

A Conversation With Robert Frost (1952)

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Description

A 30 minute conversation between American poet Robert Frost and author Bela Kornitzer, filmed in late 1952 at Frost's home in Ripton, Vermont. Frost talks about his childhood as the son of a "great 4th of July American" father; identifies himself as a "humanist" and an "equalitarian"; and addresses several themes, in his thinking and his poetry, including nature, liberty, boldness and courage, politics, and the limits of "what can and cannot be made a science of." Frost recites two of his poems in the course of this interview: "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" (at about 5:30) and "A Drumlin Woodchuck" (at about 21:30).

Keywords

Robert Frost, Poet, Poetry, Poem, Poems, Inspiration, Themes, Nature, Nature Poet, Politics, Science,

Limitations, Liberty, Courage, Symbolism, Metaphor, Interpretation, "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening", "A Drumlin Woodchuck", Textbooks, Labels, Humanist, Amherst, University of Michigan, Patronage, Literature, Henry Holt, Publisher, Conversation, Bela Kornitzer, Ripton, Vermont, Pulitzer Prize, American Poet

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CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE

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Transcript

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NARRATOR: On a hillside farm in Ripton, Vermont, lives one of America's foremost poets. Born in San Francisco, he came East to make New England both his home and the inspiration for his poetry. He said once, "A poem begins with a lump in the throat." The National Broadcasting Company presents A Conversation with Robert Frost and Bela Kornitzer, Hungarian-born author of the book *American Fathers and Sons*.

ROBERT FROST: Mister Kornitzer.

BELA KORNITZER: How do you do, Sir?

FROST: How good of you to come all the way up into Vermont for this interview.

KORNITZER: Well, it's a pleasure and a privilege, Mister Frost.

FROST: Please sit down.

KORNITZER: Thank you. Well, Mister Frost, I think I should warn you that you are the first poet I have ever interviewed.

FROST: I think I should warn you that you are the first Magyar that ever interviewed me so you better be careful about your idiom.

KORNITZER: Well, I will try my best, Mister Frost.

FROST: Must be a courageous young man just to-- to undertake to interview a poet you've probably never read much of.

KORNITZER: Well, Mister Frost, I remember that you yourself said, "Courage is the human virtue that counts the most, courage to act on limited knowledge." Isn't that your philosophy, Mister Frost?

FROST: Especially the "limited" part of it. Everybody has said that courage is the greatest virtue, but the point of what I said was that we've got to go ahead on limited knowledge. A general has to go into battle on limited knowledge, insufficient knowledge, insufficient. And someone has said a poet ought to learn all that all the other poets have ever said before he undertakes to say anything so he'll avoid repetition, you know. But if he did that he'd be fifty years old before he started and all the poetry that was ever written was really started somewhere between fifteen and twenty-five. You know, you got to start on insufficient knowledge and you got to have that kind of courage.

KORNITZER: As a young man you worked as a mill hand in a shoe factory. You were a small-town editor, a schoolteacher, and a farmer. I wonder which one of these early occupations had the greatest molding effect on your career?

FROST: Well, I suppose farming did most for me. I was a farmer all the time when I was doing other things. I always had a farm in the backyard, in San Francisco even. But I got something out of being-- working on a newspaper. I learned that I had to wind things up. I used to leave things half written, you know, but things couldn't go in unless they were rounded out. Teacher, I ought to say I got something out of being a teacher. I had to make things understood and that-- that put me in the class of poets that wanted to be understood.

KORNITZER: You're recognized as a poet quite late, at the age of thirty-nine; and in addition, your first book was published in England and not the United States. Why was that, Mister Frost?

FROST: It was more or less an accident that it happened over there. I'd never been discouraged in America. I had never been very much encouraged. I'd had sporadic poems in the magazines. But nobody had ever written me as good a letter of acceptance as some people get of rejection. And I got over there in England with the idea of writing a novel or a play to put the family on its feet, and one night I sat on the floor and looked my poems over and made up a little book and took it into a strange publisher and in three days signed a contract. But I owe a lot to the British, you see, for that. It might have happened here; don't know whether it could or not. But they were very nice to me. It was a very grand time I had, very generous. They put me on my feet. I came home from there, a made--a sort of a made poet, you know. I write-- I ne-- I never had any dealing with a book publisher here and I didn't know I had a publisher over here. I arrived on George Washington's birthday and walked up a side street rather deserted and found a-- a new magazine I'd never heard of, The New Republic. And in it a two-column review of my book as published by Henry Holt and Company and I've belonged to Henry Holt and Company all the years since. I owe them a great deal.

KORNITZER: Mister Frost, is time a factor in the perfection of a poem? I was surprised to learn that you wrote that charming poem, Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening in about twenty minutes?

FROST: Oh, more or less, yes, very shortly, very directly putting them ri-- putting it right through.

KORNITZER: Would you please recite it?

FROST: You want to hear me say that?

KORNITZER: Definitely.

FROST: Yeah. "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening. Whose woods these are I think I know. His house is in the village though; he will not see me stopping here to watch his woods fill up with snow. My little horse must think it queer to stop without a farmhouse near between the woods and frozen lake, the darkest evening of the year. He gives his harness bells a shake to ask if there is some mistake. The only other sound's the sweep of easy wind and downy flake. The woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep."

KORNITZER: It is beautiful. Do you believe, Mister Frost, that the textbooks are giving the right interpretation of the meaning and spirit of your poetry? For example, Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening is described in a textbook as a suicide poem. Is this classification correct?

FROST: That's terrible, terrible, isn't it? But that's one textbook. I've had fine treatment all around, you know. Most of the textbooks' writers, most of the critics in America are professors in our colleges and one good third of my living has come from them. They've spread my books around. They've been my public. And I don't read reviews very much, but I get them by word of mouth, you know, people tell me. I've been treated too well. Colleges--the best audience I have is a kind of a mixed town and gown audience. These college professors have taken care of me. My-- my greatest debt is to Amherst College, Michigan. I stayed there a long time, Dartmouth. Those are the chief ones, Amherst chiefest of all. I've-- I've belonged to Amherst in my loose way for about twenty years out of the last thirty-five and a member of the faculty without too much to do except write my own poetry. You know how it is in the old world, you look for patronage, you come from there. You look for patronage from the great people, the lords and everything. We get our patronage chiefly for literature in this country from the colleges. That wasn't so forty years ago. That's something that's come-- come on in my lifetime. But I've lived on colleges you might say and on Henry Holt and Company.

KORNITZER: You are labeled by essayists and critics- nature poet, New England Yankee, symbolist, I think humanist, skeptic, anti-Platonist, and as many other things. Which one of these labels do you consider--

FROST: I don't pick out any single one. I take them all, take them and put my arms around them.

KORNITZER: Well, what kind of poet do you consider yourself, Mister Frost?

FROST: Old as I am, I'm-- I'm not self-conscious enough to tell you, I like all that. I like be ca-- I like to be called a humanist, I guess, pretty well; though, I'm not strictly a humanist. I guess I'm an-- not a nature poet. I've-- I've only written two poems without a human being in it-- in them, only two. All my poems have got a person in them.

KORNITZER: Can a man as sensitive to nature as you are believe that nature is essentially kind?

FROST: I know it isn't kind. Matthew Arnold said, "Nature is cruel. It's man that's sick of blood. And man doesn't seem so very sick of it." Nature is always more or less cruel. Should I tell you what happened once on the porch of a professor-- minister he was, too? The war was going on, beautiful moonlit night. And he was there with some boys and talking about the horrors of war, how cruel men were to each other and how kind nature was, what a beautiful country this was spread beneath us, you know, moonlight on it.

And just as he talked that way, spreading his arm over it, a bird began to shriek down in the woods; something had got into its nest. Nature was being cruel. And the woods are all killing each other anyway. That's where the expression came from "a place in the sun," a tree wanting a place in the sun that it can't get, the other trees won't give it to it.

KORNITZER: You were only ten years old, I believe, when your father, a San Francisco newspaper editor, died. What is your most vivid recollection about him?

FROST: Oh that he was a long distance swimmer and he could walk over six miles an hour and he was very ambitious in politics and he was cut off in everything too young. I remember him swim-- swimming out San Francisco Bay out of sight until he appeared again on a buoy or somewhere out there in the evening. You know, I-- I was with him a great deal. I didn't go to school very much. I went round campaigning with him the year that elected Grover Cleveland the first time. I was with him all day long on a buggy, a horse and buggy. But I have no-- he was severe but informal. He was a regular Fourth of July American. He loved to make a great to-do on the Fourth of July.

KORNITZER: Your father, I understand, was something of a disciplinarian, would spank you for minor offenses. Was your attitude toward your children as firm as your father was towards you?

FROST: Well, I'd like to ask my children more about that. I was pretty mean sometimes, I guess.

KORNITZER: Your father was a violent Democrat who hated the Republicans. How did his political attitude affect you? Has politics ever come into your poetry?

FROST: Very little. I'm always interested in politics. I pick up politics very fast in any community I get into, college community or anything else. I'm-- I'm kind of political minded I think from having started life with him. But I'm no hater of Republicans. I told-- I think I told you when I first met you, or you told me that you'd read in a book that he thought all Republicans were whited sepulchers, all hypocrites. He did. I don't think that. Get over that. He-- he burned a-- a campaign biography of General Hancock after Hancock failed to get elected and-- and then went and shook hands with General Garfield who got elected. My father thought that was a piece of hypocrisy for a Democrat to shake hands with a Republican. He burned the campaign biography. He asked me where it was, hung it up by the inside leaves like that, touched a match to it and threw it into the open fireplace. That's all he wanted of that kind of Democrat who'd shake hands with a Republican who'd licked him.

KORNITZER: Would the world be better off if poets were listened to more and politicians, scientists, and businessmen less?

FROST: I'm satisfied with the division of the spoils. The-- the-- it's always been that way. Poetry hasn't had much of a say in the-- in the time of it. In Homer's time, the rhymes say, "Seven cities claimed the Homer dead through which the living Homer begged his bread." Seven cities he begged through and they all honored him long after he was dead. Poetry gets its share. It's like a very small part of a big machine, but rather vital, copywriter or something like that, you know. You can't-- and it-- it's only-- the-- the complaint about this comes from people usually who can't write poetry and can't sell poetry and can't too much of anything poetry, they think the world's to blame, you know. And that's not the way to judge it. Poetry gets a good deal of neglect and that's probably good for it. It's the same with all the arts, they get a good deal of neglect. Adversity, nobody knows just how much is good for them. Some people think that if

you'd give them plenty of foundation money they'd be all right. I-- I'd like to make a pun of that- they think the odds are a B-U-Y product, buy product.

KORNITZER: Is the world any better off now than it was fifty years ago?

FROST: If it is, I'm afraid that it won't have enough adversity in it for the good of the odds.

KORNITZER: Well, are you satisfied with the level of literature--

FROST: Yeah.

KORNITZER: --for the present America?

FROST: Yeah. Yeah. Yes. Quite satisfied. I don't know what else to be. I always wish more writers, you know, more poets that's the one thing I set my heart on. I guess we get them, we had a wave, they speak of in along 1915 to '25, quite a wave of poets and writers. Maybe there aren't as many around right now I think. Systole and diastole opens and shuts, expands.

KORNITZER: Are the youngsters promising?

FROST: Yes. Yes. Always some of them around. I know many of them. Always half a dozen or so that are-- are good bets, you know. You can't tell too far ahead. Some of them give it up and go into banking.

KORNITZER: Seems to me you are an optimist, Mister Frost, am I right in that?

FROST: Am I an optimist?

KORNITZER: Or are you a pessimist or optimist?

FROST: Are you a pessimist?

KORNITZER: I'm asking you, Mister Frost.

FROST: Which are you?

KORNITZER: Well, I have faith.

FROST: You have faith?

KORNITZER: Yes.

FROST: Is that an optimist, it has faith?

KORNITZER: In my logic, yes.

FROST: Now I'll tell you about that. An optimist has hopes for the future, is that what you mean?

KORNITZER: Yes.

FROST: Well, I have not only hopes for the future, I have hopes for the present, and hopes for the past.

KORNITZER: What do you mean by that?

FROST: I-- I-- I mean that I have hopes that the past will be found to have been all right for what it was. And the present, this present of ours, I hope will be found to have been all right for what it was, that is-- that it will have made its point in history and do you want me to tell you what I think its point will be found to have been?

KORNITZER: Yes, I would appreciate it.

FROST: It will be found to have been a discrimination between civilization and utopia. Utopia is just a word for the conclusion, the ultimate conclusion of socialism. We're going to discriminate once and for all, once again between science- what can be made a science of and what can't be made a science of. The better half of the world, of our daily life can't be made a science of and we're going to settle that. If there's a fault to find in-- with our time and it's just as important to know-- to describe its faults as its

virtues if there's a fault to find with it, it's science's failure to do all that is expected of it. See science has been led to expect more of itself than it can perform. We've been led to expect more of science than it could perform. And science, you will-- you will hear a confident scientist say that everything has-- that science has gone so far that you don't dare to say how much further it might not go. But right here and now I'm telling you that there's a whole half of our lives that can't be made a science of-- ever can't-- can't ever be made a science of. And we're going to know more about that before we get through this period. That's what it'll be remembered for.

KORNITZER: In the introduction of your Complete Poems published in 1949, you said, Mr. Frost, well, I will attempt to memorize it; it's the most remarkable statement. You said, "I have given up my democratic prejudice and now willingly set the lower classes free to be completely taken care of by the upper classes." You said further, "I am right," correct me, "Political freedom is nothing to me; I bestow it left and right." Am I correct? That's--

FROST: Yes, you are.

KORNITZER: --what you said? Just what did you mean by that? It's not too clear to me.

FROST: Well, there are two things that I'm being pretty fresh to talk that way about the lower classes, but I noticed that I have to-- that I have to with-- I'm made responsible to take care of the lower class-- classes by-- by with-- withholding part of their pay every week so they'll be sure to be insured, and I meant and they then when you go on further with that I-- I myself don't care too much. Oh, I care. I'm glad of any political freedom they give me. But what I'm interested in is not political freedom. I'm liber-- I'm interested in the liberties that I take--

KORNITZER: I see.

FROST: --here and elsewhere, always.

KORNITZER: It was expressed in some of your poems very vividly, this philosophy that you just said.

FROST: One-- one called A Drumlin Woodchuck that for instance is about a man making his own freedom and his own security, I suppose, you're talking about. See the upper classes are supposed now to provide the security of the lower classes just as if this wasn't a democracy. I'm talking like.

KORNITZER: I see. We would be very happy to hear this poem, Mister Frost.

FROST: You want to hear the poem?

KORNITZER: I would love it.

FROST: Now this Woodchuck, talking-groundhog, some people call it. Woodchuck says, "My own strategic retreat, is where two rocks almost meet, and still more secure and snug, a two-door burrow I dug. With those in mind at my back, I can sit forth exposed to attack. As one who shrewdly pretends, that he and the world are friends. All we who prefer to live, have a little whistle we give, and flash, at the least alarm, we dive down under the farm. We allow some time for guile, and don't come out for a while, either to eat or drink. We take occasion to think. And if after the hunt goes past, and the double-barrelled blast, like war and pestilence, And the loss of common sense, if I can with confidence say that still for another day, and even another year, I will be there for you, my dear. It will be because, though, small as measured against the all, I have been so instinctively thorough about my crevice and burrow." It's a smug poem, you see.

KORNITZER: Uh-Huh.

FROST: The-- the-- another poem that I won't recite to you, I speak of the three-- the three covers you have against too much. It is too much, you know, the universe is too much. First, you got your skin, then you got your clothes, then you got your house, walls, then you got your fences, then you got your national boundaries.

KORNITZER: You said three covers, Mister Frost.

FROST: Well, I've got a dozen of them. I've given you some extra measure. But that's what you have, you build your life out of these shelters from too much. "The Infinite's being so wide, is the reason the powers provide, for inner defense, my hide." You see it goes like that.

KORNITZER: You have said originality and initiative are what I ask for my country. Did you mean this to apply to poetry or to American life in general?

FROST: American life in general. What I was asking for was the freedom--the greatest freedom, the freedom to originality and initiative. One fears-- one has fears when they talk about equality because I would think one opposite of freedom was equality. If everybody has got to be of the same originality and the same initiative, there won't be much initiative and there won't be much originality. The freedom is one of the great mysteries. We use the word more than any people that ever lived maybe, except the French. When you think that you have to give up a certain amount of liberty for-- for equality, maybe you want to give up some for some equality. Difficulty is deciding how much. But the liberty is always there to breakthrough everything and that's what you want it to do; it's the breaking force. Emerson said that God would take the sun out of the skies as soon as he'd take the freedom out of a man. That's in the breast of man. And all history is about that. Byron says somewhere that-- that freedom is, "Brightest in dungeons, he says, "Brightest in dungeons, Liberty, thou art," because ther-- "Thy habitation is the heart." But that's a hard kind of liberty to endure. We're talking about common liberty that sets-- sets us free to-- to do things and make him-- make a-- a personality of our nationality. I am an internationalist in the same way as I am an interpersonalist. I don't care about spending much time with people who have a definite personality. I'm-- I'm that kind of an equalitarian. I like to mix with my equals--people who have as much personality as I have. And I want my country to be of a smart nationality that will be felt by all the other nationalities so that there can be a real internationalism not-- not a conglomeration, not cornmeal mush of the world. What we-- what we are-- what we live by mentally, our mental fodder is differences, distinct differences, even though they end sometimes, though, they go beyond pleasure, they go into pain and they go into war, strife. But the great thing is thought boldness that we spoke about early, courage to go ahead. One of the poets says that the object in life is to be "with caution bold." Bold is the first word and the second word is caution. And the caution means all the laws and qualifications and everything like that, and the knowledge, the information and everything like that for security. Caution is security. Bold is freedom and the breaking thing, the true liberty. The boldness comes in the true liberty. People will tell you the opposite. They would tell you that the freedom lies in being cautious. Freedom lies in being bold and so.

NARRATOR: Filmed at Mister Frost's farm in Ripton, Vermont.

