



## Heroes & Mentors: Eli Reed and Wayne Lawrence

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For many photographers, conversations with other photographers—be they heroes, mentors or friends—are an important part of their professional lives. They critique and inspire each other creatively; share information about technique and craft; debate the future and rehash the past; commiserate about challenges, perhaps argue; and they learn.

We asked a handful of photographers whom they would like to meet and talk with. We wanted to let PDN readers listen in on these conversations between some of the most influential people in photography, whose work spans generations and genres. We think these exchanges offer insights into the past, present, and future of photography.

Eli Reed has won the W. Eugene Smith Grant for Documentary Photography, a World Press Photo Award, the Leica Medal of Excellence, and an Overseas Press Club Award, among other honors, and has covered conflict in Central America, Lebanon, Haiti and Panama. His books include *Beirut: City of Regrets* (1988) and *Black in America* (1997). He has shot stills for movies directed by John Singleton, Robert Altman, Carl Franklin and Michael Caton-Jones. A full member of Magnum Photos since 1988, he is a former Nieman Fellow at Harvard and is now clinical professor of journalism at the University of Texas.

Wayne Lawrence, who studied at Brooks Institute of Photography and is represented by Institute for Artist Management, has been published in *The Sunday Times Magazine*, *Mother Jones*, *COLORS*, *Vibe*, *New York, XXL* and *Repubblica XL*. His images have been exhibited at the Open Society Institute, The Nathan Cummings Foundation, The George and Leah McKenna Museum of African American Art and elsewhere. Selected for *PDN's 30* in 2010, he has won the Sony Emerging Photographer Award and was twice selected for the *PDN Photo Annual*.

Reed and Lawrence spoke in June via Skype; Reed was in his office in Austin, and Lawrence was in New York City.

**Eli Reed:** I had a look at your pictures. You have a certain feel that's very honest. The portraits I was seeing, some I wasn't crazy about but the majority were really strong.

**Wayne Lawrence:** Thank you.

**Reed:** The hardest thing is to edit your own stuff. Yesterday I was at the studio, I was finding negatives from 1970. I was really shocked how much I liked the pictures.

**Lawrence:** That's interesting. This project I have been working on in the Bronx, at Orchard Beach, I just made contacts for the first time in four years. I'm surprised at all the work that I overlooked. I know exactly what you are talking about.

**Reed:** You have to do stuff for yourself that you like, and not get side-tracked on the other nonsense. The

other nonsense will lead you astray.

**Lawrence:** What do you mean by “the other nonsense”?

**Reed:** The other nonsense is other people saying, “Oh that looks great, I really like that.” I don’t mean ignore what other people say. I worked at a newspaper, and the best thing was getting feedback from readers about photos in the paper. But at the same time, you have to make the conscious decision [about] what you are trying to say, and ask: Did it work? How honest was it? Did you really get into the moment?

**Lawrence:** When did you know you wanted to be a photographer?

**Reed:** I started out as an artist. My last year of art school I took photography as an elective. I was using photographs as research material, but then I started looking at photo annuals, and I wished I were there. I was looking at pictures by Cartier-Bresson, Gordon Parks, Roy DeCarava, who were seeing situations that I wanted to see. I started carrying a camera everywhere. Photography was another kind of paintbrush. I think I was influenced by French impressionism in a big way because it is about seeing life in a different way.

**Lawrence:** It was when I was going through a tough period in my life that I first saw your work. I was working as a carpenter in Reseda, California. I was between jobs and collecting unemployment when my license and registration expired. One day while sitting in an intersection in my car a cop pulled me over and asked to see my license and registration. I was arrested on the spot. It was a Friday so I spent five days in the county jail.

At that point I decided I wasn’t going to be a carpenter anymore. I needed to find something that I would really enjoy doing. I started going to the public library trying to figure out what I would do. Your book was one of maybe two photo books in this library. It basically set me on the path that I’m on now. I read the preface by Gordon Parks, where he congratulated you on being the first African American to be accepted into Magnum.

It just opened me up to the world of Magnum, then it led me to read *A Choice of Weapons*, Gordon’s biography.

I just want to thank you for doing *Black in America*. That work really resonated with me because I was struggling, and I saw struggle in that book and I saw pride and resilience amidst the struggle. I didn’t even know that kind of photography existed, so to see it and to see people who look like me, I was able to make the connection. I decided right there that that’s what I would do.

**Reed:** I’m happy to hear that. The things that point you in certain directions are absolutely amazing to me. Like Leonard Freed’s book. I remember it was a jolt when I saw *Black in White America*, and Bruce Davidson’s work, *East 100th Street* especially.

**Lawrence:** I love that book.

**Reed:** The wonderful thing about the Internet is that you can spread the word about your experience. It makes you want to go forward. If someone asks, “What’s your favorite project?” It’s always going to be the next one.

**Lawrence:** Can you talk about your relationship with [director] John Singleton, and the films that you worked on?

**Reed:** I had worked on [a] movie, *The Five Heartbeats*. I decided at the end of that I was more interested in social issues. Then I got a call: John Singleton is going to make a second movie after *Boyz N the Hood*, which was called *Poetic Justice*. John has the power, the energy that he has to do something. Have you seen his movie *Rosewood*? I feel that’s a really important movie. But in general the news media put different kinds of screens on certain movies that have to do with people of color. One of the reasons I did *Black in America*, I wanted to do something that was not through a filter, or it’s going to come through the filter inside me: what I’ve seen, what I’ve experienced, what I believed.

**Lawrence:** You decided based on what you were seeing around you that you needed to put this work out there.

**Reed:** Yes.

**Lawrence:** How long did it take you to complete that body of work?

**Reed:** From when I got the idea in my brain, it was probably 18 years. I did two years of thinking and 16 years of doing it.

**Lawrence:** Two years of thinking?

**Reed:** Oh yes, but you see I am the kind of person that at any given moment, including now, there are five different things percolating in my head.

**Lawrence:** That's interesting. Because now with digital cameras making photography accessible, everybody thinks he can be a photographer. They don't understand the time it takes to find your voice and really figure out what you are doing.

**Reed:** Some people are going to rise above the fray and give us something that's original, something that's very moving, that can capture the passion they have.

I feel like in the acknowledgments to my book I didn't thank enough people. Editors who gave me assignments because they felt I had a passion. You can't forget things like that. There were people at Time-Life, The New York Times. Gordon Parks was always inspiring. I had post-traumatic stress at one point, and photographer Kim Komenich who came after me at the San Francisco Examiner let me stay in his place for a week. Sometimes you need somebody to tell you it's okay, you're not as crazy as you think you are.

I've experienced a lot, some amazing things, some amazing people. I've also walked away from stuff I wish I hadn't. Sometimes I wish I'd been just some guy who goes to work, comes home to his wife and his children and he feels blessed. That path wasn't for me and maybe it never will be.

**Lawrence:** This is really personal for me, man. I make so many sacrifices to do this that at the end of the day it all boils down to: What do I want to say with my work? I have a 10-year-old son, so I'm always thinking about what I want to leave behind for him. I can't please everybody, straight up.

**Reed:** Don't even try.

**Lawrence:** I would like you to talk a little bit about your history with Magnum. I know there's the whole process from nomination to full membership.

**Reed:** Timing is everything. I wanted my newspaper to send me to Central America, because I didn't understand what was happening in Nicaragua, in El Salvador with the death squads. I guess I agitated enough because the paper decided to do a primer on Central America, a 52-page series, "Tortured Land."

I won the Overseas Press Club Award, and the Nikon World Understanding award and I also got a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard. On the way [to Harvard], I stopped at the ICP [International Center for Photography] in New York, and I ran into the friend who had introduced me to Rose Marie Wheeler, the director of the New York office [of Magnum]. I wanted feedback on ["Tortured Land"] from somebody who was tough. I knew Rose Marie Wheeler was tough. I asked him if he'd show the reprint to her and if she had time, she could tell me what I could have done better.

Soon I get a phone call from Philip Jones Griffiths, the president of Magnum. He says, "I would like to seduce you to joining Magnum." And I remember thinking it was somebody's practical joke. That started the process. He said, "Some people are going to vote for you because I'm for you, some people will vote against you because I'm for you."

**Lawrence:** Why do you think after all these years, Magnum has only one African-American member, and what, two Asians and maybe four women?

**Reed:** I had a discussion once with Henri Cartier-Bresson about that same thing. I said, "You need more balance here." He said, "There is not much I can do, I'm not involved in the day-to-day things," I said, "Yeah but you're you. You say something, people will listen." He said, "I can't promise anything." Well the next day there's a fiery letter saying these things we had been talking about. I thought it was pretty cool. Still, it's a long process.

**Lawrence:** Do you have any regrets?

**Reed:** The regrets I have would be about one situation, a personal relationship. I wish I'd stuck around. I would have had a different life, which might have been not as good, because maybe I wouldn't have accomplished the things that I have accomplished.

I wish that I could sometimes let go of time, instead of getting ticked off. If I have something that is important to me I have to get finished, then basically I have to say fuck you.

**Lawrence:** Right now, I think it's harder to make a living as a photographer than at any other time in history. At the same time there are more opportunities out there if you know how to plug yourself in. A lot of people don't really take the time to study. And I find that especially with minority photographers, sad to say.

**Reed:** One thing I would say to minority photographers: One thing you have to do is not get distracted by the bullshit, by the racism or ageism or any of that crap. If you get deterred from the direction in which you're going, the other side has already managed to throw you off stride. Over and over again, the best thing is to do the goddamn work.

**Lawrence:** That's most important. Forget what this person is doing. Then it becomes an issue of competition: If you're succeeding, why isn't it happening for me? And then it's almost like a guilt trip. The fact that you are accomplishing certain things, you're responsible to pull them along. It's hard enough to do it on your own, much less trying to pull a crew behind you.

**Reed:** We're human beings so we're bound to make mistakes. That's why the meditation on the spirit of life is always going to be with me, no matter what happens. Grab life because it's the best thing that's ever going to be there for you.

The dangerous part of being a role model is the expectation. If something you've done in the past inspires somebody, that's great, but the most important thing is not being swayed from what we should be doing next. I try not to spend too much time thinking about the role model thing.

**Lawrence:** I just try to live the best life I can. I work hard for my family first. But you know, in an industry where there aren't many minority photographers, it has been surprising how many aspiring black photographers have reached out to me and said, "Thank you for doing what you are doing, because it's very rare that you see photographers doing this kind of work." And it's reaching a lot of young people, which I appreciate. What I challenge myself to do is to keep learning so that when I am engaging young people I can actually impart a little knowledge to them.

I guess in a way, I'm a role model by default.

**Reed:** Keep it up, just keep it up.

**Lawrence:** I can't stop. This is my life, this is my family's life.