same time; my two uncles died subsequently. My father, who was an accountant, was remarried and I had a half-brother. Before that my full brother had died. My sister and I survived, and my peasant grandmother, who was illiterate, raised us.

DF: When your grandmother brought you up, were you still living in Tabriz?

VG: I was.

DF: How old were you when you left there?

VG: I left Tabriz when I was 15, and at that time I went to Lebanon. I had gone to the Armenian-Russian elementary school in Tabriz, followed by one year at the Turkish school (because the Soviets had created the autonomous republics of Azerbijan in Iran and Kuridstan). When the Iranians came back, the Soviets pulled out of Iran and all our education was considered to be invalid. We had to go to Iranian schools to get real degrees.

DF: How did that work out?

VG: I had the good fortune of meeting the French vice consul, who advised me—and I am sure he was half joking!—to go to Beirut, Lebanon, "the petit Paris," the small Paris. I said, "I have no money." He said, "Don't worry, I will give you three letters. One will get you to Lebanon, one will get you into the Armenian-French lycée (the Collège Arménien), and the third one will get you to the Hotel Luxe."

DF: Did you go?

VG: The problem was that my father did not want me to leave and would not help me at all. He said "If you can get your passport by yourself, you can go." He had underestimated my tenacity! I visited my priest, because I was a choir boy and an altar boy, and he signed a petition for me, stating that I was going to Lebanon to study religion. This was necessary because Iran would not let anyone leave unless they had the necessary money and were studying in a field that Iran did not have. They also still used the medieval practice of petitioning, which meant I had to go and stand in front of the home of the governor of the province of Azerbaijan for many days, waiting, until he signed my petition, making it an official document. The whole process took six months. After that, I had to get somebody to guarantee—with the deed of his property—that I would return to Iran.

DF: How were you able to do that?

VG: An optometrist for whom I used to do chores, and who distributed Armenian newspapers from Paris, Cairo, Athens, and Beirut, vouched his property for me.

DF: That must have been amazing! What happened next?

VG: Then came a great moment in my life. Because my grandmother had lost almost all her children and two grandchildren—I was the sole male survivor—my father said, "If she agrees, you can go," knowing full well she would not agree. It was a dramatic meeting. All our relatives had gathered. My father and stepmother had previously opposed my departure. But then, to their surprise, my grandmother said, "Go and become a man." Before I left, my grandmother took me to a local synagogue, to a local mosque, to local churches of all kinds to collect amulets so God would protect me. It seemed there were amulets from all the Abrahamic faiths!

DF: So you left for Lebanon?

VG: Yes, the three letters from the vice counsel worked very well. I stayed at the Hotel Luxe for two weeks—it was not a luxurious place, it was a six-room hotel—a bed pensione, used mostly by writers in the evenings to talk, to play cards, and so forth. At end of two weeks I was asked to pay the bill. I thought it was for free. The French vice counsel had also told me not to worry about eating, saying that if I was hungry I could buy a kilo (2-1/2 pounds) of bananas or peanuts and I could live on that. I had never even seen a banana! It was a very hard, but also a very fortuitous period in my life. I got assistance from the Armenian Red Cross of Lebanon, which gave me about $6 a month. That provided lunch and dinner five days a week. Not breakfast. Sometimes, a classmate would invite me to his home for Sunday dinner or lunch. Then, it was my great good fortune to meet Simon Vratzian, the last prime minister of the short-lived independent Republic of Armenia (1918-1920). He was the director of the Collège, and when his eyesight worsened I became his second pair of eyeglasses. I read all his writings, did all his mail, dictated letters, and as compensation I stayed at the dormitory of the school as Assistant Dormitory Superintendant. I also received a $250 scholarship from the Armenian Red Cross of Sao Paulo, Brazil, because they wanted me to go Sao Paulo to become the head of their Armenian high school after I graduated. The last obstacle was to learn French, which was necessary to graduate from the lycée. I had a wonderful teacher whom I couldn't stand, Mme. Yoland, but she was a great teacher. She challenged me by saying, "You'll never be able to learn French." I met the challenge, I learned, and I finished with honors, graduating from the Collège in 1955. After that, I spent one year completing a program of advanced studies in Armenology (1956).

DF: How many languages can you speak?

VG: English was my last language—Armenian, Turkish, Russian, Persian, Arabic, French, and English. I still speak some of them, not all of them.

In 1956 I was accepted to Stanford University as a freshman. I obtained my B.A. in two years. Ultimately, it took me two more years to finish all the requirements for my Ph.D. and four years to finish my dissertation on Afghanistan. In the meantime I had gotten married.

DF: How old were you when you married?

VG: 25.

DF: How did you meet your wife?

VG: She was a fellow student. I got engaged to her in the aftermath of the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Fitzgerald's translation of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, which the Consul General of Iran in San Francisco had organized and invited me to attend. I rented my first tuxedo for the event. Stephen Spender came to speak about the life of Fitzgerald. A piece of music was composed for the event by Darius Milhaud. Edward Teller gave a brilliant speech on the atomic theory of Omar Khayyam. I took the most serious girl I knew, Clare Russell. She was born in New York, but grew up in Tenafly, New Jersey. She was also studying history. We had a fabulous time dancing, and at one point the Consul General of Iran asked me in Persian, "Who is this beautiful blond?" And I replied—playfully—"She is fantastic, and one of these days I may even marry her." He turned to her and said in English "Congratulations. When are you getting married?" She was shocked, and I certainly was shocked. We became very sober immediately. And then we drove in silence about 35 miles to Stanford. Somewhere on the road she asked me what all that talk about marriage was. I said that one of these days, when I finish my dissertation, when I get a job, then "I may even ask you to marry me." And she said, "If you ask, the answer is yes." So we got engaged in 1959 and we got married a year later, on March 25, 1960. And then we went to Europe. Our first son was born in Beirut, Lebanon. Soon after I went to Afghanistan and I wrote a book of almost 500 pages, a comprehensive history of Afghanistan.

DF: Who published your first book?

VG: Stanford University Press. It was published in 1969. In the meantime, when I finished my dissertation I got two job offers. One from Stanford University to be an instructor of Western civilization at a salary of $2,900 and another from San Francisco State at about $5,600. I talked to my professors and they said "You cannot eat prestige. You have a family now. You should take San Francisco State." It was the best thing I did. I taught at that university from 1962 to 1968. My responsibility included teaching five courses a week, plus Monday nights in the downtown branch, and one other course on Tuesday and one

Previous page: Vartan Gregorian in his Carnegie Foundation office

Top: Bookshelves with family photographs in Gregorian's office

Page 29: Vartan Gregorian stands beside a portrait of Andrew Carnegie

Page 30: Gregorian with Andrew Heiskell in front of the New York Public Library

Page 33: Original print by William Soroyan

on Wednesday at Hamilton Air Force base and at Presidio Army base. I also spent two consecutive summers teaching. So I was in perpetual teaching mode.

In 1960, I had received a Ford Foreign Area Training Fellowship, which had supported my travel and research for my book about Afghanistan. Something equally phenomenal happened in 1968, when I was selected as one of the ten best professors in the country and received the E. H. Harbison Distinguished Teaching Award from the Danforth Foundation. That took me to Texas, because some of the people on the award committee who had seen my file were from Texas, and wanted me to be in Texas. I joined the University of Texas at Austin. The position increased my salary to $18,000. They also gave me a sabbatical. Things that I could never imagine at San Francisco State.

DF: What was your wife doing during this time?

VG: Raising the children. We had two boys, and she chose to spend her time taking care of them.

DF: How did things work out in Austin?

VG: I spent four years there. During that time I met Eugen Weber, who was the chairman of the history department of the University of California, Los Angeles, and he invited me to teach his course on European History in 1968, when he would be away. In a way it nationalized me. There have always been people in my life who have adopted me and pushed me forward. As a matter of fact, when I wrote my autobiography, *The Road to Home*, I wanted to make the title *With the Kindness of Strangers*. But my editor convinced me that it sounded too much like Blanche Dubois and *A Streetcar Named Desire*!

DF: Who published your autobiography?

VG: Simon & Schuster. The book was published in 2003, and was listed among the Notable Books in *The New York Times* for that year. It was very well received

DF: What happened after Texas?

VG: In 1972 I was invited to serve on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania, and in 1974 I became Founding Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

DF: What was your job?

VG: I was asked to create the Faculty of Arts and Sciences by merging five entities into one—the College for Women, the College of Arts and Sciences, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, and three science departments from the Wharton School. And it was a success story to the surprise of everyone, including myself, because arts and sciences had never been central at the University of Pennsylvania. The professional schools—law, medicine, engineering, architecture—all of them were preeminent, but not arts and sciences as such. In the end, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences brought together 28 departments, 33 graduate programs, eight special programs and offices, 528 faculty members, some 5,500 undergraduates, and 2,500 graduate students. It was the largest component of the university, both graduate and undergraduate. One of the things I was most concerned about during this process was that eliminating the College for Women as an independent entity would become a political issue, but the truth was that it was an anachronistic entity because it had been created for women to learn soft subjects – mathematics and science were not required. It was more an example of an earlier era's prejudices against women and their abilities.

DF: What happened next?

VG: In 1978 I became the twenty-third provost of University of Pennsylvania. I was floored because the first provost of the university was William Smith, an immigrant like myself: Benjamin Franklin had brought him from Scotland. Historically, the University of Pennsylvania did not have presidents until 1929-30.The provost was the chief academic and chief executive.

My position as provost lasted for two years, until 1980. In 1980 came my first major encounter with adversity in the form of an unnecessary conflict. You may have read about it at the time. I was offered the chancellorship of the University of California at Berkeley. I couldn't believe it; it was in the middle of the Iranian hostage crisis and I could see the headlines: "Berkeley does it again. An Iranian-born offered chancellorship…" But it was due to a unanimous vote of the faculty search committee and the regents. In the meantime, the president of University of Pennsylvania had announced his retirement two years in advance. The Dean of Medicine was going to Harvard. The Dean of Engineering was going to Lehigh. So the faculty collected petitions asking me not to leave and everybody, including many trustees, pleaded with me not to go. I had a very difficult choice, stay at Penn, or go to Berkeley. I was told I had only been provost for 18 months and if I left, the university's leadership would be decimated. Someone wrote a poem asking me not to go. Hundreds of faculty members signed a petition asking me not to go. So hubris triumphed. I thought I was indispensable. My duty required me to stay. But at same time the university had started a search for a new president. People from outside thought I had been promised the presidency of Penn and that's why I wasn't leaving, or that I was one of the leading candidates, but none of that was true. I was happy to be provost and indeed, I nominated Judge Leon Higginbotham, a federal judge who was teaching at Penn part time, to be president. He would have been the first African American president of an Ivy League university. And I said I'd be happy to serve with him. But unfortunately, the search got longer and longer. I made it clear that if for whatever reason they didn't want me, they should let me know, so I could formally, publicly withdraw my name. Otherwise, I would be forced to resign because people would think Berkeley was stupid to offer me the job or that Penn had something on me that Berkeley did not know. At the time, I thought this was going to be a fair process. But it did not work out that way. I learned from the chairman of the board that Penn had decided to go outside for a new president, and he wanted me to support their candidate—but he did not trust me with the name of the candidate. I heard on public radio that Sheldon Hackney was coming from Tulane to be the president of the University of Pennsylvania. As promised, I resigned as provost. I think people who did not know me did not understand that from childhood on, my grandmother had taught me that everything you have is negotiable: your brain, height, looks, form of speech, manners; everything except your dignity. You should not let that be traded for anything. I don't think they believed I would resign. But I had told them I would. A great turmoil followed at Penn: students demonstrated, faculty demonstrated, the alumni were angry, the whole university was upset. The faculty met and voted 2-to-1

University Council
Resolution of Appreciation for
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to put my name directly to the trustees as their candidate. Students sued the university for violating the university's sunshine law and selecting a candidate without public transparency about the process. In short, as I noted earlier, it was an unnecessary conflict. And I felt very bad about Sheldon Hackney coming into a situation like that. He didn't deserve it.

DF: What did you do then?

VG: Bernard Segal, a prominent trustee of Penn who had been president of the American Bar Association, had brought Martin Meyerson to Penn. I was his candidate, but he was emeritus, so he was very offended, as were some other trustees, about how I was treated. It was not a question of whether you are entitled to it or deserve it, but how you are treated. He called Larry Tisch, a great friend of his and a prominent figure on the New York University Board, to interview me for the presidency of NYU. I met with the NYU presidential search committee, but I was told the job already had been promised to John Brademas. But in case he turned it down, I would be the next candidate. In the meantime, I was asked to meet with William Dietel, the president of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, who was the head of a search committee for the next president of the New York Public Library. He asked me to meet with Andrew Heiskell, incoming chair of the Library's board, and trustee Richard Salomon, the outgoing chair. About twenty minutes into the meeting, I was told, "You are our man, we want you to be president of the New York Public Library." After much deliberation, to the surprise of everyone, I accepted. One Penn trustee was so surprised that he suggested I see a psychiatrist. Why would I commit such "professional suicide"? Some of the speculations on why I did not get the position at Penn were 1) I could not raise funds; 2) that I was too ethnic—there was even sheer speculation that after having a Jew as president, they did not want another ethnic individual; and 3) the one that made me angry, was when I heard that one prominent Penn trustee believed I didn't have the social graces to be president of a university. Not only did I not have the right accent, I did not have the right "comportment" or respect for etiquette! In Iran you learn two things—one is knowledge and the other is comportment and behavior. The two go hand in hand. Comportment, culture, behavior, savoir faire—that you don't learn in school, you pick up through society—how to respect the elderly, how to listen, how to be kind, how to be generous, how to have manners, to be on time, all of them. But the Library was a wonderful place for me: I approached it like a hungry soul, both eager for knowledge and for the challenge of revitalizing that great institution. And I had a fabulous time!

DF: How long were you there?

VG: More than eight years. And during this time I especially enjoyed raising money for the Library. I felt great because I was asking for funds for a century-old institution. I was talking on behalf of millions of citizens of New York, the nation, and the world. It was a wonderful period in my life, except I gained a lot of weight because I had to go to breakfast meetings, lunch meetings, cocktails, dinners, post-dinners, Seven-days-a-week, 24-hours-a-day. But in the end, we proved that the Library was not a dying institution—and we were right. The New York Public Library reemerged. Everyone talks about the hundreds of millions of dollars that we raised, but I was happy with all the donations, even when someone sent in their Social Security check, or $25, or $50. It was the most democratic institution in a democratic city.

The Library allowed me to see the United States in a different light. So in many ways, in retrospect, the best thing that happened to me was not to stay at Penn, but to come to the New York Public Library.

Then in 1988 I got an offer to be president of the University of Michigan, but I turned that down. I was then considering the post of president of the MacArthur Foundation as well as the presidency of Brown University. I selected Brown for a variety of reasons. It was small, it was private, my wife's parents were nearby on Martha's Vineyard, and most of our friends were on the East Coast. It turned out to be the smartest thing I did.

DF: Why do you feel that was the best choice?

VG: I treated Brown as a potentiality, not an actuality. For example, we had terrible dormitories. In my welcoming speech to parents, I would say we are charging a lot for room and board because we are giving the students the opportunity to live an historical reenactment of World War I barracks. I also likened Brown to Japan, which is smaller than California and has few natural resources, but it has human resources. So, in my book, Brown has always earned everything it has. I called Brown the "ballerina" of the Ivy League—we had no shoes, so we had always to be on our toes and always dancing. I approached Brown with the same spirit that I approached the Library.

DF: How long were you at Brown?

VG: Nine years. I call it nine versus eight because I consider nine years to be an angelic number since; symbolically—as I noted earlier—it is the Holy Trinity multiplied by itself.

DF: Then you came to Carnegie Corporation of New York. When did that happen?

VG: I was appointed in 1997 and I am now in my thirteenth year. I have no contract. I've never had contracts. Somebody said I'm very spoiled because I've never applied for a job. I've never been fired from a job—yet. Wherever I am, I continue my education. The moment I feel I am shortchanging my job, cutting corners, I will step down. Or if I'm bored, I'll step down. Naturally, it is the Board of Trustees, prerogative, also, to let me go whenever they want.

DF: I'm having this interview in your office at Carnegie Corporation, and I see there are an amazing number of books on shelves and even on desks. Where do they all come from?

VG: I buy some of them and others are sent. I come here every Saturday, and I enjoy having these books in my office. I read the introduction and decide whether I want to read the book, or I read about a topic I am working on. On Sundays from 9 or 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. I read eight English and French newspapers, Sunday editions, in order to deprogram myself. In addition, I am also a regular reader of the *London Review of Books, The Times Literary Supplement, New York Review of Books, Harper's, Atlantic Monthly, Science, The Nation, Time, The Economist, Newsweek, US News and, naturally, the Wall Street Journal, New York Times,* and the *Christian Science Monitor* (which I have been reading since my sophomore year at Stanford). Each one provides me a view of the whole world. And when I read I am also doing research. I clip the articles that I am interested in, and they go into files that date back to the1960s. I have files on every subject I am interested in. So if I am interested in doing something on Ruder Finn, I have the file. I don't have to go to the library and do research because I already have done it. For example, I have an article from *The Progressive* magazine that I cut out in 1968, on Jean-Paul Sartre, when he got the Nobel Prize and turned it down as a bourgeois award. Did you know the most vicious attack against him for that decision came from Fidel Castro? He said, "If you don't know what to do with the money, send it to me and I will put it to revolutionary use." I have that quote! I feel that I must keep up with the literary world, with the political world, the international world, and the cultural world. I don't want only an American orientation on issues. I also have a European orientation as well as Asian. I read the *Jerusalem Post*, *Ha'aretz*, and *al-Ahram*, all in English. This is part of my life. I love to read,

DF: How's your memory?

VG: Until now it is great—to the great chagrin of everybody, I remember everything! But now it takes time to remember names. I used to have a photographic memory, but it doesn't provide instant service anymore.

DF: My uncle Louis Finkelstein also had a wonderful memory, but when he got into his 90s he began to have a problem. So he told me he was going to memorize a biblical text to get himself to be as good as he used to be. I was amazed that someone in his 90s would memorize a text, but now that I am in my late 80s, I realize that what he was trying to do was simply to memorize something, because it's very hard to memorize as you get older. I memorized the entire T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*—which is over 800 lines—many years ago, and I knew the whole poem from beginning to end. But now when I try to memorize something it doesn't work!

VG: When I was at the Library, one day there was a dinner for 100 guests. I decided to say one original line about each one of them. And I made it! My wife said, "Don't do that again!" But the second time I tried years later, I left out four names. But being in a funny mood, I did not want to concede that I had forgotten, so I said, "Those of you I have forgotten, it was intentional." I don't even know who I forgot!

It is like computer overload. We have overloaded our brains with so many facts, so many details. I can tell you one thing that nowadays I find very unsettling. I remember having read something about something, but suddenly I realize I did not read this in a book. I read it in a student exam that I corrected! I taught maybe 24,000 or 25,000 students, in large lecture courses. I corrected all their exams. And I always wrote commentaries, but now, I find that some of them have miseducated me.

DF: Do you think they appreciated it?

VG: I think so. But unfortunately, I had to explain why they got A, why they got B, or even D. The format of the exams was always imaginative, and I tried to make them interesting. For example, I would say, imagine that Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill were at dinner talking about property, and ask: how would they analyze it? Of all the blue books I've corrected, I only kept one: a student had written three paragraphs for the final exam; I wrote a two-page commentary on why those three paragraphs were wrong and I failed him. The student was kind enough to mail it back to me with a note that said, "Take it easy! I didn't study!" I feel students don't fail, teachers fail. That has been true all my life. I don't know of a single instance that I have given up on any student. I always felt that I have to be able to find a topic of interest, a concept of interest, the kind that may open the world for students.

DF: You've met a lot of people in the course of your life, and I've met a lot of people in the course of my life; I've written a lot of books, and I wrote one book about one

teacher I had when I was young—an art teacher. He was a German refugee, his name was Ernest Zierer, and I studied with him and I thought he was the most insightful person I had ever met. The book is called *The Story of Ernest*. He died about 30 years ago, and still isn't known—but we do have experiences of meeting with people who have a tremendous impact on us. Who would you think of?

VG: Oh, I have many that I have written about in my autobiography, *The Road to Home*. My editor and I had only one disagreement: she asked, "Why are you writing about all these teachers?" My answer was, "because they influenced my life." And I have had several teachers who just captured my mind. When I was in high school there were a number of university professors who were teaching high school for a living—but since they were all university professors, they were teaching us as if we were university students. They did not talk down; they just talked to us as adults, and that influenced me to study history. The greatest lecturer was a professor who taught Goethe's *Faust*. I still get goosebumps thinking about it, because during his lecture he acted out the dilemma of Faust. Faust had become an old man, but Mephistopheles pledged to turn him into a young man so he could have Margaret's love. But Faust was vain enough to want to be loved as an old man. As a matter of fact, the term "Faustian man" could be applied to how we live now. We want to be immortal, we want to be in charge, we want to be controlling, full of ourselves. We want to be Ubermensch. My teacher acted all of these roles. I remember the scene where Faust is going to commit suicide, and then church bells ring. Church bells remind him of youth, childhood, rebirth, and he decides not to do it.

DF: Are you interested in science?

VG: Yes, I'm interested in the history of science, because when I went to school in Iran, I wanted to be a physicist! I was interested in Einstein's teachings about physics. But we had neither labs nor teachers. It is the only thing that I regret—that I shortchanged myself in science. When I became dean, provost, president, I spent more time on the humanities than science. However, I've always admired scientists. They are one of the most indispensable ingredients of our culture. I believe that there is a logic and structure in science that also exists in the humanities and social sciences that people don't realize.

DF: It's interesting to read about Einstein's curious life—he was a very young man when he made his major discoveries. He married a woman and it didn't work out. He married another lady, it wasn't very good. He died in his 70s when he could have had an operation, but he said never mind, it's Okay to reach the end of one's life.

VG: I am on the board of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, where Einstein worked. Einstein was not at Princeton University but at the Institute. And one of the things I loved most about him was that in addition to his great intellect, he had a sense of humor.

DF: I once wanted to study philosophy myself, and I started reading the Greek philosophers—I read everything that Plato wrote, and then Aristotle, and I kept going up to the nineteenth century. I finally gave up, but it's interesting to try and expand your mind. I still try to, even at my age.

VG: You're doing fabulous, David. Your interests amaze me, your books amaze me, your activities amaze me, the fact that you are a good listener amazes me.

DF: I like to listen to you.

VG: You're wonderful. You've had a wonderful life, a productive life, but most importantly, you're still curious. It's curiosity that keeps us who we are. Once, I asked Mrs. Astor what kept her young, and she said she didn't associate with the same people all the time. That's among the best advice I've ever gotten.

DF: In your world you can meet new people all the time.

VG: That's my first principle, I like to meet people. Second is that every night, I read before I go to sleep. Third, I want to get to know younger people who are not captured by existing ideas. I like people who ask questions.

DF: I believe the same thing. I read before I sleep. I read when I get up in the morning too. I try to learn from young people.

VG: Your whole business is full of young people.

DF: Is there any discovery you think you made in the course of your life? I remember I once found a sentence in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* that seemed to me to be the very essence of existence. The sentence is, "All is always now." I try even now to think of what meant most to me in the course of my life. Do you think about that too?

VG: One of the things that T.S. Eliot mentioned, that I always use is, "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" That summarizes the entire quest. The second thing that comes to mind—to paraphrase Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus writing in his *Meditations*—is,"When I am caught in a corner, I want wisdom." Here is the emperor of Rome, who knows history, who knows the limits of power, limits of knowledge, limits of wealth. He strips himself of everything to see what his own essence is. How not to be corrupted by one or the other. How not to confuse the job with your identity. To me, that has always been the challenge.

DF: Isn't it interesting that in the last few years young people have discovered so many new things. They look at them on the computer, they have all kinds of information in their minds, and have the feeling that what they have discovered in recent years has changed the world. And I keep feeling that Plato and Aristotle were as insightful as anybody who lived in the course of history, and all these new discoveries don't, in my mind, bring in significant new insights, new ways of living.

VG: For the first time in history, and this is a big generalization, every individual has the potential of having their own Library of Alexandria. But I find that despite all these gadgets, the basic ingredient still remains the question: Who am I, what am I doing, what's my world view, what do I know, what don't I know? At one time at Brown University, I jokingly proposed that perhaps we should give two degrees simultaneously: one for what you know and the other for what you don't know. The rest of your life you have to spend learning what you don't know. But people did not like it even as a joke because parents would say we are producing uneducated individuals. I don't find, with rare exceptions, that people develop a world view. Instead, they develop lifestyles. Also, I am not impressed with all the gadgets. And I'll tell you why. I always repeat what Henry David Thoreau once said: "We are in great haste to construct a telegraph from Maine to Texas, but it may be that Maine and Texas have nothing to communicate." If you have nothing to say, it doesn't make any difference. We may have all these fancy communications devices, but they are not going to make us smart. I am reminded of the first story I read in Persian, in the first or second grade, which was about an illiterate man who goes to the pharmacy to ask for eyeglasses. The pharmacist has all kinds of glasses and asks what kind the man wants. He says he wants reading glasses. But then the pharmacist realizes that the problem is not glasses, the problem is that the man cannot read! So first we have to learn how to read! Gadgets are not a substitute for learning, and it is a pity how short an attention span people have. Then another thing happens. While information, knowledge, and everything else is accelerating, it is also fragmenting at the same time. People are occupying small counties in the universe and they build their own small coteries, but they are deprived of the great universal joy of seeing the totalities of the world and of the universe.

DF: Some people think they will not learn about the universe from books. They think the Internet will take their place. I hope that won't happen.

VG: Well, books may go away for many people, but I tell you one thing—I'm stimulated just by seeing titles. I can look at a book's index. I can jump from one topic to another. This is how I was brought up. I have no problem how one reads. Whether you read on the Kindle or SONY, what matters is that you are reading. Everybody places the emphasis on *how*, I always emphasize *why* and *what*. What and why. There is a great letter from Einstein, which I cited in my commencement address at Notre Dame. Einstein said scientists ask why; religion asks, to what end? That's what I'm saying. Education to what end? Knowledge to what end? So many people deprive themselves of the joy of learning, the joy of curiosity. Consuming is not going to fill that vacuum.

DF: One of the things I worry about when I have the joy of learning by reading is whether I am going to remember it.

VG: Well, to me, what's important is that after reading a book you're the same person plus new insights. Each book brings a new insight. Each paper opens the universe. It is a way of expanding intelligence, whether you remember parts of it or not. The first book that left a great impact on me was *Les Misérables*, which I read in Armenian when I was 14. I felt it touched human compassion. Then there was Pascal. I used to put one dot on the top of the blackboard in every classroom in which I lectured. Students would ask, "What is that dot?" I'd say, "I'll tell you at the end of the semester." The answer is, that dot is the universe. Find in that dot our planet, find the United States, find Philadelphia, find the University of Pennsylvania, find our classroom, find where you are. Your greatest pride should be to know that physically, we amount to nothing, and knowing we're nothing is something big.

DF: I'm currently reading a book by Karen Armstrong called *The Case for God*. I read her book *A History of God* before that. She's a wonderful writer and very insightful. I must say that I've thought about the concept of God for a long time, and I've come to the conclusion that there's no way of knowing whether is there is or isn't a God, or anything about God. We don't know what God is, or if there is a God. I think we can't know.

VG: I sat next to the Dalai Lama once. He said, "I myself am not a believer."

DF: He did?

VG: He was joking. But it's a very fundamental question, whether faith can be given a scientific test. There is a book called *Blind Faith,* by Professor Richard Sloan. It's about medicine and prayer. The author went to study everything that was written on the impact of prayers on health. He found that almost all the claims were bogus or exaggerated. Made up. That's one of the things in Pascal's bargain: Compare what you stand to gain and what you stand to lose by either believing or not believing in God.

DF: We could go on asking all those questions, and I suppose not coming up with satisfying answers. It's been inspiring to have this conversation with you and share some of your remarkable thoughts. Clearly you have explored many of the mysteries we all struggle with, and even as we become older, you continue to look for insights into what life is all about. Thanks very much for the opportunity to have this conversation with my old—but still young—friend.