RICHARD: What should we be asked to do in this crisis? Should we all be required to make sacrifices for others? That's what we're going to consider right now on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: As we were wandering down the highway of life just a few months ago, the coronavirus pandemic came roaring up in the fast lane and hit all of us one way or another. Suddenly, we were plunged into a time like no other in recent decades. That's not too much of an overstatement, right?

ASHLEY: No, I don't think it is, but some people are being asked to sacrifice a lot more than others. I'm thinking about the frontline workers: doctors, nurses, grocery clerks, pharmacists, and delivery drivers. They're being asked to risk their health to do their jobs.

RICHARD: On Let's Find Common Ground, Citizenship and Sacrifice: What's the Big Ask? And should many of us who are blessed with good health and stable finances be called on to do a lot more?

ASHLEY: We're joined by a well-known expert on public service, Professor Paul Light of New York University. He often writes about public service. He speaks at conferences, and he has testified before Congress. Welcome to our podcast, Paul.

PAUL: Indeed.

RICHARD: In one sense, in this crisis, everyone's in it together, and I think that we've all been asked to sacrifice something, although in some cases, much more than others. Have you been surprised or impressed by the way that many people have responded?

PAUL: At the beginning, I was lifted by the desire to have colleagueship and friendship and this community response to the health workers and the police officers. That's always a sign of a renewal of civic interest. So I was pleasantly surprised. We're seeing some cracks in that embrace now. It's been heartening to see how many Americans are saying, "We've got to pull together. This is a common threat. We've got to work together."

ASHLEY: Paul, do you think it matters who is asking us to make a sacrifice?

PAUL: It always depends on not only who's doing the asking, and how do they define the sacrifice? Are they hoping for us to work with others to contribute to charitable causes, to deliver meals, to help the Other—if we can use that term here—the other persons across the street, in a different part of the city, in a different part of the country?

RICHARD: When you say "who's doing the asking," I assume you mean the president on one hand or your mayor or your governor or even your priest or rabbi?

PAUL: Yes, yes, and yes. We know that Americans now are paying a lot of attention to governors. The levels of trust in governors, much higher than trust in the United States Congress, trust in the president, and trust in some federal agencies. But there are some people who have instant credibility, the people we know best around the corner, our clergy and so forth, absolutely, and health workers, the police, so forth and so on.

ASHLEY: In previous generations, especially thinking about people who've lived through World War II or people who lived through the Depression, they were asked to make a lot of sacrifices, and they did. But for most of us alive today, this crisis is different from anything we've ever experienced before. Do you think this pandemic could actually help us understand what real sacrifice is?

PAUL: Well, I think many people would say yes, we're getting it. This has gone on well beyond the normal statute of limitations, so to speak. After September 11th, it was three, four, five days, people were mourning. They moved on. This has been a long lockdown here in the United States, and people are coming to grips with it now in a way that I don't think we all did at the very beginning. People are starting to recognize that this could be next year. What's going to happen during the holidays?

RICHARD: Yet, some people are being asked to make much greater sacrifices than others. People who work with their hands for a living or people who are working at the grocery store are making much greater sacrifices, and in some cases, putting themselves at risk for their health by doing their jobs, or on the other hand, being laid off completely, compared with those of us who make our living online.

PAUL: I think if we did some sort of an analysis of the conversation about health disparities, race and income as predictors of vulnerability to the coronavirus, it's like this thing jumped up, but we've known about health disparities for a very long time. The fact that we think it's surprising is, in fact, itself a surprise. Come on, we knew this. We understood it. We just didn't pay much attention to it because we're pretty good, in society, at hiding it, putting it across the river or putting it in a different neighborhood that we never go to. So, yes, the sacrifices are falling heavily in certain communities. What's amazing to me is how quickly people step up to make the sacrifice. It's also people at the grocery store, and the response to this has been, "I need my job. I also want to make a difference in this world." That's heartening at some level.

ASHLEY: Given what you just said about our willful blindness on some of this stuff, do you think that there is potential for people of different backgrounds and different philosophies and beliefs to find common ground here?

PAUL: It's possible, for sure, but we're going to all have to work together after this is over to talk about how to heal these disparities, how to address this unevenness in who sacrifices and how they sacrifice. That's for the future. We need political leaders and social leaders, civic leaders who are going to ask us to confront some of these issues and say, "Look, we know that 70% of victims of the coronavirus are in hidden communities or in distressed communities. What are we going to do about it?" That's going to be something that our leaders need to take up six months, nine months, a year from now.

RICHARD: Following on from that, do you think the pandemic will change our notions of citizenship, the boundaries between self, society, and government?

PAUL: We'll see. It's an open question. Yes, we have been primed here. We have been called to service, and many people have taken it seriously. There's a lot of evidence now that we're aware that something different has happened, and whether this carries over is going to be up to our presidential candidates in the fall, our political and civic leaders. This has got to be something that you push forward after the event is over, and sometimes we just go back to the way we were.

ASHLEY: Thinking back to another public health crisis, when I went to university back in 1989, we were presented with a welcome pack by the university, and some of the items in that welcome pack were condoms, which I remember being vaguely shocked by at the time. But the reason for this, of course, was the AIDS crisis. AIDS had become massive in the '80s, and at the time, I do remember some people viewed using a condom as something of a sacrifice. Yet, in the years since then, it's widely accepted that to stop yourself from contracting a sexually-transmitted disease, it is a very good idea to use a condom. Do you think that some of the little sacrifices we're making today could lead to long-term behavioral changes?

PAUL: Well, I hope so. When the president talks about the invisible enemy, he's on to something. I don't agree with a fair amount of what he tells us we should do, but he's talking about this threat, this hidden threat, and he uses it to his advantage. But there is something about: this could strike anybody. There's something about this particular crisis, its invisibility, its casualness in attacking that may stimulate a broader sense of need to come together, and we're going to need to see what happens coming out of the crisis. But you can see in the polling right now a tremendous sense of need to act and an awareness of the Other. In many ways, as we talk about this, all Americans have become the Other.

This is an indiscriminate attacker. This is an indiscriminate threat, and to a certain extent, we may be called, after this is over, to understand and empathize. So the real question about the civic sacrifice is: is there an empathetic response to it? Along with the declines in civic engagement in this country, we've seen a deep drop in empathy for the Other. Now that we all are the Other, or many of us are the Other, how do we respond to that?

RICHARD: We're speaking with Professor Paul Light of NYU. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley. More of our interview coming up. Our podcasts are brought to you by Common Ground Committee.

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DONNA BRAZILE: We have to get back to a place, I think, in society where we can foster stability in our conversation. We need a new vocabulary to talk about race.

MICHAEL STEELE: I agree 100% with Donna in terms of moving back into that space where we have a civil conversation. But, folks, it's got to start in our neighborhood. It's got to start in our community. It's got to start, most especially, in our home.

RICHARD: Watch full events online at CommonGroundCommittee.org or on our Common Ground Committee YouTube channel.

ASHLEY: Now back to Professor Paul Light.

RICHARD: You mentioned data a little earlier. Are there any signs from new polling that attitudes are changing? Do people have more or less trust in government?

PAUL: Well, we've seen a surge in trust in government agencies. So, even the Internal Revenue Service has surged. It's so interesting when you look at actual trust in the IRS, that actually Americans are much more trusting towards our tax agency than you would've thought. Americans actually like paying taxes. They feel better about the IRS to some extent because it represents the common good. Now, we don't want to go overboard with that one, but still, Americans want government to work right now. They're not in a criticizing mode except, for the moment, towards the president. It's not a majority yet, but his approval has gone down over the past three to four weeks.

RICHARD: I gather that it's becoming easier for pollsters to do their job.

PAUL: It's amazing, right? The response rate to most random-sample surveys over the past 5 to 10 years has been maybe 5-6%. So you'd have to make dozens and dozens of phone calls to get somebody to actually pick up the phone to start talking to a pollster. They had a very high hang-up rate. What we hear now from organizations like Pew Research Center is that you can't get respondents off the phone. People want to stay on. So the normal interview time for a Gallup or Pew or Kellogg or whatever, five minutes. That's about all you can hope for from most surveys. Sometimes we go a lot longer, but now people are hanging on. They want to go eight minutes, nine minutes, "Please, I'd like to talk to you more," like I'm talking right now. Here, I have two people. I'm dominating this conversation, driving you nuts, but you're the first people I've seen all day. So there you go.

RICHARD: That's why you're so loquacious.

PAUL: Oh, my god, yes. I talk too much, obviously.

ASHLEY: But that's so interesting that people want someone to talk to.

PAUL: Well, people want somebody to ask them questions about how they're doing, but there is some evidence that Americans are saying, "You know what? I don't like being isolated. It's lonely here. I can't go out, and I'm online 24/7, but that's not enough." I want to talk. I want to interact.

ASHLEY: Well, I was going to ask you if you thought this situation could possible lead to more civic engagement coming out of it.

PAUL: Gosh, I hope so. We've been in decline for some time now, although it's not as bad as many experts argue. This isn't the end of civic life. It's a change in the content of civic life. Our Millennials and Zs are getting engaged, but they're not engaging like the Baby Boomers.

RICHARD: What do you mean by that? You mean they're voting less or they're not as likely to be involved in associations?

PAUL: They're boycotting. They're un-anchoring from traditional civic institutions, religious institutions, political institutions and so forth. So there's this un-anchoring going on, but they're starting to attach. There's more and more engagement, some increases in giving, different types of giving. The Millennials and the Zs are going to change how we conduct politics. We just can't yet see what it's going to be, but I have a lot of faith in them. They're just not anchoring to the conventions that the Baby Boomers and the Xers did, and we can see that in the surveys.

RICHARD: You teach public service to undergraduates. Have you noticed any changes in your remote classes and the responses you've had?

PAUL: I think they're paying attention. They want to learn, and they want to learn… They're working on it. They just don't like the Baby Boomers and the Zs or the Xers telling them how it's done. They're reinventing the nature of civic life, and we just don't know what it's going to look like quite yet. This may be the defining moment.

RICHARD: The name of this podcast is Let's Find Common Ground. So what about the prospects for less hyper-partisanship?

PAUL: You hope it could happen, and we'll see whether or not the 2020 campaign allows it to happen. I don't know. I think it's going to take a little bit of time. I think it's a new generation of leaders who are going to have to step forward. You may have noticed that the Baby Boomers still control the nomination process. We had quite an array of older candidates in this last round. I think it's going to take a couple of elections before we see the rise of younger candidates, different approaches, and so forth, but I expect it to come.

ASHLEY: You teach a course on social impact. I'm curious, how do your students respond to that? And I wonder if they're thinking about that even more now.

PAUL: Well, what we hear from our students is that they want an option to make a difference in this world, but they don't think that option is going to be found in government. Without noting that, there's just a desire to find different ways of making a difference, of having impact. There is a lot of concern about where we're headed but not much faith in government, not much faith in our big institutions to come together.

They're looking to social enterprises and nonprofits and private businesses. They're looking around the corner to say, "Well, government is just so unable to make a decision and take action. We're going to have to build our own common ground." It feels a little bit like the beginnings of a new process that we might've seen back in the early 1800s traveling with de Tocqueville. Now, that's really romantic, but we do see a lot of reinventing going on in terms of how young people want to make a difference.

RICHARD: Well, clearly, in the run-up to this crisis, the government failed, for instance, to have enough ventilators, to have enough masks to prepare properly for the possibility, which was a know possibility, of a pandemic. Do you think that that laying bare of government failures could well lead to a sense that people need to come up with their own solutions.

PAUL: Look, when this first started to emerge three months ago, I looked at the inventory of past breakdowns. We've seen an increase in government failures of one kind or another: the failure to imagine the possibility of a suicide mission against the World Trade Centers. We had ample warning, but nobody was paying attention. So, at the beginning of this, I was saying, "Well, what agencies would we

rather not respond to this crisis? Which ones are broken?" And the answer is that we have a lot of broken government agencies today: CDC, FEMA.

We need to do something to revitalize government, but I don't hear many observers right now talking about that. We're trying to figure out whodunnit, but what are we going to do about it? How are we going to fix these agencies so they're more agile and responsive? Would you take a job in government right now? Where're you going to find the answers to some of our problems? We've got a lot of soul-searching to do in schools like mine, the public service, public administration, B-schools, and so forth. What can we do differently in the future? That's on us to work with younger people to find new ways of delivering services and getting the job done.

ASHLEY: Just going back to the idea of sacrifice for a minute and thinking about what previous generations sacrificed, again, I remember my grandmother, who was a young woman during the Depression. Even throughout her life, she would save absolutely every scrap of everything. She would save a tiny, tiny nub of margarine that we laughed at once, and she was very cross with us because she said, "You do not waste anything." And people who went through the war, particularly in Britain, I'm thinking about.... Do you think not just people who are in their 20s but people from their 20s all the way up to their 70s, do we have it in us to make the kinds of sacrifice that really do affect our personal pleasure in the ways that previous generations did?

PAUL: I think it's a great analogy to the Depression and so forth. Right now, we're being asked to sacrifice to protect ourselves. But do we have a common ground proposal out there right now? We started this conversation by saying, "Who's doing the ask? Who is saying sacrifice?" But what is the ask right now from our leaders? Save yourself, protect yourself, don't get into trouble, wear a mask, and so forth. Where's the common good request here? That's worth struggling with. But what is the ask after it's done? Who steps forward and says, "Okay, the sky is clearing. Things are better now. We've all been through this. What do we want people to do? What is the ask?" And I can't figure that one out. I see a big smile on your face because you know it's the tough question, yes?

RICHARD: Yeah. I was going to test you. How can people with different beliefs, different backgrounds find some common ground?

PAUL: Well, I'm trying to figure out what we want people to do. Do we say, "Well, this is going to be over. Vote in November for president." Is that what we want them to do? Or do we want them to get engaged in fighting health disparities and inequality? How do we want people to respond? That's where I think this president and Democrats, too—I don't see anybody stepping forward and saying, "This is a moment of great awareness for all of us. Here's what I'm going to do as your next president." I don't hear Donald Trump saying that. I don't hear Joe Biden. I just don't hear it yet.

ASHLEY: And right now, I feel like there are lots of small asks like, "Please don't travel," or, "Please don't go to the beach." That's going to be a tough one in the summer, right? If they're going to be telling Americans that they can't be outside in groups at the height of summer, that's going to be something that a lot of people struggle with.

PAUL: Please don't gather in crowds, and maybe it's not an ask. Maybe it's a change in behavior, as you've been hinting at a little bit here, that people will be a little more patient, a little more understanding, a little kinder, perhaps. Maybe that's what we're looking for. Maybe we get a restoration of empathy, which some people would say is the root of all common good, and suddenly we have people taking off their mask and revealing and saying, "Yeah, we can see you."

ASHLEY: Professor Paul Light, thanks so much for joining us.

PAUL: And I love this conversation. I wish I had an answer, but I'm going to have trouble sleeping tonight, thank you, about this one. Anyway, it's a delight to talk to you.

RICHARD: It's great to hear from you. Thank goodness you weren't glib and professed to know what will happen.

PAUL: I know very little. All we do, you and I, the three of us, we follow what's happening, and we try to make sense of it. Anybody who's telling you they know what's going on doesn't know what's going on.

RICHARD: Professor Paul Light on Let's Find Common Ground.

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