



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

William “Bro” Adams Knows What Good the Humanities Can Do Beyond Campuses

William "Bro" Adams, the former head of the National Endowment of the Humanities, and President of Colby College and Bucknell University brought the humanities with him through his professional journey. While doing so he challenged colleges to rethink the impact liberal arts and sciences had on students, and the role they could play in the broader general public, and he shares how the meaningful life and the productive life can coexist and how they can both be served in higher education.

Fred Lawrence:

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. On our podcast, we welcome leading thinkers, visionaries and artists who shape our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters. Many of them are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country for us visiting campuses and presenting free lectures that we invite you to attend. For the full visiting scholar schedule, please visit pbk.org.

Today it's my great pleasure to welcome William Bro Adams, who was senior fellow at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Bro was the 10th chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities from 2014 to 2017 under the Obama administration. Shortly after arriving at the NEH, Bro launched an agency-wide initiative titled The Common Good: Humanities in the Public Square. The initiative sought to demonstrate the relevance of the humanities to the life of the nation during a time of unprecedented domestic and global challenges. Prior to joining the NEH, Dr. Adams served as president of Colby College in Waterville, Maine from 2000 to 2014, and also served as president of Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania from 1995 to 2000. Today, he lives and writes in Maine. Welcome, Professor Adams.

Bro Adams: Thank you, Fred. Good to be here.

Lawrence: Bro, it's a pleasure to have you with us today. You have been a professor, an academic administrator, a leader in the humanities, but I want to start with a diversion in your path that's not all that common, and that is you started your career as a student, Colorado College, but interrupted that career for three years in the army, including at least one in Vietnam at the Mekong Delta. So how did that come to be, and how do you think that influenced the whole rest of the journey?

Adams: Well, it came to be because I wasn't a very good student and was a little lost in college during my first year in 1965-66. I dropped out and then realized pretty quickly that I was going to have to deal with the draft, so I enlisted as an 18-year-old ex-college student and went from there to basic training to advanced training. And then I was recruited to officers candidate school and went to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where I was commissioned as an artillery officer, and spent a year in this country training and doing other things, and then went to Vietnam for a year as well.

As to how it affected me, it completely changed me. I think mostly in good ways, not entirely in good ways, but mostly in good ways. It certainly made me serious and committed when I got back to school. When I did get back to school, of course, I had a pretty different point of view on things, and I think that was the beginning of a conviction that I've had my entire professional career, that the work we do, the work you do in Phi Beta Kappa, the work I did as a professor, administrator is extremely important in the context of the daily lives we actually live. And it was then, and is now, my belief that starting with that fact and that promise is important to understanding the role of higher education, the liberal arts and sciences, and the humanities as well.

Lawrence: Is there a greater blessing than walking to work, walking to campus, walking to the office and thinking, "What I'm going to do today matters"?

Adams: No, there probably isn't a greater blessing, and I always had the conviction that it mattered. I had thoughts about where the academy should be headed, and where the liberal arts and sciences should be headed in particular, with respect to these questions of connection of the higher education enterprise to the rest of life. But I never doubted that I was in the right place and that what I was doing was critical to the future of the students we were teaching and to the broader prospects of the country as a whole.

Lawrence: So let's take you back to Colorado College. You ultimately graduate with a BA in philosophy. Had you been a philosophy major or were you planning to major in

philosophy before the time in the army? Or is that something that changed after you got back?

Adams: Well, I don't remember what I was thinking before the army, if I was thinking anything at all. But I started to read philosophy, actually, while I was in the army, and I took a night school course at the University of Louisville in Kentucky when I was stationed at Fort Knox, and that was pretty meaningful. It was a course in aesthetics, actually. And we had a wonderful teacher, who was on the faculty at Louisville. And I was smitten and never looked back. I was absolutely convinced that that's what I wanted to do, partly because of that experience, partly because I think life in those rather extreme circumstances of the military was a learning experience that seemed deeply philosophical to me or it raised deeply philosophical questions. So I went back to Colorado College. They had a wonderful philosophy department. I'm sure they still do. And it was in that context that I was introduced to contemporary continental philosophy, which is what I pursued in graduate school. And I was taken away by philosophy in that period, and I never looked back.

Lawrence: When you say that the army experience struck you as deeply philosophical and then that gets reinforced by the aesthetics course at Louisville, ultimately concretized when you're studying continental philosophy back in Colorado College, but say a little more about that. It's not the most obvious connection, particularly for people who haven't been in the service, as to what you mean when you say that there was a deep philosophical resonance to your army time.

Adams: Well, for me, coming from a pretty protected environment in a middle class community outside of Detroit, I was exposed to people and questions and behaviors that I'd never seen before, and a kind of diversity of background and ways of thinking about the world that were completely foreign to me. So immediately I felt kind of confronted by these new things that I was experiencing, and it threw me into a kind of a perpetual reflection about what was going on. I'm not sure I was a reflective person before that, but I certainly was inclined in that direction because of these experiences in the army.

Not everybody goes that way, by the way. In Vietnam, particularly, I saw it go quite the other way, where people kind of shut down intellectually. The experiences were complicated and difficult and dangerous and made people go the other way, kind of close themselves off, partly protectively, partly, I think, to escape the things that were going on around them and us. But for me it was really an impulse to reflect, and I think pretty deep questions about why people act the way they do and how wars are possible, and what people do in wars, and all of the things that I saw, which again were quite new and quite overwhelming.

Lawrence: You wonder if, in fact, the reaction to extreme circumstances such as that, and particularly your time in Vietnam, is in fact bimodal, not a normal distribution, but bimodal. One either shuts down or one becomes deeply reflective, but there's not much middle ground.

Adams: That's very interesting. I never thought about it that way. I think you're probably right. I think it probably is bimodal. As I think back upon the people I was serving with and the people I knew there, my closest friend there after the war became a writer and a teacher. And so he too went through this, in his own way, this kind of reflective career following the service, but many people, I'm sure, went quite the other way. So I think that's a very wise comment and does reflect as I think back on a lot of what I saw.

Lawrence: Two of your early teaching posts are at very different institutions, a private Jesuit school, Santa Clara, and a big celebrated public, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. Were you influenced by differences between those settings? Did you see similarities? How did you experience the juxtaposition of Santa Clara on the one hand, Chapel Hill on the other?

Adams: I found them both to be pretty interesting places, but as you say, extraordinarily different. I mean, Chapel Hill, this big, burly public university, mostly students from North Carolina. I met some wonderful students from North Carolina who had grown up in far flung places of the state and had done well in high school, and they're now at this really outstanding place. Even then the state of North Carolina was in a kind of an oppositional place in a way with respect to the university and the resources of the university. So it always felt a little starved for resources, but the faculty was tremendous. The students were very good. It attracted a lot of students, though there were limits on this, from out of state who wanted a part of that scene in Chapel Hill.

Lawrence: Much more common today, but still even then, right?

Adams: Yeah, even then there was a percentage. I don't remember what it was, probably 10% came from out of state paying a much higher tuition. So I had that big public university experience. Santa Clara, by contrast, was a small Jesuit institution that drew mostly from the Bay Area. It was also very interesting, and I had some interesting colleagues there. A little more buttoned up intellectually, but it introduced me to the Jesuit way of thinking about higher education. And I have to say that I've been an admirer of some of the dimensions of Jesuit thinking about higher ed and admire the kind of people that have come out of that system, including Anthony Fauci.

Lawrence: Coming out of Holy Cross.

Adams: Holy Cross.

Lawrence: And actually before, right? He comes from a Jesuit high school, even before a Jesuit university.

Adams: That's right. That's right. I have a lot of warm thoughts about the way Jesuits think about the purpose of education, the growth of the person as a member of a society in which he or she should be serving the public good and the public interest. I think that's a dimension of higher education that we have almost lost entirely in the United States, and the Jesuits cling to it, which I think is terrific and good for them. I know there are other dimensions of the Jesuit approach that maybe aren't so progressive, but in any case it was an interesting experience.

Lawrence: So let's take you to your presidencies. You spent a substantial portion of your career as a college president, first five years at Bucknell in Pennsylvania in the mid, late 1990s. And then into the 2000s where you spent 14, 15 years at Colby College in Waterville, Maine. We overlapped during that time. I wasn't all that far away. I was president of Brandeis at that time, in Waltham.

Adams: Right. Yeah, I remember.

Lawrence: When you look back on those times, and in some ways it's a long time ago, but in some ways not so terribly long, what do you think of as the major challenges that you faced and what do you think of as the major successes?

Adams: Well, I think when I went to Bucknell in 1995, we were just starting to see the, I'd say something like the deterioration of the public standing of private and public universities, and higher education generally in the country. There was a mounting sort of public skepticism about what we were doing. That certainly hasn't changed or gotten any better. I think it's gotten worse, but it was beginning. The cost issues were becoming very sensitive and difficult. And you could feel the acceleration, as I'm sure you did at Brandeis, at the same time of the competitive marketplace surrounding higher

education with all of the effects that that had and has on what we do or what we did and what they're still doing.

And I think most of those competitive market based effects were not good. I think they changed the attitude of administrations and boards of trustees, especially, to some degree, faculty, though I think faculty resisted some of that pressure in a good way. But that whole market driven phenomenon of *U.S. News* rankings, "Who's better than whom?" That all was sort of gaining momentum, and that phenomenon and that dynamic continues to dominate higher education in ways I think that are very problematic. The price issue, of course, is as lively or livelier than ever, and all of the questions about sort of the mission of higher education and how it serves the public have only gotten, I think, more difficult and the critics have gotten quite a bit louder. Meanwhile, of course, the scramble to get into college and that competitive admissions phenomenon has grown at the same time, ironically, but that's part of the fundamental dynamic, I think, in higher education.

And that was also the period in which, going back to my experience at North Carolina, where states were becoming very, very stingy with respect to the budgets, and that was the beginning of this long process of the defunding of public higher education by states and state budgets. What's getting set aside is this question about what are the fundamental dimensions of the educational experience and what kind of people are we imagining coming out of this experience? And we don't think very much about what I like to call meaning readiness, which is the way in which we all sort of travel through the world and our experiences, in search of or making meaning in various aspects of our lives.

Lawrence: At Phi Beta Kappa, the vocabulary we've been using is that a liberal arts education prepares you for a meaningful life, a productive life and an engaged life as a citizen. But here's the trick, I think, and I wonder your thoughts on this. The meaningful life, what we think of as the essence of understanding who we are, where the world has come from, who's asked the questions we're asking, how do we fit in the world? How do we understand the world? The meaningful life is not so brittle or fragile that if we lay it alongside the productive life, it's going to disappear. We can talk about both of those things, and a first rate education certainly ought to talk about both of those things, as well as the participation readiness or what we call the engaged life of citizens. So is that along the lines of where you're probing for?

Bro Adams: Sure. And of course, they're closely connected. I mean, if you think about working lives and what all of us do in our working lives, one of the things that people confront sort of in the most predictable and extensive ways is what is the meaning of my work? Is it meaningful? What does it mean? What do I get from it? What kind of person does it require me to be? I mean, these questions are not abstract.

I think it's kind of surprising, for example, that in liberal arts colleges and universities with which I'm most familiar, we don't teach about work very much. I mean, there are lots of economic courses. Now there are lots of courses in finance and those kinds of quasi-professional sorts of fields. But I don't recall a single course in my entire career that was focused on the meaning of work. I remember reading Marx on alienation and Durkheim on anomie relationships and Weber, but these weren't sort of work focused conversations. So I think there's tremendously interesting terrain for philosophers, historians, humanists of all kinds, social scientists, certainly, to engage these work related questions as existential sort of phenomena, right? The actual lives that people lead.

Lawrence: But as you say, not in the abstract. These are actual, real life questions. These are the students who will come talk to me in office hours about all sorts of questions, about legal doctrine that we're studying. And clearly at some point, the question goes to, "Do I really want to be a lawyer when I grow up?" Right? That's what's really animating this and, "What can I do with this?" And in my experience, I'm sure yours too, a lot of meetings with alumni who were three years out and 30 years out, or 50 years out turned in part on these kinds of questions, not just, "What did I do over the past half century with my Brandeis diploma or with my Colby diploma?" But, "Who was I? What did I become?"

Adams: Exactly. And that's where this meaning readiness and this work readiness sort of concepts and domains intersect almost completely. But in general, I would say, as faculty, we've got to be, I'm speaking kind of the royal we here, we've got to be much more interested in this question of work readiness. And I'd be careful to say not in the sense of training, because we don't do that very well and lots of other people do that much better than we do, we being liberal arts and colleges, but in giving students kind of fundamental pieces of orientation and context for the working lives that they will ultimately have. They're thinking about it, of course, in their own ways. And we should be willing and eager to help them think about it because, by the way, it's intellectually extraordinarily interesting and challenging. And I think this applies to not just these questions about how my identity is related to my work? I think it's also related to things like dimensions of work that they're actually going to encounter in the organizations and places in which they work.

Lawrence: In addition to running two relatively small private schools, you also got to paint on a very, very large canvas, one might say the largest canvas there is, the whole society when President Obama appointed you as the 10th chair of the National Endowment of Humanities in 2014. Tell us a little bit about The Common Good: Humanities in the Public Square. What were you trying to accomplish there? And maybe even a couple of examples of when you got it just right.

Adams: I was coming into NEH in 2014, and the humanities were already in a kind of a free fall at that point. My conviction was that NEH had to be a kind of thought leader with respect to whether the humanities? Where are we? Where are we going? It's not just a question of what the humanities are doing in the university or college world, but what they're doing out there in the larger world. And what I found was, and I'm sure you're aware of this being where you are now, the humanities go way out beyond the college and university world, and they're embedded in all of these cultural institutions.

So I was interested in two key questions. One, how do we help colleges and universities think about the transformation of the humanities within their own settings to address this crisis that they found and find themselves in? And how do we think and talk about and make a difference in the public humanities, with respect to the way the humanities intersect with the broad general public? So we thought a lot about and talked a lot about how we used the government's money, taxpayers' money, to advance both of these interests. And The Common Good was really a creature of that thought process.

And so we tried to pick these sectors of public life and the humanities where we thought there was a lot of good work that could be done that would demonstrate the relevance of the humanities to the common good. One of the interesting expressions of this was a part of this initiative called Humanities in the Public Square. And these were invitations for funding in projects that were local expressions of humanistic work in communities. And there were just dozens and dozens of wonderful projects.

There was a very memorable one in Miami, and it was a project that had to do with environmental change and justice in the Miami area caused by global warming. This is back in 2015, right before a lot of the hurricanes and the flooding had occurred, but it struck me at the time as a pretty interesting project. And of course now it looks like it was sort of prophetic in its inspiration. We all also did a lot of work with veterans around the legacy of war and with communities around the legacies of war. Of course, we were in two of them at the time, and so we did a lot of really interesting work with veterans, which were very moving and very, of course, interesting to me personally.

Lawrence: Bro Adams, what a pleasure to have you sit down with us today on Key Conversations. Thanks for being with us.

Adams: It's been a pleasure being here, Fred. Thank you for the invitation.

Lawrence: This podcast is produced by LWC. Jimmy Gutierrez is managing editor, Kojin Tashiro mixed this episode, and Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. Our guest today, Bro Adams, was selected to deliver the Malcolm Lester Phi Beta Kappa Lectures, hosted by Mercer University. In

those lectures, he discusses the importance of liberal arts and sciences in a post pandemic world. You can read them in their entirety at pbk.mercer.edu. We'll include a link to the lectures on our page as well, pbk.org/key-conversations. You can learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program on that site as well. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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