TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

2025 Phi Beta Kappa Book Awards

The Phi Beta Kappa Book Awards are presented annually to three outstanding scholarly books published in the United States. The 2025 winners are Charles King for his book *Every Valley: The Desperate Lives and Troubled Times That Made Handel's Messiah*; Stefanos Geroulanos for his book *The Invention of Prehistory: Empire, Violence, and Our Obsession with Human Origins*; and Ayana Elizabeth Johnson for her book *What If We Get It Right? Visions of Climate Futures.* This year, the Book Awards Dinner was held in person in Williamsburg, VA in December 2025, where two of the three scholars discussed the impetus behind their books and the motives that keep them sleepless—and engaged—in liberal arts and sciences.

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.

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 have 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 Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit pbk.org.

This special episode featuring our Phi Beta Kappa Book Award winners was taped at the annual Phi Beta Kappa Book Awards event. I hope you'll enjoy the conversation that we had with our extraordinary book award winners.

So in some ways, I want to pick up where both of you were talking. The writer, Donald Murray, said that all writing is autobiography. I think he was thinking of fiction. It seems to me that it's not just about fiction. It's also all writing, nonfiction as well, and you both alluded to this in your marks a little bit, but I want to ask you to reflect on, partially, how you came up with the topic, but also where did it come from, not just here, but in the heart as well. Charles, let me start with you.

Charles: I mentioned this sort of briefly in my remarks, but Maggie and I were sitting at home in the middle of COVID, in our house on Capitol Hill. We had had health issues in our family, a serious health issue in our family, and we put on this piece of music, which we had both loved, but we're not great aficionados of it or even of the Baroque in general. And we just burst into tears when this first thing, the first accompanied recitative comes on, and I really wanted to figure out in a way why we felt that way, or why when you go to any performance of this piece of music, especially this time of the year, you look around the audience and people will have tears in their eyes or for whatever private reason, religious or family related, you name it.

And the more I started digging into this, by the way, not as a music historian or musicologist, which I'm absolutely not, but the more I started digging into this, I realized what the story I wanted to tell was of the lives that made this kind of monumental piece of art, the real people involved in it. And to me, as a historian, as a kind of cultural and intellectual historian, it is the real people who make the ideas, who come up with the ideas, the communities of people who come up with ideas that we overlook, I think, so often.

So, for me, I guess this had a more autobiographical bit than any book I've written, but biography, to me as a history writer, is absolutely essential. I think of history writing as being a kind of exercise in the moral imagination. We are trying to understand the lives and decisions, bad decisions and good decisions, of people we can never meet. And in exercising that skill, it ought to then be easier to do it with people we can meet, with those we're kind of surrounded by. So, I suppose biography and autobiography are, for me, intertwined, in a way.

Fred Lawrence: Stefano, same set of questions, which you alluded to a little bit in terms of the book, in some way, being a reaction to or a conversation with your own past.

Stefano: That's right. I think that as I was growing up, I was a teenager in the '90s, and there was both a sense of high hope, but also a sense of profound disappointment, not necessarily in the '90s, especially in the early 2000s, and all of these great terms that I'd been raised with that were the aspirational bits, human rights, for example, and so on,

they began a real decline when we could see them weaponized politically. Human rights was not the only one, but there were many others.

But the idea that humanism and human dignity had a very unpleasant and dark side, that they could be used politically, was something that really stuck with me in the early projects that I did. And in a way, I kept thinking, you know, the coolest version that I ever had, as a child, was to learn the grand story of how we became, how we, whoever this we were, became human. And I learned that story as a wonderful setup, occasionally with versions of like, there were some savages over there and some violence over there, but you don't click. That's what I was trying to say before. You don't think about it until you start really thinking.

And sometimes it was very creative work. Over time, because I was concerned with these ideas that we say them and they sound good and we don't ask, where is it that something of them can go wrong, and to further the ideal, we have to criticize them. For that reason, I ended up starting to ask, "What exactly is it that happened?

The other story is a little more prosaic. I had to teach a class on behalf of the history department for NYU's core program, which would require 120 students, and I had no idea what to do. So, suddenly I could pick all the people I wanted to teach to come to this, but I had no plan around it.

So, it all came around 2020, really in the middle of the pandemic where there was a sense of, what is all this for? Where is it that all these great voices... Now, we have David Attenborough. We hear that voice of authority and it's so meaningful. I grew up with Jacques-Yves Cousteau, and it was such a meaningful voice. And then there are people who have come later, and they try their best. None of this book says that these are horrible people, but there is a way in which we commit to things that we don't know what they are, and I wanted to produce a scenario that said, for all these good things with a dark underside, I'd like to know how it is that it works.

Fred Lawrence: Talk about the voices, and I think, Charles, in your book, the extraordinary cast of characters. I mean, if it were fiction, an editor might say, "Don't you think you're overdoing it a little bit?" except they're the real characters you write about.

Stefano: That's it, except they're real.

Fred Lawrence: But in both books, I was reminded of the very end of Barbara Tuchman's introduction to her book, *The Proud Tower*, pre-Edwardian England in Europe, to a certain extent, where she talks about, in her acknowledgement of the project, the people who helped her with it, and all the work that she did, and all the reading that she did, and then she says that, as she closes the introduction, meaning that she's about to start delivering the book to us, that the faces of all the people she didn't have room to put in the book are pressing in on her. It's a very powerful image, I thought. I had the image that she

must have been living with all of these people for so long, and she had to say to some of them, "You don't make it."

Stefano: "You don't make the cuts," yes.

Fred Lawrence: So, you're in dialogue, as it were, with lots of people, going back to the enlightenment thinking about pre-history, what pre-history means. How did you decide who were the voices who were going to be in and who were the voices who were going to be out? And Charles, of course, I'm going to-

Stefano: Oh, that is such a good question.

Charles: Yes, that's a great question.

Fred Lawrence: ... ask you a similar question, that we get this dramatis personae around Handel, but some people are in and some people are out.

Stefano: Oh, that's such a difficult question. There were the more famous people where, clearly, they had to be part of it. You can't write the story without Darwin. You can't write it without Freud. Not that I would want to, but they were crucial enough and influential enough.

Then, at some point, I thought, "I don't really like to write about people, in this case. I'd like to write about the words that they used." So, I started picking particular words that I would find repeated. For example, "Bomb them back to the Stone Age," as an expression from the 1960s all the way to the 2000s, the savage beneath the thin veneer of civilization. That's a really difficult one to research, by the way. Most of it ended up being about vernissage. So, I picked the word primitive, Neanderthals, not what Neanderthals were, but what is it that people describe them as having been?

And then it really bloomed because I didn't need to contribute to literature about Darwin. There's so much of it, but there is a way in which he plays a role, and people and ideas become enmeshed so that they push each other in this story, and that was the part that became more important to me to go on.

Now, then you can say there's the same selection problem. Then what do you do? What happens at some edges of this project? Unfortunately, the tales of the spectrum get pulled apart, but I really kept thinking, "Which ones are the ones where I can talk about the people and the ideas, but I can go at them a little obliquely so that something interesting about them may come in?"

At some point I thought I would have two chapters about people, H. G. Wells and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit theologian, and the Teilhard de Chardin chapter made it. The H. G. Wells got chopped up and moved all around. But what you said, all the people who didn't make it in, yes, may their ghosts leave me alone, I think, is the... That's right, right, right, you wrote that.

Fred Lawrence: I guess I have to be the one who tells you they won't.

Stefano: Yes.

Charles: Yes.

Fred Lawrence: That final cut of, you can't write the entire book about everything. I remember an editor saying to me, when I'd hit a rough patch, saying, "You're allowed to write more than one book. Let's write this one," which was the right word at the right time.

So, Charles, how do you say this is within the circle because the circle is almost endless, once you start to spread it.

Charles: Well, in fact, I think I faced, in a way, the opposite problem right at the beginning, which is expanding the circle because so much of writing about art, music, theater is a lone genius story. That's especially true of, there are many, many very fine Handel biographies, written by very talented biographers, and I relied on their work in writing this book vision to my own kind of research and archival work and so on. But because this work of art has such a place in our civilization at this moment, we desperately want there to be an angel sitting on the shoulder of this one man dictating this work. He wrote Messiah in 24 days, and it seems extraordinary that he should be able to do that.

I'm not one to determine where angels sit or not. I have no idea what angels do, but I did know that I wanted to write about an entire world, a set of ideas in the Enlightenment. I wanted to think about the Enlightenment differently, not as this Western Civ version of rationality and the triumph of reason, but this moment when everyone is trying to figure out how you manage catastrophe, which is one of the great themes of the 18th century, and the fact that our toolbox for managing catastrophe may be a bit larger than we had thought.

And out of that world, I think, from this moment of deep political division, so Charles Jennens, the librettist and Handel the musician, and by the way, this is the Bernie Taupin and Elton John of the 18th century, the George and Ira of the 18th century. So, part of this is also a kind of homage to the people who write the lyrics, who write the book for a Broadway musical, which is the character of Charles Jennens, a political dissenter. He and Handel were on the opposite sides of the greatest political divide of Britain at the time, whether the Stewards or the Hanovarians were the appropriate dynasty. Jennens was a closet Jacobite and nonjuror. Handel was in service to the King's court composer, and that divide made the divides of our moment look pretty shallow, to be honest. That was a very, very serious religious and political problem.

I wanted to expand the circle of people, all of whom were connected. I will say the one that... I was very moved by all of these characters, but the one I thought was absolutely essential to include is I wanted somebody who would tell the story of enslavement in

this moment and the dependence of art and architecture and music on the proceeds of the forced trafficking of human beings across the Atlantic.

And lo and behold, there is this character, Ayuba Diallo, who was sold on the docks of Annapolis, who was enslaved on the eastern shore of Maryland, whose portrait now resides at the Revolution Museum in Yorktown, one of only two copies of a portrait we have of him. The other is in the National Portrait Gallery in London, and whose life parallels the entire story of Messiah itself, which is the story about a returning prince, because he writes one of the very first freedom narratives that we have, or he dictates it, I should say. It becomes absolutely essential to the abolition movement later in the 18th century, and then into the 19th century, and he's one of the very, very few people whose story we can follow from enslavement to the colonies and back home because he returns to Senegambia.

Just the last point, the thing I discovered in writing this book, which nobody ever had remarked on, is that he and Charles Jennens, the librettist to Messiah, appear on the same document, which is astonishing. It's the membership list, this is appropriate here, of a learned society, of a thing called the Spalding Gentleman's Society, which was a regional learned society in the 18th century, that Diallo, once he had been freed and spent time in London before going back to Senegambia, was also a member. They're two lines apart on the same membership list.

Fred Lawrence: Wow.

Audience: Wow.

Stefano: That's a eureka moment.

Charles: It was a eureka moment.

Stefano: Absolutely. You're absolutely right, yes.

Fred Lawrence: Maybe you think you're the one making the connections, and you realize you're doing all you can just to keep up.

Charles: No one had noticed this before.

Fred Lawrence: That's right.

Charles: Yes.

Fred Lawrence: The thing that particularly struck me in your descriptions of his story, and it's something that a late scholarship I think is catching up on, is the enslaved person not as an object, but a subject.

Charles: Yes, that's right.

Fred Lawrence: That he is the author of his own story, not someone to whom something happens.

Charles: Yes, exactly.

Fred Lawrence: It's often that enslaved people are portrayed as human beings to whom all these things happened, and I assume you quite consciously-

Charles: Well, right, that he's...

Fred Lawrence: ... made him the author of his own story.

Charles: And he, in fact, is... His portrait is one of the first portraits of an African individual looking out at the viewer. It's a really remarkable, beautiful portrait in the National Portrait Gallery. It was painted by William Hoare, one of the great portraitists of the 1730s, and if you go to the National Portrait Gallery in London, it hangs just within a few steps of many of the other characters in this book, so you can stand in the same room and look around the room.

What is so brilliant about that portrait in the renovated portrait gallery is they have put this portrait at child height, and I think that's absolutely remarkable... It's a brilliant way of thinking about how to show this individual. So, young Londoners can come and look right in the eyes of this person, not someone in the background, but someone looking right out at the viewer.

Fred Lawrence: Subject-

Charles: Subject, not object.

Fred Lawrence: ... not an object. Yes.

Talking about the Enlightenment, and one of the insights I found, well, startling really, I would have assumed that people always thought about prehistoric people, but you situate this as an Enlightenment project. So what is it about the Enlightenment that causes this, now, to be something people start to reflect on?

Stefano: Right. So there are versions which are, let's say, imitations of the Bible that do exist. There are people who will have a sort of like, "Well, there was a..." They'll very vaguely say there's a golden moment, but we can't find it anywhere, or there's merely these people who may or may not be peoples of the Bible. Where are they? Meaning Indigenous people around the world. They can't figure out where to locate them in the Bible, and this is an elaborate problem for a century and a half.

But as time dilates in the 18th century, then suddenly the question of how do we relate to people we don't understand, don't know, can barely engage with, that becomes a real Enlightenment question for author after author, and the key figure for me really is Rousseau trying to figure out some way out of the conundrums that he's in and saying like, actually, really the state of nature is the golden moment, is the golden age.

Everything else is a form of decline. And yes, there are different versions of this, but that golden age is what has really been lost.

So, for me, it was less that there's an awakening in the Enlightenment than that it's a little bit like the tension has gotten worse and worse and worse, and suddenly you get somebody solving it. They solve it for one second, then it gets undone again, but that one momentary solution…

Fred Lawrence: Which is the nature of solving tensions, right?

Stefano: As a first go, I think that was the part that really mattered.

Fred Lawrence: When I spoke to each of you to tell you that you'd won the award and that we were going to be doing this talk tonight, I told you that part of the challenge, if you will, the fun of it for me, is the throughlines through the books. And it was easy, obviously, with these two, I think. And part of this is that I can't help but situate tonight, in our moment... I mean, we're in a looking past/looking future moment, where the fulcrum is our 250th anniversary, and it seems to me that both books are ultimately about something like the past - well, to understand ourselves, we have to understand the past.

I don't mean the classic Santayana quote about those who fail to remember the past are condemned to repeat it, which most of us, I think, remember having college walls and as a poster. I remember seeing a great poster that actually said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to have to listen to Santayana." But it's actually kind of closer to the old Soviet joke about the future being easy to predict. It's the past that keeps changing.

Charles: Yes, it's the past

Stefano: Yes.

Fred Lawrence: So, in that sense, our understanding of the past is an enormous insight into who we are in the present, and I see this in both of your books, and I wonder if I could ask you each to reflect on that. You didn't write books about the present per se, but you did.

Charles: Well, but I think there is this interesting connection, which is, what are the stories we live by? And when do we stop recognizing them as stories? And how do we shock ourselves into this moment of recognizing them for what they are, which is a story about the way one ought to live, or about how people before us lived, or about how we project our own lives into the future?

At the heart of Messiah is this big kind of question, what is ultimate truth? What is this life about? What is suffering about? Because, of course, Messiah came about because Charles Jennens, its truest father and creator, sat down to try to figure out, based on his own Christian faith... He was a high church Anglican, but someone who suffered

from what, in the 18th century, was called hypochondria, but it didn't mean what we mean it to mean today. It meant a kind of chronic depression. So, when he sat down sometime in the late 1730s, early 1740s, to create the text of Messiah, he took all of these Bible verses from the King James version of the Bible, and then rearranged them.

So, for those of you who know Messiah or who have sung it, nothing is in the biblical order. It's all biblical text, but nothing in the biblical order. So, when you hear it, you're hearing what Charles Jennens wanted you to hear in the order that he wanted you to hear it.

It's his story about what life is kind of about and where suffering fits into it, and he begins it with those words, "Comfort ye." They're from the 40th chapter of the Book of Isaiah, and the first words are "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem," and here's a kicker of a line for right now, "and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished. Her iniquity is pardoned." All right, those are the first words that have been sung since the 1740s.

It's Jennen's way of telling this story that, what if you began your day, your week, your life with an assurance that things are going to be okay? And then work backward from that, reason against experience rather than in line with experience, also a very Enlightenment idea, actually. Like, don't trust your eyes for a moment, don't trust your senses for a moment and reason contrary to the data that the world is actually giving you. So, this document itself, if we think of this piece of art as a kind of document, it is also telling us a particular kind of story that was born of a very particular moment in the same way that our understanding of pre-history or understanding of the future also bear the stamps of the moments that create them.

Fred Lawrence: Talk a little bit about how that influences how people react to it.

Charles: Well, think about that text, for example, "Comfort ye. Comfort ye my people." Then what comes right after that is the first area in Messiah, Every Valley, title of the book, "Every valley shall be exalted, every mountain and hill made low." Some of you, even if you don't know your Hebrew prophets, may recognize that text because it's in Martin Luther King's, "I Have a Dream" speech. It is the high point of that speech. "I have a dream. I have a dream of this, of every mountain being made low, every valley being exalted."

King is using it in the same way that Charles Jennens, in the 1730s and '40s, is using it, that the essence of hope is your ability to imagine the world differently, to imagine the world as the opposite of the world that you see now, a place where mountains aren't mountains anymore and valleys aren't valleys anymore. That's what a just world looks like, King is saying, and that's why Jennens is choosing this text, too.

So, I think that, especially in our moment, is to fire the imagination, think of the world in very different ways, and your template is the one you see before you, but upside

down. Just turn everything upside down, and that's what a more just world will look like.

Fred Lawrence: By the way, just as a throwaway here, had our third recipient been with us, that was the connection point in that, in that her book is, in fact.... Is a perfectly good line that I am going to use, apparently, that it's an extended, scientific, environmentally-focused version of, "Comfort ye. Comfort ye my people."

Charles: Absolutely.

Fred Lawrence: But, and I promise I'm going to come back to you in a second.

Stefano: No, no. That's all right. That's okay. I'd rather listen to this right now.

Fred Lawrence: But to put it differently, you're not going to get off that easily.

Stefano: All right.

Fred Lawrence: The question is, did they understand, and we, relating to the text, understand, "Comfort ye," as a kind of, I don't know, trust fall into the future, or as a moral imperative that says, "Comfort ye, but you better get to work."

Charles: Oh, yes, and exactly right. That's a great question because members of Phi Beta Kappa will understand the importance of a comma.

Fred Lawrence: Boy, you got the right crowd, brother.

Charles: So, I got the right crowd. I got the right-

Fred Lawrence: There aren't a lot of houses we can get away with that line.

Charles: So, you go to that biblical text, the biblical text, and Jennens knew this. I mean, he knew his Bible. There is no comma after ye in that text. It is not "Comfort ye," comma, "my people," in other words, you people out there be comforted. It's a command. The prophet Isaiah is commanding... actually the king in this case, but commanding you, "You be the one. You be the one to do it. You comfort my people."

And I think... Again, you think about the context of this, this terribly depressed man in the middle of a politically divided society, he himself had not taken the oath of allegiance to the new Hanoverians. So, he couldn't get a university degree. He couldn't sit in parliament. He couldn't approach the bar. All of this world was closed off to him, but he's sort of telling himself that, "It depends on me." The first words are, "It's my job to bring hope into the world, not to fall back into it."

Fred Lawrence: And of course, the very placement of the comma is a normative exercise because, in the Hebrew, there is no punctuation.

Charles: Well, yes, there you are.

Fred Lawrence: So, King James is going to put punctuation.

Stefano: That's right. That's right.

Fred Lawrence: The King James version will-

Stefano: That's right.

Fred Lawrence: ... but the Hebrew Bible will not. So, that act of deciding where the punctuation is going to go, you can't do that based on original intent-

Charles: Right, exactly, exactly.

Fred Lawrence: ... whatever that word means in this context.

Charles: Exactly.

Fred Lawrence: So in some ways, my question is a setup from your thesis, that we understand ourselves by how we see prehistory. But reflect a little bit on what that says about our moment, and the view of prehistory now, and how that is similar or different to the Enlightenment, the romantic period of the 19th century, and how our sense of the past evolves talking about us.

Stefano: So, there's a wrong way to read the book, and I think the book makes this case in quite some detail, which is to say they had it wrong and now we have it right. The reality is we do know a lot more. We know a lot more about genomes of hominids and the relationships between them, we know a lot more about what they consumed, we know a lot better how large their trade networks were, but we don't know anything that we would accept as knowledge about the people living today. With the people living today, we would ask anthropologists to be able to give us extraordinary lists of what goes into life. None of this happens when we talk about prehistory because it's structurally nearly impossible. There are some details out of which you can pull a lot, but that's it.

So, the point that I'm trying to make out of this is I wanted to produce an account that had a similar sense that requires hope, but that requires skepticism more than anything, and especially that we do know a lot, but then we fill in the blanks. We understand a lot about how it is that a certain tool user would have lived or cave painters would have worked. But then we fill in the rest of it because that's the way that we think. We know certain things, and then we close the picture. Now, this is, for me, a very contemporary problem because right now we are consistently asked to know and to give a full picture, without skepticism, opposed to people who disagree with us, and that there is something of a kind of oomph to this.

Now I do think that this is not the same. This isn't to relativize different positions. A certain someone with a certain position in the current government who thinks vaccines are crap is not somebody to be taken seriously in terms of knowledge, but there is a

reality. But then we have to be able to ask, and so this is the part that I find myself doing, why did we end up with that person being possible and that level of power and anti-scientific commitments being possible? What is it that convinced people that maybe there is something hollowed out about science and about the way that we go and the way that we go about our lives?

So, there's something of that effort in the book, not to say scientific results are untrue, but to say that we complete them. As I said before, the lights are bright. I can't see a certain point past the room, and so I fill in what my visual field looks like. We all do it on a daily basis. So, what is it that we don't see? And what is it that we overinterpret so that we need to get our own point through?

Now, this isn't a panacea, but it's something that bothered me about the present moment, that I would read recent books on the matter, and people really did seem much more certain than I would have ever been about things that I felt would have been much more clear.

And the same thing with TV shows. TV shows that I watched when I was a child or TV shows that my kids would watch, with documentary reconstructions of what Neanderthals were like and how they fought and so on, and just think, "Well, okay." But this gives a certain image of things, and then we live our lives with these images of things, and that's very true. To me, this is a very tricky business, so skepticism is good.

Fred Lawrence: The Enlightenment Project was to oversimplify this idea that, in the fullness of time, we can know everything. That all problems will ultimately reveal themselves to us if we can apply the right methodologies. And whether you call it Heisenberg or Freud, that begins to break down in the 20th century, and we accept certain levels of uncertainty and things that we can't know. Does that affect how we think about pre-history? Did the people of the Enlightenment think that, in the fullness of time, we'll know it all? And is that just not possible?

Stefano: Right. Regarding the deep past or what we now call the deep past, there was a lot more ambiguity, and that was an ambiguity that they were willing to live with. In the 19th century, as well, which is the moment when really, from the ambiguity relating to early human history or what is speculated as early human history, they begin to come up with grand theories that have to explain everything.

Now, there are people who express great uncertainty about what it is that they're reading. They're the heroes of this book. Francois is the hero of this book. André Leroi-Gerhoin, who is a French paleohistorian who is very, very explicit that he's trying to solve a number of problems, but isn't sure, and he's willing to take a gamble, but he says, "I'm probably wrong about this." People like this, Juliette Mitchell, the feminist psychoanalyst who also tried to think of how does one approach, with deep skepticism,

what would have happened or what it would have been like. These people are people that I admire very much.

At the same time, you also do get solutions which really do end up producing people who seem to conceive of themselves as prophets. And I don't mean in the H. G. Wells prophesying a world state example. I mean it is people who do write today have extraordinarily harsh things to say about progress and the people living outside of it. See, the question now is when you can't say primitive anymore, when you have to say Native people or Indigenous people, how do you celebrate progress, but avoid having to deal with that niggly side of how you go about it?

So, you get people who do have this position, and these people sell millions of books. It's nice to get a book sold, but they write to sell millions of copies, and I think that that's a very, very dangerous position that follows, that it's this need for a kind of, "We got it all," Homo Deus, better angels of our nature kind of life where everything can be simplified for a thesis, not for knowledge, but for a thesis to come through. Not an encyclopedia.

Fred Lawrence: And not being willing to accept the unavoidable messiness of discovery and taking the false security of a certainty.

Stefano: Right, right. Not to name names, but at least…

Fred Lawrence: Not to name names, that's right. That's it. Yeas, not to name names is usually followed with a but and a name

Stefano: I sort of did that in advance, but I tried to be sly about it, so…

Fred Lawrence: Charles, I want to come back to, well, somebody you talked about, but it could be a different somebody that you want to talk about now. One of the things I always do in induction ceremonies, Phi Beta Kappa induction ceremonies, is I tell the inductees that by the fact that you're sitting here, I know three things about you.

One is you got yourself into one of only 290 plus schools that have a chapter. For that, you should be very proud. Second, you challenge yourself. You took a broad program, a diverse course program and succeeded at the highest level, and for that, you should certainly be proud. And the third, for which you cannot be proud, you can only be grateful, is that you've been blessed. Somebody played a role in your life. Somebody said the right word at the right time.

And it never fails when I do this, because when I do it, I'm reading the room with my eyes, and you can see numerous people get this look staring off. I then would usually say, "Some of you are thinking of that person right now. And then I always get this look, like, "How did you know that?" Because we all have those people.

So, you talked a little bit about your band teacher.

Charles: My band teacher, yes.

Fred Lawrence: And you may want to tell us a little more about your band teacher or somebody else who said the right word at the right time, that you look back on it now and you say, "That was actually pretty formative"

Charles: Yes. I mean, I had extraordinary teachers growing up. I mean, I grew up on a farm in Northwest Arkansas and went to our local high school, and I look back now, being in the profession of changing young minds and trying to open them, and I think of the extraordinary extra effort that people had to expend on me and willingly spent on me. I was the first person in my extended family to go to college, and I grew up in a Southern Pentecostal church. So, I mean, it's odd writing about Handel now because I think of myself as being on the Sufi end of Christianity and writing about this very high church Anglican, very sophisticated, lace cuff sort of work of art. So, it was very far away from my experience as a kid, but I had teachers who drove us to the science fair and who came in on Saturdays and Sundays and who came in early and stayed late, purely for the purpose of changing somebody's mind about something.

I think that is the opposite of this big-think approach to history or the past. It's that it's the cultivation of uncertainty and the valuing of uncertainty and living in that moment of uncertainty that is a very, very hard thing to accept, especially when there are extremely smart people and large-scale publishers who really want the one big answer to everything.

I, personally, benefit through the fact that I get a nosebleed at 30,000 feet. The big think things, my brain just doesn't work that way, so I haven't been drawn to writing that kind of book, I guess. But it's the teachers who can instill that sense of skepticism, as you were saying, and what it's like to live uncomfortably. I mean, that's what the liberal arts ought to do in some fundamental sense, is getting you comfortable with being uncomfortable and being a little bit uncertain, but still living your life and still accomplishing things and still building things, and I had lots of teachers who did that brilliantly.

Fred Lawrence: The great learned hand, Phi Beta Kappa member and often thought of as one of the greatest Supreme Court justices we never had, was on the Court of Appeals, the Second Circuit, sitting in New York. But he gave a marvelous lecture called the Spirit of Liberty during the Second World War, in which he says, among other things, "The spirit of liberty is the spirit that doubts its own correctness and being willing to live in that moment of saying, 'I think this. I believe this. I'm actually willing to live my life on this, but I might not have it right,'" and that takes a lot. And to ask a young person to do that alone seems almost impossible.

I'm interested that you both have used the word skeptical numerous times, but neither of you said cynical. And there's a big difference between a skeptic and a cynic, and it's a

difference that may be largely lost in our time, and that's very dangerous. The skeptic is not a cynic. In fact, the skeptic is really a believer, because why else would you bother to be skeptical? So who turned the key for you?

Stefano: Who didn't? I was very, very lucky, with a good number of teachers. Very blessed, as you put it. That's right. I mentioned at the table before that my Egyptian grandmother, Sarah Caruso, was absolutely key for this because she had had a roundabout way to Greece. She had left Egypt in 1945 to go to France and gone from there, as a journalist, to Berlin, right into the ruins of Berlin, gone back to Paris and married a Greek. Terrible idea for her in some ways, but it worked for me.

Fred Lawrence: That's the next book project, I think.

Stefano: At some point, some version of her story is actually put into detail. But the results were people exactly like this, for whom the world was much larger and where they were not happy with agreeing.

Now, that, you could say, was a specific Greek thing. It was a very '90s thing. It had been a series of disappointments domestically. At the same time, there was a sense of Greece opening up to the world, so there was very much of that, and our teachers very much had that sense. They had a sense of traditionalism. They had a sense that they had to teach us how to do things, and then that they had to send us very far. So, I was very lucky.

But then at university and in graduate school, this never stopped. And if I'm not naming people, it's not to be unfair to others. I think I can name my grandmother, but I'll leave it at that.

Fred Lawrence: Grandmother, you can name, yeah.

Stefano: But you're right. Cynicism makes no sense in this. The skepticism is a point of healthy examination, and then attempt to understand what it is that we understand and where we are going, and how we make horizons.

Fred Lawrence: The other throughline of your books, the celebration of a healthy kind of skepticism in a time that is seeking certainty at a terrible, terrible price.

Charles: Well, I have my students now read C. S. Lewis's sermon, Learning In Wartime, which he preached in Oxford in 1939. The high point of that sermon essay is he's trying to deal with, why should you stay in school? Why should you be here in this great university, in the cloistered halls of Oxford, when there's a war going on?

And the high point of that essay is he says, "You should be concerned with ideas, and with good ideas, purely because there are so many bad ones out there." And I think that's, what a brilliant, brilliant idea. And Lewis Namier has a similar line, that you

should write good history because there's so much bad history out there, and I think that's what we're all trying to do, in one form or another.

Fred Lawrence: Well, there are just a few happy tasks left to me, first, to join me in congratulating and thanking our two wonderful award winners tonight. Thank you for the marvelous and skeptical conversation. As we conclude this marvelous evening of conversation and books and celebration, I invite you all a year from tomorrow night to be with us in Washington, D.C., for the celebration of Phi Beta Kappa's 250th birthday, the celebration of which begins tonight. Thank you and goodnight.

Audience: [clapping]

Fred Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Phantom Center Media and Entertainment. Kojin Tashiro is lead producer and mixed this episode, Michelle Baker is editor and co-producer, and Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the 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.

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