

**Doug Sprei:**

Welcome to Higher Ed Now ACTA podcast on pivotal issues, trends, and leadership in higher education. I'm Doug Sprei, and today we'll feature an interview I did a few months ago with Peter Skerry, who is a professor of political science at Boston College, as well as a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. He's been published in quite a variety of scholarly and national media publications and is the author of *Counting on the Census: Race Group Identity and the Evasion of Politics* published by Brookings and *Mexican Americans, the Ambivalent Minority*, published by Free Press, Harvard University Press, which was awarded the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. I first encountered Professor Skerry this past summer while I was chairing a debate on immigration at the Braver Angels Convention at Carthage College in Wisconsin. During that highly charged debate, as he stood up to speak and asked respectful questions of other speakers, it quickly became clear to everyone in the room that he has deep knowledge of the issues surrounding immigration.

Professor Skerry has been helping to guide Braver Angels in framing constructive dialogue around the immigration topic, which is certainly polarizing and challenging our society on all fronts. He certainly made a huge impression on me and everyone in the room at that Braver Angels debate, and I was glad for a chance to extend the conversation with him when he visited us at ACTA in Washington a few months ago. I hope you enjoy the conversation.

Peter Skerry, welcome to higher ed now on the Fly, but I'm really glad to have you here with us in Washington, and I wanted to harken back to the first time I met you, which was probably June 28th of 2024 at the Braver Angels Convention, and I was tasked to chair a debate on immigration. And as the moderator or the chair, I kind of channeled that into suggesting that you make a speech and you did and you spoke in a way that galvanized the whole room. That debate was memorable because now Braver Angels has tethered itself to immigration as a theme for the next couple of years in advance of its next convention in 2026, and I know you're involved in helping them think that through. So I just kind of wanted to open up the conversation in that way to get to know you a little bit better, why you're getting involved with that initiative with Braver Angels, and also just to find out more about yourself as an educator at Boston College.

**Peter Skerry:**

Okay. Well, it's good to be here with you, Doug. Great to encounter you at that debate back at the end of June. So I've been involved in writing and researching about immigration for a long time.

**Doug Sprei:**

Why is this topic tearing the country apart? Are people getting the same information about it? What's really at heart of the polarization here in your view?

**Peter Skerry:**

Well, I've been at this since the late 1980s, and I would say that while immigration is ripe, as we would say in political science as an issue more so than ever before, it's not as though it hasn't wrought havoc in our politics before over the last 30 years or more. The debates over the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act were intense. I remember being at the Democratic Convention in 1984 where that was basically held up by controversy over what to do about that legislation was finally passed two years later. The 1807, that was state proposition in California that passed in 1984, really got the attention of interested publics around the country. So this has been roiling our politics for a long time. But I would say that for a long time our political elites have been able to keep it off the principal agenda.

And I mentioned earlier to you that when I was based in Washington from the late '80s to the late 1990s, I was at various times at the American Enterprise Institute of Center-right Think Tank and at Brookings of Center-Left Think Tank. And I can assure you that none of my colleagues in either one of those places was terribly interested in immigration, and they found my questions intrusive, obstreperous and what are you getting at Skerry? Was kind of the response. But it seemed to me that this was an issue that was roiling large numbers of, for lack of a better term, ordinary Americans who weren't living in Washington or New York City or well, I was going to say, or Los Angeles, but that's not true. Los Angeles is a different kettle of fish. And our elites in Washington were celebrating the marvelous changes that the country was going through we're becoming as many high-level officials in the late '90s pointed out becoming a majority-minority nation, and that was self-evidently obvious.

Well, I don't necessarily have a problem with change and the people who were coming, but I don't know too many ordinary Americans who would be happy to hear that they were becoming ordinary white Americans, to be blunt, who would be delighted to hear that they were becoming a minority in their own nation. I don't know any country where that would be good news on its face. Have to be prepared and explained and interpreted, and that wasn't really happening in any credible way for more political elites. And fast-forwarding to today, the issue is now obviously undeniable front and center, hitting us all in the face on a daily basis, but I still aren't very happy with the way in which the issue is getting talked about or dealt with. I think there's a lot of templates, stock stories, images, perspectives that are getting invoked on all sides that don't really advance our understanding of what's going on or help us think about what we can do about it.

**Doug Sprei:**

Braver Angels' mission is about uniting the country, and so they've chosen the most divisive topic that we have raging in the country right now to tackle. And I'm just wondering what have the conversations been like between you and them? Why did they ask you to get involved in their thinking on this? They're thinking ahead toward the next Braver Angels Convention in 2026, but they've taken the most incendiary topic currently in American society and trying to make something out of it that would bring people together. Is it possible, do you think?

**Peter Skerry:**

Well, it's got to be possible because this issue is not going away. It's clearly getting worse in terms of causing strife among us, and certainly the numbers show no sign of diminishing, so we've got to do something better than we've been doing, but I have no illusions that it's going to be easy. But I do have confidence in Braver Angels. I have great respect for what they're trying to do. The first thing I would point to is just simply, David Blankenhorn, who's clearly one of the moving forces, one of the three people who really got this going has long experience, and David's an old friend at dealing with these kinds of complicated public policy questions that shade off into cultural components that get very divisive. And he's worked on those kinds of issues for a long time and he's very skillful at it, and I think he's bringing those skills to bear now, but it would be a disservice to put it all in David's lap because clearly Braver Angels is bigger than David and bigger than all of us at this point. It's something that's really taken off.

Now, how that's going to play out at the grassroots, I think remains to be seen because as I witnessed and as you witnessed in the debate that you oversaw at the Braver Angels Convention, these discussions can very easily get out of hand. They can either get out of hand because of people's emotions because this is a very emotional issue on all sides, or I would say it gets out of hand or it gets hard to deal with

because immigration is so much a part of our history and so much a part of our self understanding that these tropes get invoked.

These kind of stereotypical images get constantly relied upon. The Statue of Liberty being the obvious one. The interesting thing about that particular image is that the of Liberty was never intended to be a monument to people coming to the United States. It was given to us by embattled French small Republicans in the 1870s who were fearful that their own Republican aspirations were being squelched by the Monarchists and they turned to the United States, the one successful republic on the globe, to send this statue to help inspire Republican values, shining that torch out toward the rest of the world. That torch was not designed to greet migrants into New York Harbor.

**Doug Sprei:**

So how did this happen that the statue became a symbol of hope for immigrants?

**Peter Skerry:**

Well, not surprisingly, it had to do with an immigrant or at least a daughter of immigrants. Emma Lazarus, the poet who came from a Russian Jewish family, certainly a Jewish family from the pale. Her father was very successful and she was a poet in New York and she wrote this sonnet, I believe it was in a competition to be involved in the erecting of the statue, wrote this sonnet which celebrated, yes, an immigrant perspective, but it was clearly the perspective of a daughter from what we would call today, a refugee family and the wretched refuse of the earth who were seeking refuge. And that's not really an immigrant story. Immigrants don't tend to come here out of desperation. They come here, usually it's not the poorest of the poor who historically have migrated. It's the folks who have the means culturally and materially to kind of plan ahead, think about such a big trip and then coming here.

**Doug Sprei:**

Like my own great grandparents.

**Peter Skerry:**

Yeah, although from what you told me earlier, they might've been more like refugees because they were fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe.

**Doug Sprei:**

They were, but they still had means to plan and to carry it out.

**Peter Skerry:**

Right. These things aren't mutually exclusive, but Emma Lazarus's experiences, family experience translating into that imagery of welcoming those from the across the tempest tall seas has struck a powerful chord. Again, it's not really an immigrant story, it's more of a refugee story. And another wrinkle on that that's worth being mindful of is that historically, this was true in the 19th century, the end of the 19th century, the beginning of the 20th century, and it has been true in our own era, that large proportions of immigrants who come here don't intend necessarily to stay here. They come here thinking they're going to work for a couple of years, save a lot of money, or send money home, buy some land, build a house and then go back.

And that's happened, the turn of the 19th to 20th century, historians estimate fully half of the, and Greeks who came here went back to live permanently. And that kind of movement back and forth, it's

maybe not as easy right now with the border being what it is, although the border is hardly unpenetrable, it still goes on. So this is all part of our self-understanding. We think everybody wants to come here and seeks to become an American. Well, that may happen, but it's not necessarily what the initial motivation is for a lot of people.

**Doug Sprei:**

So what do you make of just a couple of weeks ago there was a presidential debate and Springfield, Ohio was brought up, and so I think most Americans didn't even know that there were Haitians in Springfield, Ohio. And so there's just in this gigantic flood of whether it's information or misinformation, disinformation, it's just perplexing the hell out of the country right now and also vexing the country and the whole thing is erupted in a big conflictive situation in the people who actually immigrated are caught in the crossfire. So what's your reading on all of that? Can you explain a little bit what really is going on in Springfield, Ohio? What should the public really know about this?

**Peter Skerry:**

Yes. Well, as a field researcher, I'd feel better about answering that question. If I'd been in Springfield, Ohio, I was going to say recently or ever, but first of all, this confusion between immigrants and refugees is in play already because those Haitians who have come here have come here in most cases as asylees. They've been given temporary protective status, so they're not technically immigrants. But if those are the terms they came here under, and they are what certainly most of them have given temporary protective status, it is worth pointing out that they are here legally. Albeit we are so used to getting upset about illegal immigrants, it's often assumed that they're here illegally, which only to my mind points out that this distinction between legal immigrants and illegal immigrants is somewhat bogus. I mean, I believe there's a distinction in law. I understand that, but in terms of the controversies that roil our politics and the things that either immigrants or migrants to use the more generic term, the things that migrants do that cause non-migrant Americans to respond negatively, those transcend legal status. They have to do with cultural conflicts, they have to do with noise that may be getting made, it may be overcrowded buildings, all those kinds of things. So this set the table. So with regard to the specific charges, which I think are pretty, I would assume not true, but I don't know, I lived in New York City for several years in the late 1970s, and I remember being up in upper Manhattan and off of Dyckman Boulevard, there's a big park at the tip of Manhattan, I forget the name of it. And I remember being told and walking by big picnic areas of Caribbean migrants where there were claims that there were voodoo ceremonies going on, and I didn't see them explicitly, but I saw the circumstances that struck me as plausible. Okay, does that mean it's the end of the world? No. Migrants come here with the culture that they bring with them, obviously, and it doesn't change automatically.

Now, that's not a glorified way of saying that Haitians are eating cats in Springfield. It seems to me unlikely. But are they engaging in some kinds of activities, religious or otherwise, or just things that they're trying to do to survive in difficult circumstances that are creating problems or challenges for their American citizen neighbors and so forth? Yes, I think that's likely true. What we don't seem to be able to own up to in America today is that immigrants come here with different cultural values. And yes, many of those values and traits contribute to the broader realm and help create a diverse and open society, but it's not all one way. They also bring traits and practices that cause problems for them because this is a different society where they're used to and problems for the rest of us who don't understand what they're doing. So it's not all one or the other, and we have this template, it's all bad or it's all good. It's a very mixed bag, and our politics doesn't seem to be able to allow us to address both sides of the coin.

So I think that would be my best way of trying to answer the question. I think any large influx of the sort that Springfield, Ohio has experienced is going to raise challenges and problems, and people who have been living there all their lives are going to feel challenged and put upon. I don't think there's anything inherently or necessarily racist about that. I think that can provoke all sorts of things that get said and some genuinely racist comments, but I don't think it's inherent in the situation. What we need to do is to kind of be more realistic about what the implications of large scale migration are and reckon with them and be more straightforward with ourselves about it on all sides.

**Doug Sprei:**

This is a great way of circling back to our core question, which is around what would be the right way to conduct not only discourse, but just deep constructive conversation in America around this topic, which has become utterly weaponized right now by the different political parties. And even the example of Springfield is such that the city managers are copping to the problems that you just elaborated on. They admit that, but they also talk about a lot of good that the Haitians have brought to the area and helping commerce develop, reviving the economy there and so forth. So those points are not really getting enough airing in the conversation and the social discourse today. We had a little debate in Kenosha about immigration, and it was very powerful for a lot of people. I'm just interested in your perspective, knowing as much as you do about immigration, what would really help Americans to have a proper conversation about immigration?

**Peter Skerry:**

That's a tall order and an important question. And I mean, I think what I've seen Braver Angels trying to do and what it's looking forward to continue doing and developing over the next couple of years is the most encouraging thing I've seen in a while.

**Doug Sprei:**

How so?

**Peter Skerry:**

Well, just first of all, I'm saying this being particularly mindful of being an academic and looking what's going on around campuses around the country, generally speaking, where it's very hard to have reasonable conversations about immigration in particular. I can tell you that from hard-earned experience. And so I think what I've seen Braver Angels do in its grassroots sessions, just getting people to address and talk about aspects of immigration and come to some sort of resolutions about it in small group settings is encouraging.

I also think however, that something more is needed for sure. I mean, that's a great start, but as I explained to you earlier, I think the debate format that I met you at is also critically important because this issue particularly is so emotional and so complicated and so charged. You've got to have room to let the limbs move in these discussions. And I think the debate format lends itself to that when done correctly, which was what was in the debate that I met you at, I think was definitely the case. And that takes a good deal of skill. And I can tell you I've seen that skill demonstrated in the debate you led and in some other Braver Angels venues much more than I've seen it in academia in the last 20 years.

**Doug Sprei:**

Which is why we have a college debates and discourse program that is trying to help campus communities change the culture, get back to a culture of free expression, viewpoint diversity, and honoring all of that. But yes, no one is more appreciative of the formats that we have in Braver Angels and the debates and discourse programming the workshops than I and our team. But on the other hand, your presence in the debate was also really important because we were debating a very flammable topic and people come in armed with different sets of facts. And when you spoke up, it was from a point of view of having a lot of insight into the topic that goes back decades, and that had an influence on people that just changed the current in the room. They were listening, they were pondering, thinking more critically, measuring what they might want to say and bring to the conversation. So we're setting up a structure where that can happen, but to have someone in the room who was really informed on the topic was really a gift.

Then we also had young people who are immigrants who talked about actually going through the immigration process and how difficult that is for them. So there was a lot of emotion that was brought to the table. The whole conversation turned into something that really got people thinking and coming out of the room with a little bit more of respect for each other, I think. And we could take other topics. We've debated abortion, we're debating healthcare, we're debating climate change, hundreds of topics that students choose. When you talk about the world of academe and out there in higher education, why are faculty and leadership at higher ed institutions so divided right now? There's a lot of conflict out there. Give me a little bit of impression that you have of the higher ed landscape, the climate out there.

**Peter Skerry:**

Well, I'm not sure I would characterize academia as divided, and I think that's the problem. It's at this point, a trope, particularly for people on the right to characterize academia is all of one persuasion. And unfortunately, that trope is not too wide of the mark. And I can tell you what I had to say at your debate was not any different than what I've presented in courses I've taught, but more importantly in more general talks and discussions I've had at various universities where the response I got wasn't at all encouraging like yours. I was literally told to sit down and shut up.

**Doug Sprei:**

You were.

**Peter Skerry:**

Yeah. Not at my own university, but in other places and in my own university, I've encountered disapproval, shall we say. So that's there. And that just reinforces for me the importance of what you're doing. I mean, for a lot of reasons, universities today, higher education in America, I think like many other sectors of American society, is at a real critical, if not crisis juncture. It's become, as I once heard a college president at an institution where I was teaching 30 years ago, talk about how we have to address the needs of our students and their parents because they are consumers, they are our customers. And I remember then sort of inchoately saying, and I said it out loud, I don't think that really is the relationship here. And I think I was right even before I'd even had a chance to think about it much. But that is the relationship today. Higher education has become a business and students and their families are our customers and we're catering to them in ways that is not a helpful educational undertaking.

And of course, given the inequalities in American society, that means we're getting a sector of American society, not uniformly, but a sector of American society that's affluent, well-educated, particularly elite

and aspiring institutions that aspire to be part of the elite that has certain blinders because of their affluence and perspective on life. That's not a crime, but it's a problem and it's not conducive to looking at alternative ways of looking at things and challenging students. I once had a discussion with an administrator who asked me what was I doing to make our students feel comfortable in class? And I got quite upset and I said, "Well, that's not my job. My job is to make them uncomfortable."

**Doug Sprei:**

So that's really the division I'm speaking of. That's what I'm kind of pointing to. Again, that's what ACT is very concerned about in terms of its academic freedom initiatives that there's plenty of research out there that shows that students self-censor when it comes to expressing political and social viewpoints on campus in the classroom. But I haven't seen many studies about faculty, and yet I meet a lot of them. And last week, a week ago, I was at Virginia Military Institute and we were giving a workshop on all of the civil discourse work to 35 faculty from across the state of Virginia.

And as part of that day, we decided to give them an actual experience of a Braver Angels debate. We let them choose the topic for the debate. They selected the topic on the spot, and the topic that rose to the top was, should faculty be able to express their political viewpoints in the classroom and that could even express their political party affiliation? And we polled the room and half of the pretty much 50/50 split on that. So we had a good affirmative side and a negative side, and we had a great debate about it, and it was incredibly thoughtful and incredibly nuanced.

**Peter Skerry:**

I would've loved to have been there. That's one of my favorite topics.

**Doug Sprei:**

I wish you had because now I feel like we're going to be doing a number of faculty debates in the next couple of months this semester and next year because they want to have the training about how to do this in their own classrooms. We have a whole curricular thing that we're doing where these debates can be implemented in the classroom as an assignment and the students get course credit and graded for it. But the faculty themselves haven't had an experience of civil discourse like this before. And a lot of them, like you've expressed, have gotten blow back when they expressed a certain standpoint that they have in the faculty body or in a conversation with administrators. And we're told, your job is to make students comfortable.

**Peter Skerry:**

Yeah.

**Doug Sprei:**

There's something that we really object to in that. I think you're right. Your job is not to make them feel safe and comfortable, but to get them to think critically and embrace other points of view or at least be able to listen to them.

**Peter Skerry:**

Exactly. And where that other path making students feel safe has tended to lead us is what I think is this totally untenable notion of objectivity. And this is how the media, when I was in college longer ago than I care to admit had the same notion of objectivity then, which was that you don't take any side,

everything is straight down the middle. And I just think that's silly and untenable. I think being objective is a dynamic posture, which means you are contending with all the different perspectives, all the competing evidence and facts, but you have to sort all that out and figure out what you think the proper or the appropriate policy is or the appropriate determination is. And that won't almost certainly be right down the middle that doesn't offend anybody. It's going to be somewhere and there's going to be somebody, maybe lots of people who don't agree with you.

But I think that's what that dynamic sense of objectivity is. What is missing in higher education. It's what I try to do in my classes when I teach a course on immigration, I tell the students from the beginning, I have definite views on immigration and they reflect a lot of thinking and research and reading, but you are going to have your views too, and you're going to want to express them, and I understand that. And we're going to express our views, but we're going to do it in relationship to the readings and the evidence that's in front of us or that you go and get. But you have to pay attention to the other arguments. Again, objectivity is a dynamic stance. It's a dynamic posture. And you have to do due diligence to make sure that you address the concerns, the objections of those who you know will disagree with you. And once you've done that, you can articulate a position and I consider that an objective position. And that's what I strive to do in the classroom, and that's what I strive to do in my writing and research.

**Doug Sprei:**

Would you say that part of your job is to invite students into the marketplace of ideas?

**Peter Skerry:**

Yeah, that's a great way to put it.

**Doug Sprei:**

But then do you have to suppress your own ideas while doing that? Do you have to hide them from view? I mean, that's what we're being told. Faculty are telling us I can't express my own viewpoint because students feel like I'm going to be biased when I grade them.

**Peter Skerry:**

Right. Well, it requires some subtlety and some effort for sure, but it's a process that has to evolve. You're dealing with a situation of relationships with individuals that presumably is going to develop over time. That's what you do in a 15-week course. So I don't necessarily trot out all my views bluntly and directly first day of class, but I try to give the students a sense, and I think they have a sense from my reputation for better or worse, that that's kind of where I am. But mostly it's important to reassure them that they should feel free to express their views as well, especially if their views are informed by the readings I've offered to them or asked them to read and are prepared to base their views on some evidence.

But even there at the beginning, we are not all starting off equally informed. So fine, bring out your questions, your concerns, your notions that are just sort of in the air that you think makes sense and we'll kick it around. But it's a process and it takes time and it evolves, but you have to at least give each other a chance to do that, listen to each other and not think that you can exercise a veto by telling somebody your views are making me uncomfortable. Well, some of you will be feeling uncomfortable maybe hopefully by the time the course is over, we will have all felt uncomfortable.



**Doug Sprei:**

Well, in the terms of the framework of our debates, they start with a speech and the affirmative, questions for that speaker, a speech and the negative. So right then and there, the room is set up in a way that they're going to listen to every point of view that's aired, that creates its own little sense of objectivity. We're listening to different viewpoints here. Also, nuance seems to open up. We've had many debates on immigration, and I remember back and just before the pandemic, March 3rd, 2020, Arizona State University, 100 students in the room, Michael Polyakov was with me, and the debate topic was, should we build, it was at Phoenix, Arizona, so should we build the southern border wall? And the debate went on for a while really well with the affirmative and negative voiced. Then a few students stood up to make speeches, and they were Native Americans who went to ASU. They started talking about the impact of the border wall on the sacred flora and fauna, the indigenous species.

And suddenly the whole room got much quieter because it was a whole dimension of conversation that opened up that no one had considered. It wasn't so much build the wall or not, but what are the consequences of building it on our natural environment? And everyone sort of embraced that part of the conversation for a while and it went in a new direction. And so, do you see opportunities in the way you teach or the way you have conversations with your students where just that kind of thing can happen? Aren't topics really a lot more complex than we imagine when we get started?

**Peter Skerry:**

Sure, they are almost inevitably. And yeah, I wouldn't want to exaggerate those kinds of moments are magic and don't happen all the time, but when they happen it and you feel like you've really done something. I'll give you an example, which is not exactly maybe what you're thinking of, but it's what comes to my mind. 10, 15 years ago, I was teaching my course in immigration at BC, and it was the most engaged and almost raucous class I've ever taught. And it seemed like half of the students were intensely in favor of immigration and the half were intensely hostile to it. I would say most of my experiences, most of my classes of students have been almost unreflectively pro-immigration. But this class, they all did the readings, but each class was almost like a war. I had to referee it. I didn't have to stimulate conversation at all. It was a chore. They were almost more in charge than I was, and I just had to kind of contain it. But it worked out okay.

But then the very last day of class, I recall this one student at the very back of the room who used to wear a stocking cap and was very quiet, didn't have a word to say the whole semester. And I said, well, this is our last class, and some of you have never spoken. You ought to feel free. Now finally, if you have anything on your mind, raise your hand. This kid did. And he said, "Professor Skerry, this has been an interesting class, but what are you supposed to do when you don't really have strong views and you don't really quite know where you come down?"

And I said, "Well, that's a great question, and I feel like maybe you were deserved in the sort of melee here, which I didn't discourage," but I said, "I really understand what you're saying because when I was in college, I was you. I didn't know how I felt about things and I didn't have much to say. And all I can say is that that's not a dishonorable position to be in. You don't have to engage in the back and forth. That can be so intense. But as long as you have reflected on it and listened and begun to sort things out for yourself, if this is what you decide you'd want to really focus on or think about, that's okay." But I think reassuring that student that he didn't have to be part of the debate, that not everyone has to debate, but in some broad sense as a citizen, you want to pay attention to these debates and figure out where you feel most comfortable, even though that may not be your style or your proclivity, that's okay too. And like I said, I think that is all part of this too.

**Doug Sprei:**

That's at the heart of the matter for us. That's thousands of students that we've dealt with. That's where they are. They come into the room not with fully-baked notions and opinions, but kind of feeling unsure, and then tell us in the debriefs after the debate. Well, I think I came in thinking one thing, but I changed my mind a few times or I learned more about the topic, and that's delightful. They're also the ones who are a little less comfortable in their skin standing up and making a speech in front of a group. And I have had many instances where the professor would come to me later and say, that kid who spoke in the debate hasn't spoken up once in my entire semester of this class. And he or she stood up and spoke, and I watched the professor smile when that happened. We're trying to coax that kind of thing out.

**Peter Skerry:**

Yeah. It's gotten a bad name and a bad rep, but really it's sort of like a safe space.

**Doug Sprei:**

We call it a brave space.

**Peter Skerry:**

Yeah, a brave space. We tend to get into this way of thinking about debates. It's sort of flipping a light switch. It's sort of on or off. But no, there's all sorts of in-betweens, and you have to be tolerant to the in-betweens for sure.

**Doug Sprei:**

So again, with the immigration debate that we had that you were part of, you kind of even rising up to speak in the affirmative on the topic or the resolution around whether undocumented people should be deported, I remember you gave a preamble, which was I'm raising in the affirmative on this resolution. On the other hand, I want to really let you know the reality of it, because you had accompanied the agents on these raids. And so what you did was bring a sense of real world consequences and what really happens to people when they're caught up in this process. And that was what touched me the most about your participation, that there was a certain strong feeling of compassion for those affected. It wasn't just like, let's get them out. It wasn't like that at all. You really made people think, and I felt that was extraordinary.

**Peter Skerry:**

Oh, that's gratifying to hear. I'm glad.

**Doug Sprei:**

Telling you flat out, that's why we're here talking right now.

**Peter Skerry:**

Okay, appreciate it.

**Doug Sprei:**

But I mean, our debates, as I say, they run the gamut and should the second amendment be abolished? Those of us who chair these get rocked back on our heels because it gets heated. And you got to find a

way to channel that emotion into something more constructive. Usually we're able to do that, but it's through the people sharing their own truth, there's something very affirming about that. And it seems like as we really start to break the ice with faculty that they're really taking to it also. The students are hungry for it. We've sensed that in line with what you were saying earlier about faculty, that they can use this kind of discourse as well.

**Peter Skerry:**

I think that's a really interesting point because particularly when I look at my junior colleagues, they're on kind of tenterhooks. They often don't know which way to go. They're starting their careers. They may not have tenure, they probably don't have tenure. And sometimes it can be really disheartening to see a young academic sort of playing the odds because they're just not sure what's going to get them in trouble or not. Part of that has to do with character people. If you're going to be an academic and enjoy the benefits of this profession, then you have to face up to some of the music about looking at the evidence and telling people what it is.

But on the other hand, we've got a structure that doesn't encourage that kind of thinking and activity. And when you're a young person who's starting a family and a career, I will be the last to say that they shouldn't exercise caution, but the overall setup is not conducive to how it ought to play out. And so if you're getting that kind of response from academics, it doesn't surprise me and it kind of encourages me. Keep it up.

**Doug Sprei:**

Now that kid in your class, you mentioned who had the stocking cap, and you said to him that you were him when you were his age. Tell me a little bit more about that, because is a little of him still in you now?

**Peter Skerry:**

Yeah, yeah. I kind of think I do know what you're getting at. Well, I come from what I consider pretty humble origins. Neither one of my parents graduated from high school. And it was always assumed that I would go to college, but that was sort of vague, and I thought I was going to go to medical school because that's what my parents thought would be a good outcome. So my parents weren't very sophisticated, and I didn't come from a very sophisticated family. So when I went off to Tufts University in 1966, which was actually in my hometown of Massachusetts, it was a totally different world that I wasn't prepared for a lot of young people from much more affluent backgrounds than I came from who just had a whole lot more sophistication about the world. And it was also the '60s, which was not an ideal time for a kid with my background to confront all those issues of the '60s.

So I was pretty overwhelmed by that, greatly intrigued by all the stuff that was going on. I wasn't completely on the sidelines, but pretty overwhelmed by it. So I guess I tend to identify with the young people who don't feel totally comfortable with the flow. And of course, that's a lot of different individuals. There's lots of ways not to be comfortable with the flow, but it's pretty clear that there's a flow today. It's pretty clear what it is, and it tends to be defined by young people from affluent backgrounds who've got to kind of at least start off with a clear beat on things and have got the backup to pursue it.

I don't underestimate that things are hard for all young people in some ways, these are trying times. But I tend to have great empathy for the ones who are coming at it less oriented and less privileged than the mainstream, as it were. And that cuts across lots of groups. It isn't just minority kids, although it often is,

sometimes it's not, but lots of kids from lots of backgrounds just don't come prepared for what they're going to be up against.

**Doug Sprei:**

Well, since you were that kid decades and decades ago, now you've had a long career as an educator, and we often talk at act about the educational mission of an institution, but I like to sometimes probe into what's your educational mission? Maybe that could be our concluding chord in this conversation. After a lifetime of doing what you do, how do you see your mission today as an educator?

**Peter Skerry:**

Well, as I said earlier on our conversation, I think higher education, it's in a crisis, but I'm not sure its leaders have really gotten the message and could really understand that. Because I think the crisis stage has become apparent in the last couple of years in spades, and I think it hasn't really come to the attention of the people who were still heavily involved with it. So I think I haven't always felt comfortable in academia. In some ways, becoming a university professor is the last thing I ever thought I would become. And certainly my parents and members of my family still wonder what exactly it is I do and why do I do it? It's a pretty soft life, isn't it? You sit around, you have summers off. You got it made right, Peter? Well, I mean, I'm not complaining compared to what other people do for a living. I feel privileged.

**Doug Sprei:**

You can change a life.

**Peter Skerry:**

Well, yeah, that's a somewhat grandiose way to look at it. I try not to get carried away with that, but it boils down to more and more as I get older and older, I feel more and more preoccupied with my students and the ones that I can connect with. And I think that's sort of concrete, tangible, and the kind of thing that I feel like I can have some impact in some cases, and that's what I strive to do and keeps me at it.

**Doug Sprei:**

I'm very grateful for the time here. I know I kind of thrust the microphone in your face kind of unexpectedly, but it's been really great to talk to you.

**Peter Skerry:**

It's been mutual. I really enjoyed talking with you, Doug.

**Doug Sprei:**

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