TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Editor Bob Wilson Celebrates A Career of Literary Journalism

The retiring editor of The American Scholar magazine reflects on decades producing literary journalism, why he always supported women writers, and the role of journalists in turbulent times.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at Hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Lawrence: Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we've welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys.

Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about the Visiting Scholar lectures, please visit pbk.org.

Lawrence: Today I am thrilled to welcome my colleague, Robert Wilson, the editor of *The American Scholar* magazine, the literary journal of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Bob has served in this capacity since 2004, and previously was the literary editor of *Civilization*, the magazine of the Library of Congress, and editor of *Preservation*, the magazine of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. In 2019, he published a book called *Barnum: An American Life*. Bob retires this year after almost 20 years at *The American Scholar* and it is a great pleasure to sit down at Key Conversations with Bob Wilson. Welcome Bob.

Bob Wilson: Thank you, Fred, looking forward to our chat.

Lawrence: Bob, before we start talking about *The American Scholar* magazine and business, I want to take you back a little bit. Tell us a little bit about the journey and where it starts. Tell

us a little bit about your early years in school. Is there a favorite teacher who inspired you and got you started on this path?

Wilson: The way I really got started on this path was in college. I had a professor who was an English professor, but also the editor of a literary magazine at the university I went to, which is Washington and Lee. The magazine was called *Shenandoah* and I got involved with it as a student, just reading manuscripts and doing whatever I could to be useful, and I continued that when I was in graduate school. After graduate school, that terrible moment came when I realized I had to have a job. I had an in with a newspaper in a hometown of some of my relatives called Newport News. So I went to work for the *Newport News Daily Press* as a reporter. I wrote obits, I wrote police beat, I covered county, and eventually I moved on to *The Washington Post* where I was a copy editor, and at some point an opening came up in the book section of *The Washington Post*, *Book World*, and I managed to snag that job, and that was really how I got into this sort of literary side of journalism.

Lawrence: When you were doing reporting for Newport News, and of course you were just starting out then, but were you thinking that this is what I want to do more of maybe for a different kind of periodical or wider audience? Or were you already thinking that I think I like the editing part better than the reporting part?

Wilson: I must say that my introduction to editing on a newspaper level was very much the old fashioned, and my introduction to reporting as well as a result, is the old fashioned inverted pyramid style, meaning you put the most important thing at the top and the least important thing at the bottom, because the way things were edited in a newspaper on deadline was they just whacked off what didn't fit, so it wasn't a very sophisticated form of editing.

Wilson: I did know that I wanted to do kind of literary things and I would write book reviews. The first book review I wrote for the *Newport News Daily Press*, I very proudly took to the editor and he walked back across the newsroom a day or two later and said, well, Wilson, you've committed literature, and it wasn't a compliment. I did feel about the reporting experience that it wasn't something I really wanted to continue doing. I felt a little bit of the Janet Malcolm problem that you're taking something from the people you're writing about and not always clear that it was a sort of equal transaction or at least it was one I didn't feel particularly comfortable with. So I was ready to move to the editing side.

Lawrence: When you went to *The Washington Post*, did you think you would wind up staying in journalism on the newspaper side? Because obviously we know how the story ends, you move and have a substantial and meaningful career in long-form journalism in magazines, but was that always the plan or when you were at *The Washington Post*, did you think maybe this is where I'm going to drop anchor, I'm going to be a Washington Post writer?

Wilson: I was pretty young when I went to The Post and I confessed I didn't have much of a life plan. I started there not so long after *All the President's Men* came out and it pretty

much felt like the greatest place in the world to work. It was just so exciting to walk into that newsroom every day or every evening often. I remember that one of the legendary Watergate editors, Howard Simons, was talking to me once and he said with a little bit of disdain, so Wilson, are you a lifer or not? Meaning is The Post going to be your whole life or are you going to move on? I probably said, I didn't know, but I did feel a sense that life could get too comfortable there.

Wilson: Howard also referred to it as the velvet cage, working at *The Washington Post*, and I got a job offer to move across the river to Egyptian exile in Arlington at *USA Today*, and I didn't know whether to go or not. It was clearly a move up, but I did love The Post and The Post was a sort of identity. If you lived in Washington, you worked for The Post, but I made the decision to go. And so I did.

Lawrence: Let's bring you to the Scholar now. This is 2004. *The American Scholar* of course is the journal of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, a nine decade magazine, [and] continues to be a major player in long-form journalism, in arts, culture, ideas, thought. Tell us about what you thought when you started back in 2004. What did you think of as the biggest challenges? What did you think of as the biggest opportunities as you came in at that time?

Wilson: Well, I had a very clear idea of what I wanted to do. My predecessor Anne Fadiman, who was a fine essayist herself, had really conceived the Scholar as a book of essays. And she had even had a designer, a book designer, redesigned the magazine to look more like a book, and the essayists that she attracted were truly first rate. They were really great people and she won lots of magazine awards and things, but there was a kind of monotone quality to the work. And when I went to talk to the search committee about what I wanted to do, I said, well, I want the magazine to not be about “I” so much and be about “we”. If you read Emerson's American Scholar speech, part of that is about intellectuals making their way in the world and trying their knowledge out in the world, and I felt certain that the name was not there accidentally, that there was some purpose behind it.

Lawrence: And of course Emerson's American Scholar lecture was given at a Phi Beta Kappa ceremony. Ralph Waldo Emerson became one of our early honorary members or alumni members of Phi Beta Kappa, but he chose that moment to give his declaration of independence for American intellectual inquiry.

Wilson: But also to make a pitch for what we would call now, lifelong learning.

Lawrence: Talk to me a little bit about something that you and I have talked about many times offline, how you balance timelessness of pieces in the Scholar with relevance of a piece in the Scholar. How do you balance relevance and timelessness?

Wilson: One thing you have to do is you have to think of today in a fairly broad sense. Since we're quarterly, today is probably a three month window. So part of the trick of it, the art of it, the luck of it, is to, especially with a cover story, try to think about what are

people going to be interested in coming down the road? What are they no longer interested in?

Wilson: For instance, right now, if I were editing another issue of the magazine, I would be very interested in obviously doing something about Ukraine and about what's going on there today, but you'd have to be extremely cautious about that and try to figure out, we have no idea what's going to happen in Ukraine, what is a way of coming at that story that we haven't read about yet and that will feel like us, will be, say, historical perspective of a kind you might not read in the newspaper. And so that to me is often the, that's the challenge is you don't want to ignore what's going on, especially epical moments like the one we're in right now, but you have to find your own way of doing it. For me one of the big things that happened in my time here was the election of Donald Trump and clearly that called for a response, and one of the things that he said during his campaign was how much he loved the uneducated voter.

Lawrence: Right.

Wilson: And so we ended up having a piece really about what the founders thought about the idea of the uneducated voter, what they thought about the importance of education, vis a vis American democracy, the continuation of American democracy. So that's a challenge. I mean, how do you find, we often say, well, how do we find the Scholar way into the story?

Lawrence: Another slice on roughly the same question. This is as issues become more relevant, it is easy to fall into the trap I think, of being perceived as a left wing journal or a right wing journal, a conservative or liberal journal. How do you perceive first of all, the role of the Scholar in that debate, but then also, is there a place for journals that are overtly liberal or conservative?

Wilson: Oh, well clearly there's a place for journalists that have a definite point of view. I do think any good magazine, even a big magazine, but certainly a small magazine is going to be a reflection of the sensibility of its editor. And if it's not, it's being edited by committee and that's not a good thing. You don't get good things doing things by committee. So there's no way for my own personal opinions to not be reflected in the magazine that I edit.

Wilson: Joseph Epstein granted me an audience when I first took on the job and one thing he said to me was, I never thought I was politicizing the magazine. I was just running pieces that made sense to me. I thought, I'll be able to use this many times in the years to come and that's true, but I also felt very much that pieces could make sense that I didn't agree with. I didn't have to agree with everything. I had to feel that they were making a rational argument. I had to feel that there was some value in the argument they were making, but I didn't have to necessarily think, well, this is what I would've written on this subject. Editing is part ego and part humility. You have to let other people have their say, and that may seem very obvious, but there's certainly editors who don't do that. There are editors who rewrite every piece from beginning to end to sound like them.

Lawrence: Well in an interesting way, and I thought of this long before I came to Phi Beta Kappa as a Scholar reader in my own reading, the Scholar was always one of the ones on the nightstand for me long before I came to Phi Beta Kappa. One of the things that was remarkable, and I wonder if you share this view and if so, how do you produce this result, is that there is such a thing as a Scholar piece, that there is a tone that pieces in the Scholar have that as you read one after the other, they all belong in the Scholar. But that said there is no ideology, there is no politics of the Scholar in that sense, but there is such a thing as a Scholar piece, at least it seems to me. I wonder, does that sound right and if so, how do you produce that?

Wilson: Yeah, I think it's right. I mean, I think it is partly a matter of sensibility. I'm going to take certain kinds of pieces. Early on among the many pieces we get were many works of straight literary criticism. And it's like, here's a piece about Moll Flanders with no particular connection to anything else. And I remember talking to Jeanie Stipicevic and Sandra Costich, who were the two editors who'd been there for many, many years. I said, do we run lit crit? Because it doesn't feel right to me to run lit crit. Oh no, we've never run lit crit. So that's the sort of whole category of pieces we don't run. We run a lot about literature. We run a lot that's criticism of the culture of arts, of literature, but lit crit has that sort of airless disconnected feeling often that is something that we steered clear of.

Wilson: I mean, I think the other part of it is we're not interested in academic mumbo jumbo. I have a very low tolerance for that and often just simply don't understand it. And so we don't run that. We don't run pieces that are not clear or cannot be made to be clear. We love pieces that are based on many years of thought in a particular area or at least a few years of thought or at least a few minutes of thought. So I hope that's a characteristic of a Scholar piece. I can't tell you how much I love it when a piece comes in from somebody who says something like, I've been an anthropologist for 30 years and I've always wanted to say X for a larger audience. And if that person, if she or he is able to say that in an understandable way, that to me is the greatest thing. I love it when those kinds of pieces walk in the door.

Lawrence: You have edited with this most recent issue of the Scholar, which will be the last one that you edited, 70 issues of *The American Scholar*. Do you have, I'm not going to ask you for favorite articles because they're all your writers out there waiting to hear is he going to say mine? So let me ask you a slightly different question. Are there any pieces that the way in which they played out surprised you, either in terms of their staying quality or how they were perceived or how they developed from the time you initially reached out to solicit the piece or the time it showed up at the door as a submission?

Wilson: I guess the piece that's probably had the most impact for better or worse, and it's probably the piece most associated with my time here is William Deresiewicz's piece, The Disadvantages of an Elite Education. That piece has gotten literally and I do mean literally millions of views on our website and it continues to be read again and again. I didn't, I mean, Deresiewicz, I had sort of approached Deresiewicz originally as a dance critic. He had been recommended to me as somebody who wrote well about dance. And

indeed he wrote a piece about dance for me, but then he started sort of veering off into other sorts of criticism, and then he produced this piece and another piece that was a speech he gave at West Point called Solitude and Leadership, which has been read by everyone in the military, I would say in our military, every officer I would venture to say in our military has read that piece. And so those are a couple of pieces that have had a really long life. I'm really not thinking of pieces that surprise me, but I will ask myself a question if I may, which is…

Lawrence: Please.

Wilson: What is a kind category of piece that I'm really sort of proud of? And this is going to seem odd at this moment in history, but I'm extremely proud of how many women write for our magazine. You would think that, well, women have always written for the magazine of course. That's really not true. In fact, within a couple of years of my getting to the Scholar, an editor from a very major magazine, took me to lunch and said, we don't know how to find women to write for our magazine. Can you help us? Do you have any ideas?

Wilson: And even the current editor of *The Atlantic* has said within his time editing there, we can't find women to write cover stories. Now this says more about those of us who are older white men, I'm sure than it should, but it's something that I've really been committed to since really my days at *USA Today*, and it's something that has to be worked at and every single time we have an assignment meeting, I say, do we have enough women writers? And that's the only way to make that happen, and I'm very proud that I'd say we're over 50% women in our magazine as a rule.

Lawrence: You've been with us at the Scholar for nearly two decades. You've been in the journalism business a lot longer than that. So I did promise I'd give you the chance to do a little bit of that reflecting mode. Thinking about where we are now in 2022 and looking at the state of long form journalism, online, in print, all of the various different platforms in which information is produced, content is made available today, what excites you about new opportunities that you think are there for the Scholar and other long-form journalism in the years ahead, and do you have any concerns about this moment, are we at risk of losing something?

Wilson: I mean, it's a wonderful time for journalism in that there's so many terrible things going on. This is what journalism is there for, most of the time. When I worked for *USA Today,* I used to think it's such a lousy newspaper when nothing's happening and such a great newspaper when something is happening, something matters, and a lot of what journalism is, is keeping the channels of communication open until something important happens. You look at, I mean, this is not long-form print journalism, but the long-form print pieces will be coming and they'll be great about Ukraine, but just look at the television journalism that's coming out of that right now, which is really quite extraordinary.

Wilson: The fact that there's so many platforms, the fact that there are so many ways for people to get their writing out there is a great thing. It's a hugely competitive market for a

magazine like the Scholar, and that's a good thing, and it's a very hard place to break through in. I guess I do have to feel there's that line from Auden, "Poetry makes nothing happen." It's hard to reconcile the idea that there is all this great journalism out there, and there's so many terrible things happening in the world that we are in such a terrible, terrible state. It's not journalism's responsibility completely to make the world a better place, but I wish I could say the world is a better place today than it was when I took up the editorship of the Scholar. But I'm not sure I can say that.

Lawrence: And yet, if Trilling is right, that there's a moral obligation to be intelligent or at least a moral obligation to seek intelligence, then we're part of that conversation, and hopefully not just our 20,000 plus subscribers, but well beyond for those who are affected by the ideas, the ones that are permeating into the tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, and the odd one that gets clicked on a million times.

Wilson: No, absolutely, and I mean, the idea of the competition out there also creates an opportunity for the Scholar to be more unique. I mean, to have a place that other people don't have. One of the other things that I'm proud of doing is I've published an extraordinary number of old people even before I was old, and I feel like there's so few publications out there that don't want the latest thing, the hot new writer, but there's a lot of wisdom there in age, and I've been really proud to be able to bring that sort of wisdom to the pages of the Scholar. In this new issue, I have a piece by Garry Wills, to me, the greatest literary journalist of our time who writes something I've never seen him write before, something extremely personal about his family, his mother, his father, it's extraordinary. That's the sort of piece I'm extremely proud to have been able to publish.

Lawrence: We will look forward to following that. You will be dearly missed at Phi Beta Kappa. I will take the prerogative as the host of Key Conversations to say, I will dearly miss you as a colleague here at Phi Beta Kappa and our regular meetings. You have left a lasting imprint, impact on *The American Scholar* magazine and therefore on the Phi Beta Kappa Society, and I think it's not too much to say on society much beyond that. So Bob, thank you for all of that and more, and we don't say goodbye we say, we look forward to staying in touch and seeing all that will yet be produced as you tinker with your own prose.

Wilson: Thank you, Fred, and thank you for all the support you've given me as the editor of the Scholar.

Lawrence: My pleasure, and thank you today for sitting down with me at Key Conversations. This podcast is produced by LWC. Cedric Wilson is lead producer. Paulina Velasco is managing producer. This episode was mixed by Robert Lopez. Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our visiting scholar program please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

CITATION:

Lawrence, Fred, host. “Editor Bob Wilson Celebrates A Career of Literary Journalism.’” *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa,* The Phi Beta Kappa Society, April 18, 2022. www.pbk.org.

Produced by: