RICHARD: Have you been rethinking your views of how America should work, the role of the police, the extent of racism in our society? Today we ask two African-American thinkers and activists a personal question for all of us to consider: What Racism Means to Me.

ASHLEY: This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: Outrage over the deaths of George Floyd and other Black men and women has changed the debate over racism. We look at the prospects for lasting change and whether the response to recent events is a common ground moment.

RICHARD: Our guests are Ilyasah Shabazz and Dr. Brian Williams.

ASHLEY: Professor Shabazz promotes social justice and higher education for at-risk youth. She teaches at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, and she's the author of the memoir Growing Up X. She's often asked to speak about the legacy of her father, Malcolm X.

RICHARD: Dr. Brian Williams is Associate Professor of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery at the University of Chicago Medical Center. He led the trauma team that treated police officers ambushed by a sniper in Dallas in 2016, the largest loss of life for U.S. law enforcement since 9/11. First question to Ilyasah.

ASHLEY: How do you think the national discussion about racism has changed over the last 50 years or so?

ILYASAH: Well, I think that, especially seeing the low, horrific murder of George Floyd, that people are certainly more open to hear about and learn about the injustices and the complaints that many people were talking about. Even when we look at the phrase "Black lives matter," prior, when you hear that, a lot of people that I know, they would say, "Oh, come on. All lives matter." But now they understand why people would say that Black lives matter because for so long it just didn't seem like it did. I think being at home, self-isolating, wondering if we're going to survive this pandemic—Are we going to live? Are we going to die?—and having this time in our hand to focus on how these four police officers just snuffed the life out of one person was just... Whoa, it was just so much.

RICHARD: Brian, how do you feel things have changed? Do you agree with Ilyasah when she says that more people are open to this phrase, Black lives matter?

BRIAN: Well, I definitely agree that people are more open to discussing racism in general. And, also, what I think has changed is the variety of voices that you're hearing

from that are condemning this act that happened with the murder of George Floyd and also connecting the dots to other incidents like that in the past because what I've seen with past events is that they were always looked at in isolation. We looked at Michael Brown as one and Freddie Gray as another incident. But for me, these were a continuation of a much larger narrative that I thought was lost in this discussion. That's the huge change that I see in the current climate.

RICHARD: Do you think the police are the problem, the primary problem?

BRIAN: I think it's really important how we frame that narrative. So, when you ask me, do I think that the police are the problem? I can say emphatically, no, the police are not the problem. But policing and the lack of understanding of the history of policing in this country and how it has been meant to isolate and control Black Americans, that lack of understanding and reform is a problem. Yes, there are bad police, right? We tend to focus on those individuals when incidents like this happen. This one officer, his actions have had huge international repercussions. But, also, we can bring some good out of this by taking this collective energy from around the world to reform policing and reform systemic racism.

ASHLEY: Ilyasah, as an educator, do you agree with that?

ILYASAH: I would agree, certainly, with Dr. Williams. The policing, reform, education, there are so many reasons.

BRIAN: But also, education and discussion, that's just a start, but it's not enough. A lot of us have been educating and talking and waiting for a long, long time. Now is the time for action. It is time for us collectively, as a society, to recognize that there are tremendous gaps that exist that disadvantage Black people because of policies that were intentionally set generations ago. So those systems need to be reformed.

ILYASAH: Yes, that's right. They need to be reformed. My premise has always been education because for me, my parents made sure that I learned at home in addition to going to school because the educational curriculum are absolutely incorrect, inaccurate. If we are taught that Black people are inferior or all the negative things that we're taught about Blackness, right, then there is going to be less sensitivity, less respect, so many things. Education, to me, is extremely important, and that's one of the things that I've continually fought for, not just talking about accomplishments that Blacks may have made in February but making sure that the educational curriculum is inclusive. Even when it comes to police training, the information provided is inaccurate. We have these unconscious biases.

So I've just seen education as being one of the biggest challenges. My father said, "If you put a knife in my back nine inches and pull it out six inches, the knife is still in my back," right? We still have to address these issues that have happened, and it all starts

with being misinformed, miseducated about so many things. We want to talk about Africa. We want to talk about slavery. We want to talk about the foundation of this modern world in America. We have to remember that there were indigenous people who were already here, already making significant contributions to world history and society. And had it not been for them, we would not have all the things that we have today.

RICHARD: Do you, both of you, Brian and Ilyasah, see this as a potential common ground moment, that these protests have got the world's attention? Are there things that you think might be possible now that were not three weeks ago, four weeks ago?

ILYASAH: Yes, absolutely.

BRIAN: Absolutely.

ILYASAH: It's a miracle because now people's eyes are open. Now you can say, "Look, this is what happened to Eric Garner." And they're like, "Oh, my gosh. I didn't realize this is what happened." Now we can say, "This is what Malcolm was saying." And it's like, "Oh, my gosh. I thought Malcolm was something else." Now people are so much more open to understanding the challenges.

RICHARD: I just want to say that Brian's beeper has just gone off. Brian, as a trauma surgeon, he's on call. Are we still good to go, Brian?

BRIAN: We're still good to go. That was just a FYI type of page. I normally have it on vibrate. So I apologize, how that slipped through there. But to answer your question, I absolutely believe this is a common ground moment. There's certain things that Ilyasah said that resonate, in which you talk about education. I completely agree on that. It's serendipitous that she mentioned her father because just yesterday, prior to you asking if I could do this podcast, I recommended her father's autobiography to people to read. I said, "You may have this one-dimensional view of who he was and what he represented, but read this book and watch the evolution of a man and how you can use that and apply those principles in your own life."

As far as what I could now that I probably couldn't do three weeks ago, I don't think I would've gone on social media and recommended 12 books on racism for everybody to read. I'm cognizant of my public perception as a doctor and a trauma surgeon, as an academic surgeon and as an educator. I want to make society better, but I also recognize that I'm viewed a certain way, and I don't want that to reflect poorly upon my institution. But now it's okay, like, "Okay, after this, I can get on social media and list: if you want to learn about racism, read these 15 books like The New Jim Crow, Slavery by Another Name, The Autobiography of Malcolm X," bam, bam, bam, bam, and nobody blinks. You get thanked for that as opposed to getting trolled. That would not have happened three weeks ago.

ASHLEY: That's so interesting that you felt that you had to tread such a fine line between what you say publicly when you speak about these issues and then your work life.

BRIAN: It's funny because before, I've had some people criticize me and tell me that I am kind of radical with the things I say. I'm like, "You think I'm radical?" I think I've been very restrained. I certainly try to speak truth to power, but I want to be respectful and try to have a constructive, safe dialogue about it without compromising my values. So you have to make a decision. Do you want to be right all the time, or do you want to be effective? Do you want to tell people why they need to change, or do you want to get them to change by meeting them where they are? I think it comes from being a doctor and being a Black, male doctor, that that carries with it a certain sort of expectation that people place upon you about how you should behave and what you should do and what you can do and can say.

RICHARD: Ilyasah, do you feel that?

ILYASAH: I've never been like that. I am, which most people would never believe, I'm a loner. And most people at home, "No, you're not. You're sociable. You're a social butterfly." No, I'm really not. I know how to socialize because I come from a large family of women. I have five sisters. But I speak up. I think it's important for young people to find their voice. For me, it's always been an issue of wanting to see young children happy about who they are. I'm very fortunate that my mother made sure, while I went to these beautiful prep schools and had a great education, that I also would come home, and there would be Sheik [Ahmed Talik 00:12:18] who would teach us about Africa, who would teach us about Islam. We had these beautiful statues of women of the diaspora in our home. I grew up, really, with a great sense of who I am. My mother made sure that each of her six daughters learned about the significant contribution that women made to the world, the significant contributions that the diaspora, the African diaspora made to the world, and the same with Islam. So I grew up with a very healthy sense of who I am, and I never felt like I had to be quiet.

RICHARD: Ilyasah, you've said that when we teach people to hate others, we also teach them to hate themselves, and we must do better.

ILYASAH: Well, absolutely. I mean, why are we teaching our children to hate? It speaks to my mother making sure that we loved ourselves because when you love yourself, then you know how to love, and then you love others. When you love yourself and you see injustice or suffering happening to someone else, then you want to do something to help because you love that person because you've been taught love. So, if we're taught hate, we're never going to solve any problems. It looks like that's what the young people are saying, and it's great. Thank goodness because we need our young people to have their voices, to speak up and help us make change. My father said that these young people were going to get sick and tired and recognize that the old way of doing things is

no longer going to work, that the old people have misused their power. So now it's time for change.

RICHARD: You're listening to Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley. More of our interview in a minute. Our podcasts are brought to you by Common Ground Committee.

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BARRY KUDLOW: But I would give you a lot of running room on the personal tax side if you give me my 15% corporate tax rate, large and small [crosstalk 00:15:09].

BARNEY FRANK: With the right tradeoff, we could do that.

BARRY KUDLOW: I mean that. I mean that. I think there's a deal to be had.

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ASHLEY: Now more of our interview with Ilyasah Shabazz and Brian Williams. Brian, you sort of touched on this just now when you talked about, prior to this time, being a bit careful because of your professional profile. When it comes to slogans like White Silence is White Violence, for example, I think there are some people who are quite scared of that, or it makes them feel defensive. What do you think about that?

BRIAN: That discomfort, that's speaking volumes. Individuals that feel uncomfortable with those sorts of slogans, they need to stop and think about what it is about that that makes them feel uncomfortable. That is a time for introspection. That is a time to look at their own biases. Then, once they've thought about it, then what are they going to do about it? So, in the past, I spent a lot of my time trying to make everyone around me feel comfortable. I felt it my job to make them feel... You don't have to be afraid of me. You're going to be okay.

I don't feel that way anymore. It's not my job to make you feel comfortable. It's my job to live my authentic self, and I'm always standing on the side of justice. My job is to, every day when I wake up, I want to do what little thing I can do to help create a just society.

And I recognize that that will make some people uncomfortable, and I recognize that some people may not like me or what I am doing. However, the end goal is not for me to elevate myself, individual, but what I can do to uplift society. If I stay focused on that, then I can go to bed at night knowing that I'm living my truth and doing what's best to uplift humanity.

RICHARD: Sounds like this moment has changed you, Brian, and maybe a reminder of what happened to you in 2016 when you worked as a trauma surgeon in Dallas.

BRIAN: It's amplified a change that occurred for me. Four summers ago, a similar thing happened. This was the day after Philando Castile was killed in Minnesota, not very far from where George Floyd was killed. That happened on July 6th, and then on July 7th, there were protests nationwide against police brutality. The protest in Dallas turned deadly. There was a sniper there that shot 12 police officers. I was working that night, and I led the team that cared for seven of the 12 officers that were shot. Three of those officers that we cared for died. So, for me, it was a lot going on for me personally and professionally that just exploded with that shooting and then those deaths. I don't cry, but that night, after I talked to one of the families, I was in the back hallway on the floor, crying about what had happened.

Then, afterwards, at a press conference a few days later, which I initially did not want to attend, but my wife... When I told her, she said, "Okay, you're going to that press conference. The world needs to see that there was a Black trauma surgeon there that night trying to save these white police officers. You don't have to speak. You just need to sit there, have a camera on you," which was my initial intent. But as I sat there and the press conference proceeded, and I heard the discussion... So that was my first time when I spoke up. I was done trying to make people feel safe, and I spoke up about police brutality and systemic racism and gun violence. This happened at a televised press conference. I had no plans for this. Then, after that, my life changed, whether I wanted it to or not.

ASHLEY: Yeah, you essentially said, "I support you," speaking of police officers, "but I also fear you."

BRIAN: Right. That was me speaking my truth. I've had my own run-ins with police officers. I know what's happened with my family, and I've seen all the videos in the past. I had the oral history of what goes on in Black communities. So there is that inherent fear from what I know and my own experience, like, yes, this could be a lethal interaction with police officers. But I did say that. I was like, "Yeah, I respect you because I went to the Air Force Academy. I've served in the military. My father was in the military. I respect anyone who serves and puts on uniform. That includes police officers." I get that. I get that sort of sacrifice. We can't ignore the fact that many of these deaths were not justified. They weren't justified at the hands of police, and we

can't ignore that. That's what I said during that conference, and that resonated with a lot of different people for different reasons.

Ilyasah said she's been true and spoke up from day one. That was not me, right? That was not me. Small circles, maybe, but publicly, no. But from that point on, it's been an evolution up until now where, yes, I step into the arena and have these discussions. But I'm better this year than I was last year and the year prior, and it's continued to grow. But right now, I just feel alive. I feel authentic. I feel like I'm contributing to humanity, and I have no intention of going back to the way I was. For a while, I tried, but that just was not going to work. So now I will say that at this point, I am comfortable being uncomfortable.

ILYASAH: That's really the big challenge because I have, also, a lot of friends or... When I was going to school, my school was a all-girls school. We would go to the boys' school, and I know for a lot of the African-American boys that were in the schools, what they would do is they would emulate their professors. And they could never be their authentic self because you're taught that being Black is not good. You're taught so many things about your Blackness, which is your identity. So, for me, it's always been that I want to see children happy. I want them to know that they're worthy of all of these great things. I want them to look in the mirror and love themselves because the research that was conducted on Black and white dolls that were identical, but the spin was one was lighter than the other, and all these Black children were picking the white doll. That just speaks to the institutional, systemic racism, that a young child would think that the Black doll was bad, dirty, and not smart, and ugly, and that the white doll was wonderful, great, and just perfect. Then, when they said, "Well, which doll are you?" We want everyone to love who they are, and the joys and the benefits of just that.

RICHARD: Ashley and I are both white journalists, and we think we know a lot, pretty well-educated. What do you think that we should understand about race that we don't?

ILYASAH: Personally, I think that it starts with... Most white people think that the Egyptians, the people that built the pyramids, were white. But our logic will say that Egypt is in Africa, and that you have to have melanin in your skin, which means that you're dark. Just all these ancient characters, like when we say, "The founders of math and the founders of biology are from Greece," and they're from Africa. Then, when we look at slavery, let's acknowledge that had it not been for these people that we would not have the opportunity to call the United States of America our home today. So let's honor those people who cultivated the soil, who made these contributions to help make America what it is today.

ASHLEY: And Brian?

BRIAN: It's all about education in all the different forms it comes in. The perceptions of the Others—I'll use an example that even shows one of my own blind spots. As a

doctor, having gone through medical school and always the education, I always thought that the extent of experimentation on Black Americans began and ended with Tuskegee. I think it was a 20-year study. They had a cure for syphilis, which was penicillin. Anybody could get this, but instead of giving this to their Black research subjects, they gave them placebo so that they can study the natural course of the disease, which can be deadly, can cause neurosyphilis and many other complications. And this was run by the United States Public Health Service. So the federal government denied an existing cure for this disease, and as you can expect, many suffered and died. Their children and partners were infected with the disease, as well.

So most people are aware of that, but there are so many other instances of exploitation and experimentation on Black Americans before and even occurred after. For example, in the antebellum times, they were performing surgery on Black women, vaginal surgery without anesthesia to perfect a technique which is now a standard repair for vesico-vaginal fistula, which is a connection between the vagina and the bladder. But the surgeon that did this would have the woman held down and restrained and do the surgery over and over again without anesthesia when anesthesia was available. Up until the '80s, they were still performing unauthorized sterilization on Black women and teenagers in the South. It's part of eugenics, to better the race. So, in our lifetime—the '80s is not that long ago—this was still happening. However, I never learned about any of that in medical school.

It seems to me to be a reluctance to take a look in the mirror and see all the warts and bruises on American history. But I agree that the young kids, the kids out now, they're not having it. They are aware. They are courageous, and they are not being silent. And I admit this to them. When I go speak to colleges and medical schools, I say, "You know what? I know you've invited me here to speak, but I'm inspired by all of you because you are going through now what it took me 50 years to get that point. I am inspired. So keep pushing."

ILYASAH: Yes. That's right.

ASHLEY: Have each of you felt the presence of racism in your lives over the years when you were growing up and later than that, perhaps?

ILYASAH: Well, for me, I didn't feel it. It wasn't until... I remember being at this restaurant, and it was after Donald Trump. There were these two gentlemen that were saying things, and it made me very uncomfortable. Then they were leaving, and so I walked up to say something, like, "Hey, guys, what was that all about?"

ASHLEY: Hang on. So you approached them about something they said, and they talked back to you?

ILYASAH: Well, one of them had on a hat that said Make America Great Again. The other one had an English accent. So they were saying things, and I kept looking at them like, "Are they saying what I think they're saying?" It was just hinting at something negative about me being there. I just decided that I was going to go out and find out, "Excuse me, sir. What was it that you said?" And it took all of him not to do something to me, and that's what got me like, "Wow." I was a little frightened.

BRIAN: I've felt it my entire life either in some explicit form or implicit. I think I grew up being angry all the time and wanting to fight everyone and beat the racism out of them. Then I came to a point in my teenage years where I just sort of accepted that's the way it is, and I think I learned how to function within that system by not speaking up and just navigating all the different barriers and challenges, but I handed over who I was in order to exist. You hand over your identity for acceptance, and I recognize that now. But it's all part of the journey that's prepared me for where I am now. I'm able to speak about this because that narrative, I think, resonates with people. I don't get angry now. I know it sounds counterintuitive, but I actually feel some empathy for these people.

RICHARD: I'm really struck by the difference in the way both of you have seen this apply to your own lives. Do you feel that many people are objectifying the Black experience, oversimplifying it without realizing that everyone's view of life, everyone's experience in life is different?

ILYASAH: I think most people, though, are like Dr. Williams. I think mine is just a little different because I must have lived in a fantasy because my mother made sure that my image of me was intact. Most people did not grow up with their image intact. My mother, she almost went overboard with it. And I think when you come to the reality, you can either be traumatized or you can do something about it. I grew up very happy. I grew up very loved. My mother over-loved me, and I'm so grateful for it. I always wanted to make sure that other people had the same. So I understand so many of my friends, and I've even heard so many people of color, Blacks primarily, say that now they can come out of their shell, that now they can speak up because for a long time, if they were successful, they didn't have to, and they didn't even want to talk about it. So, now, they're understanding how important it is.

BRIAN: I think what's interesting about hearing the two of us talk right now is that you are clearly seeing that Black folks are not a monolithic group. But the common ground between the two of us, it's about identity. It's about service. It's about humanity. So, despite our disparate views of it, we're looking at the same picture from two different angles, from different lenses, in the end it's about who we are and who you want to be and how you want to impact the world. It's exciting to see how this world is changing. I feel hopeful for my daughter now. I always worry about this world that she's inheriting, but she's growing up at a time where she's seeing so much, and she understands that people can make a difference and that there are movements, that

people are committed to making the world a better place. So I'm going to over-love the heck out of her like your mother did to you.

ILYASAH: Right.

BRIAN: It's like, "You can do anything. You can be anybody, and don't let anybody tell you otherwise."

ILYASAH: You have to let her see her ancestors in a positive light. That's extremely important. Why were they taken? What were they doing before they were taken? What were they doing before they were enslaved? They were inventing. So we understand that the tradition was universal spirit and intellect, God and scholarship. Then that gives you a great sense of who you are because it's wisdom, and it's believing in a creator.

RICHARD: Thank you very much. This has been a really enlightening and wonderful, loving conversation.

BRIAN: It was an honor and inspirational, and I learned a few things.

ILYASAH: It was a pleasure to meet you, too, Dr. Brian Williams.

BRIAN: Yes, hope we can connect again in the future.

ILYASAH: Yes.

ASHLEY: Yeah. Thank you so much, both of you. Ilyasah Shabazz and Dr. Brian Williams on Let's Find Common Ground.

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