

COUNTDOWN TO BOSTON

27 DAYS



## "V" is for Volpe

Writers never really know how their readers are receiving and processing their work. Getting inside a character's head is hard enough. Trying to penetrate the readers' individual or group psyche is sheer madness. Which is to say, I don't really know how this Countdown to Boston has been received. I been pleased, even touched by the kind words of appreciation many have shared via email, but I don't really know how, or if, one particular vein of thought or another may be resonating. Or grating, perhaps sometimes even offending. I myself am surprised to find as I go along how fiercely fond and in awe of so many child neurologists I truly am, having never previously taken the time to write so many of these things down, which is how, after all – writing, I mean – we find out what we think and who we, and others, are.

Some of you may have anticipated that "V" would be "for vaccination." Many of you may insist it should be. I will say only that it may yet be, when "V" comes up again next week as we wind our way back down the alphabet to "A" (which I dearly hope, playing off of my previous Déjà vu musings, does not end up being "A is for 'Again?!?')).

Some of you, I know, may be growing concerned about my Ahabic pursuit of the Great White Whale, holding the 50th CNS Annual Meeting live in Boston, a pursuit that seems destined, some say, to end with one lone survivor clinging for life to a floating piece of wood; a coffin for Ishmael, a piano, perhaps, for Phil Pearl. It is true, I do want very badly to get back to Boston. For Boston, really, is where it all began, or perhaps I should say, began again, with Joe Volpe, Chief of Neurology at Boston Children's Hospital in 1993-95 when he served as CNS President.

## HISTORY, RESEARCH, THE SOCIETY

Home / Videos / Neonatal Neurology (Recorded at Boston Children's Hospital)



### Neonatal Neurology (Recorded at Boston Children's Hospital)

Participants:

Phillip L. Pearl, MD

Joseph J. Volpe, MD

Screenshot

*Click to see video.*

I was hired, as I noted previously, by Larry Lockman and Mary Currey in 1981 and began doing part-time work on the side for the CNS beginning in 1983. Mary and I found ourselves newly headquartered outside of the University of Minnesota in 1989, thanks to Marvin Fishman. And it was Steve Roach who offered me the chance in 2012 to succeed Mary as the Society's second Executive Director. But I would never have been around to accept Steve's offer were it not for Joe Volpe.

There have been two times over the years when I almost left the CNS for what, at the time, seemed like better offers; better for my family, better for my soul, better for my bank account. Both times my mind was made up: I was leaving. Both times I turned back. Each time it was largely because of the CNS President that I turned back and stayed on: the high regard and deep devotion I felt toward each – Joe Volpe in 1995, and Ann Tilton in 2007 – because of their character, their essence, their personhood.

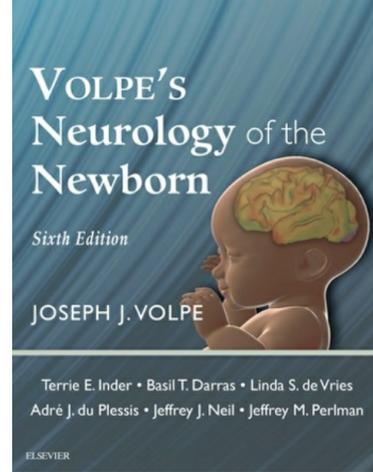
In Joe's case (or "Dr. Volpe," as I am still reflexively inclined to address him directly, despite his insistence I call him "Joe") it was that quiet center of gravity he seemed to create about himself and whoever he was working with or engaged with in conversation. He was Prospero on the island, able to calm the winds and create this stillness within which things clarified and made sense. Those who know him well from training under or working with him know what I am talking about. It starts with, as it must, his remarkable gift for listening closely, even intimately, to the person or persons with him.

It goes without saying that the man is brilliant. One does not author six editions of the definitive textbook on neonatal neurology, one does not become known worldwide as "The Father of Neonatal Neurology" without having a few things going on in his mind, thought processes moving in ways and at lengths and speed like no one else's. But, I wouldn't know how to begin talking about that. And you wouldn't want me to even try.

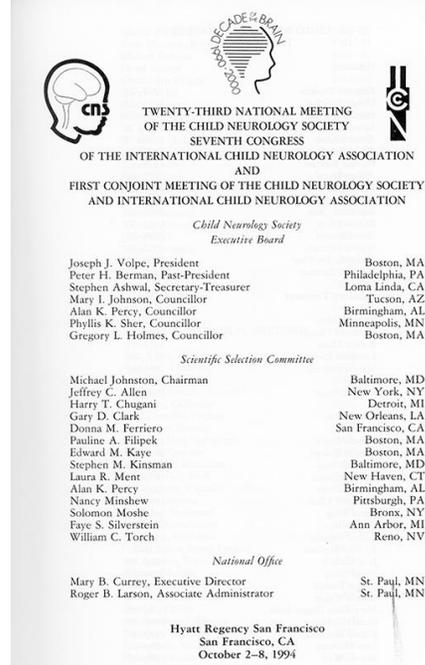
What I can talk a little bit about, however, is Dr. Volpe's style and spirit. Joe Volpe is the definitive case study in "quiet authority": presence of mind creating quiet space around him

for those present to truly be present, to be there in the moment. It's a "Zen thing," I suppose, although I can't imagine Joe being self-consciously aware of that, let alone claiming anything like that out loud. Pretension is not part of his make-up. He is one of those people you recognize as being remarkable in part because he makes no claims to being remarkable, yet doesn't disclaim with false modesty the intangible qualities or tangible achievements others cannot help but recognize and celebrate.

Dr. Volpe, as I have pointed out previously, is one of only two people to win the Triple Crown of Child Neurology: receiving the Hower Award in 1990, the Sachs Award in 2000, and being elected by his peers to serve as CNS President, from 1993-95. The only other person to achieve that distinction is Darryl De Vivo, his colleague at Washington University during its Phil Dodge heyday.



Peter Berman frequently expressed amazement and pride at being CNS President sandwiched between those two Wash U luminaries. Dr. Berman was the rock that kept things solidly grounded through the 1993 crisis surrounding the bombing of our original meeting site at the Vista Hotel adjoining the World Trade Center and the subsequent move to Orlando for what proved to be a very successful meeting. He was succeeded in the helm by Joe Volpe, an accomplished sailor, who steered the CNS through the choppy waters of San Francisco Bay and the first joint meeting with the International Child Neurology Association (ICNA) in 1994, a role requiring great patience, discernment, diplomacy and, yes, quiet authority.



That was when things changed for me in relation to the CNS. Dr. Volpe invited me to sit in on, and actively participate in CNS Executive Committee meetings, something I had not previously done working as a part-time administrative assistant for Mary Currey. I was the father of two young children at the time, a 7-year-old son and a 1-year-old daughter. I mention that because I think now, looking back, that was the basis of the ease, trust, and mutual recognition in my early relationship with Joe. He was, as I mentioned, a gifted listener. I imagine him as being the consummate compassionate clinician, listening closely in a way that gives comfort and instills confidence (in the double sense of the word) to parents of tiny, imperiled premature babies, as well as toddlers or young children. I see them standing together, the two or three parents and the expert physician, enclosed within a question that defines that space and time, both at that very moment in time and in memory thereafter: "Is our child going to be OK?"

I think it was that sense of me as a young parent that drew him to me, or me to him: two people who could converse openly and naturally, ask difficult questions and offer direct answers on important topics and issues, exchanging essential information in service to a progressively clarifying and compelling shared purpose.

He was not, it's true, the most dynamic speaker; sparks did not fly from the podium when he stood behind it. But in a sense, again, his quiet authority filled the space, the entire space onstage and in the meeting room. His talks were always structured and delivered with craftsmanlike precision: measured in pace and comprehensive in scope. No one, in all my years of recording post-meeting CME surveys, so consistently received higher marks from meeting attendees than Dr. Volpe, although many of his trainees and young faculty came close, including several Investigator Awardees he mentored: Evan Snyder (1990), Adre du Plessis (1995, shown below), Michael Rivkin (1996), Joe Gleeson (1998), Terri Inder (2004) and Mustafa Sahin (2005).



He wrote elegantly. I have written and edited many letters and statements in and outside of the CNS through the years. Other than an admittedly obsessive and probably inappropriate insertion of a semi-colon or two, I never touched his drafts. I never had to. Which, without any pretension on his part, may have been the first subtle clue he picked up that I was a writer. We were obviously working in different genres, he on medical monographs and textbooks, me transitioning from short-form into long-form fiction. He would occasionally ask me about the novel and I confess, as further twisted tribute to my high regard for him, that I often avoided him at later CNS meetings, embarrassed to admit it was not finished or even progressing well. He might be cheered, or at least amused to know that the 16-year-old boy I began writing about in 1994, devastated by Kurt Cobain's suicide and anxiously watching his 43-year-old father wrestle with middle-age and the recent, untimely death of his mentor, is now in 2021 a 43-year-old father. (The book's working title is *Déjà Vu*. Surprised?). So I was deeply touched when, at age 41 in 1995, I received a gift from Joe upon ending his presidency: a Montblanc pen that I still write with today.

At the same time that I am coming full circle with my novel, I find that I am now coming full circle with my CNS "career" (not a term I associate with my years spent among you). By staying on with the CNS and not leaving to write, to go to seminary, or to take that job offer in 1995 – all because of Joe Volpe – I was able, in time, to grow into my role at CNS, to see it as a calling, even. And that, I see now, is one way in which I may have mirrored, however obscurely, what I find most compelling, most genuine and quietly authoritative about Dr. Volpe. That notion came to me a few weeks back when re-re-re-reading Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (yes, it's racist in a prototypically Victorian fashion, but we can debate its relative merits and demerits some other time).

The passage I am thinking about speaks to me not only about Joe Volpe, but of many of you as well, faithfully following your soul and muse daily as you practice in a largely overlooked and undervalued medical specialty. In talking about the "battered, twisted, ruined, tin-pot steamboat" he captained, the narrator, Marlow concludes: "... (but) I had expended enough hard work on her to make me love her. No influential friend would have served me better. She had given me a chance to come out a bit – to find out what I could do. No, I don't like work. I had rather laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done. I don't like work – no man does – but I like what is in the work – the chance to find yourself. Your own reality – for yourself, not for others – what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means."

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**"V" is also for VOTE!**



## VOTE TODAY!

On-line portal is now open for Active CNS Members in good standing to cast their vote.

**Deadline: September 19**

Read candidate personal and diversity statements in the Special Summer 2021 issue of CNS Connections, then go on-line and vote!

- **Midwest**, replacing current Councillor, Nancy Bass, rotating off in October.  
Candidates:
  - **Sucheta Joshi**
  - **Katherine Nickels**
- **Northeast**, replacing current Councillor, Nigel Bamford, rotating off in October.  
Candidates:
  - **Janet Soul**
  - **Alcy Torres**

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**CLICK TO VOTE**

**Note:** This platform works best on a laptop or desktop.

Until tomorrow (The letter “W”)  
Roger

Roger Larson, CAE  
Executive Director

## On-line Registration is Open!

Registration is now open for the long awaited 50th Golden Anniversary Meeting of the Child Neurology Society in Boston. Registrants attending this milestone meeting live and in-person in Boston will want to register early (some sessions are limited and reservation-only). You will also want to book hotel rooms ASAP. A link and access code to the Sheraton Boston Hotel will be included in your registration confirmation email.

**Click to Register**

## 2021 CNS 50th Annual Meeting

For more information, click button below.

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