

RICHARD: Climate change: it's like a red rag to a bull for many people, one of the most divisive issues in American life. But this wasn't the case 20 years ago. So how did we get here? This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. In this episode, we look at how climate change became so polarizing and how to make it easier to talk about. Our guest today says only when we're having real conversations about what's going on with climate change can we start to reverse its effects.

RICHARD: Climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe is Chief Scientist at The Nature Conservancy. She's also the author of a new book. It's called Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World. And by the way, we're doing a book giveaway at the end of this show. So stay tuned for that. Ashley, you kick us off with the first question.

ASHLEY: You start the book with the line, "I'm getting used to being hated." Why?

KATHARINE: That really is at the foundation of our conversations about climate change today. As a climate scientist, whenever I open my mouth outside the ivory tower, it is rare for me not to be attacked for doing so. And so I understand more than anyone else why we don't want to talk about climate change. But I also understand more than anyone else why we need to be talking about climate change. So that's why I decided to open the book with that.

ASHLEY: Now, you live in Texas, which, of course, is oil country. Why do you say that's actually a great place to be a climate scientist?

KATHARINE: It is the perfect place to be a climate scientist, where I live, because of a few different reasons. So, first of all, Texas is the most vulnerable state in the whole United States to the impacts of climate change. Climate change is loading the weather dice against us, making our hurricanes stronger, intensifying faster with a lot more rain. It's making our droughts longer and stronger, our heat waves more intense, our heavy rainfall more frequent. Texas already gets more naturally occurring weather and climate disasters than any other state, and as climate change is loading those weather dice against us, we're getting hit first and foremost.

Texas, of course, is also home to the oil and gas industry. Texas has more carbon emissions than any other state. But Texas also has more wind energy than any other state, and we're currently number two in terms of solar energy production. But we're looking to overtake California probably within the next year. The biggest solar farm in the whole U.S. is being built outside of Dallas right now.

And then, in Texas, climate change is just as, if not even more politically polarized than anywhere else in the world, where people will say, "Everything you've said makes sense, and I'd like to agree with what you said. But if I agree with you, I have to agree

with Al Gore, and I could never do that." So, if we can talk about climate change in positive, constructive ways in the heart of conservative Texas, I feel like we could do it anywhere.

ASHLEY: That's a really good point, and actually it brings me to the expression "climate change" because, obviously, that's a trigger expression for a lot of people. Is part of this, perhaps, not even using the words "climate" and "change" together? Do you do that sometimes?

KATHARINE: I do. I decided to give a whole presentation to a very large group of a few hundred water managers where I never used the words "climate" and "change" in sequence. So here I was at this meeting, and the person before me was a state representative who explicitly rejects the reality of climate change. The person speaking before him was another state representative who explicitly rejects the reality of climate change. Then up comes me, the climate scientist. So I figured, "I have nothing to lose at this point. Let me just try this."

So I talked all about how climate was changing, how our temperatures were increasing, our extreme droughts were getting more extreme. I showed what we expect to happen, depending on the choices we make today, but I talked about long-term trends, and I talked about climate variability. I never mentioned those two words, "climate" and "change," together because I could explain it perfectly well. I didn't need to use those words.

And what happened afterwards was really amazing. Well, first of all, no one threw any rotten tomatoes, and people applauded politely, which was nice. But this woman came running up to me afterwards and grabbed my hand, and she was so enthusiastic. And she pumped my hand, and she said, "That was the best presentation. I agree with everything you say." And then she said, "But those people who talk about global warming, I don't agree with them at all."

At that, my mind slightly boggled because there was no question that was actually what I was talking about, although I never used those words. But then she went on, and she said, "But this, this makes sense." And so, because we were able to avoid sort of tripping over the landmines, the conversational landmines, so to speak, she listened to what I was talking about, she recognized how it related to her and how it dovetailed with her lived experience, and she completely agreed with it.

RICHARD: Our show is called Let's Find Common Ground, and the craziest thing to me is how this whole issue, call it climate change or global warming, has become so polarizing. I mean, we're all in this together, and yet, somehow, we divide over this issue. What's going on here? How did this happen?

KATHARINE: In the 1990s, if you asked Republicans and Democrats what they thought about global warming, you would get about the same answer. So climate change was

not politically polarized back then. What changed? Not the science. What changed was the way it's talked about. Today, and for the last 10 years, climate change is and has been one of the most politically polarized issues in the entire U.S. to where the number one predictor of whether you think it's real, it's us, and it's serious is not how educated you are or how much science you know or how smart you are. It is simply where you fall on the political spectrum. But a thermometer doesn't give you a different answer depending on how you vote, and the science that we've known since the 1800s hasn't changed significantly in the last 20 years.

So how did this happen? Do people wake up in the morning saying, "Well, I've decided I'm just going to reject 200 years of physics that explains how airplanes fly, how stoves heat food, and also why the planet is warming due to our emissions of heat-trapping gases"? No, people don't wake up and decide that.

What do we do? We wake up, and we go to social media, and we scroll through the feeds of people whose values we share, whose opinions we respect. We go online or we go to the TV, and we listen to politicians and pundits and thought leaders who we agree with on issues of, say, family values or personal liberties or the economy or immigration, and we listen to what they're saying about climate change, too. So, when we are being told day after day, year after year, decade after decade by people we trust that this is a hoax or it's not real or fixing it would destroy the economy, most of us, if we respect those people and agree with them in other areas, we would agree with them on this, too.

RICHARD: So how do we un-polarize it?

KATHARINE: In the book, I talk about how we can begin conversations over something we agree on, connect the dots to climate change, and offer a positive, constructive solution that connects directly with people's preexisting values. That's how we can have good conversations. We tried this out in real life. We made four short videos, one-minute videos, one by a Republican congressman talking about free market climate solutions, one by a Libertarian talking about how climate change affects our personal liberties and rights, one by an Air Force general talking about how climate change is a national security issue, and then one that I did myself talking about not only the science but how, as a person of faith, it's a faith-based issue, too.

ASHLEY: Here's one of the videos from the campaign, which was developed by Yale University's Program on Climate Change.

AIR FORCE GENERAL: Why does the military care about climate change? The answer is we see it as a threat to our country. We have at least 19 bases around the world affected by rising sea levels. Drought and severe storms are triggering mass refugee migrations while devastated areas could become breeding grounds for terrorists. We need to protect ourselves from these risks. Part of the solution is developing clean

renewal energy. This has to be everybody's fight. Learn more about climate change. Go to newclimatevoices.org.

KATHARINE: So we aired these four short videos on social media in a few different districts. And Yale researchers tracked not who watched the videos... They didn't track that at all. They simply tracked Republican opinions on climate change, and guess what. By airing one-minute videos that framed climate impacts and climate solutions based on values that Republicans would prioritize, it noticeably altered Republican opinions on climate change in those districts. Isn't that amazing?

ASHLEY: Yeah, the framing thing is so fascinating, but it also just shows you that you just have to do a little tweak, and maybe you can reach people.

KATHARINE: Absolutely. So often, I think we, as humans in general, all of us, suffer from the everybody-has-to-be-like-me syndrome. If I care for this reason, you have to care for this exact reason, too, and if you don't care for this exact reason, you're a bad person. But the reality is, everybody has morals and standards that they live according to. It is perfectly fine if they care for a completely different reason than you do because all that matters is what we do.

RICHARD: Katharine Hayhoe on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: Katharine is the author of the new book, *Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World*...

ASHLEY: ... Which you could win a copy of. Stay tuned to find out how. And if you're enjoying this episode, there's a whole archive for you to check out on your podcast app or at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts.

RICHARD: Now back to our interview with Katharine Hayhoe. You're a Christian, and you say that if you're someone who takes the Bible seriously, then you already care about climate change. Why is that?

KATHARINE: So often in the United States, we hear a lot of religious-y sounding objections to why climate change can't be real or we don't want to fix it. And I'm saying religious-y not to be cute but because they aren't really theologically based, ideas like, "Oh, if God is in control, then this doesn't matter," or, "The world's going to end, anyway. So who cares?" I hear these excuses all the time.

But if you actually go to the Bible because these excuses typically come from Christians, Protestants or Catholics, the Bible literally says in Book 1, Chapter 1 that God gave humans responsibility over every living thing on this planet. Then, at the very end of the Bible, Revelation, it says God will destroy those who destroy the Earth. So,

all through the Bible, it talks about God's love and concern for the most seemingly insignificant aspects of nature, and then, all through the New Testament, it talks about how we are to love and care for those who are less fortunate than us, who, of course, are the very people who are being most affected by the impacts of a changing climate. So, if we don't think climate change matters, and we call ourselves a Christian, frankly, I don't think we're actually looking at what we truly believe. And sadly, in this country, for many people, the word Christian or Evangelical has become more of a political label than a theological one.

RICHARD: So how do you talk to Christians who are really skeptical about climate change?

ASHLEY: Yeah, what have you done? I'm curious, you, personally, because I know you've had plenty of experience in this.

KATHARINE: I absolutely have. Well, the first thing is to determine whether their statement of faith is written by their theology or not because if it isn't, then there's really no point going to the Bible to talk about what it says if their concerns are entirely, 100% political or economic or some aspect of that. So listening is really always the first step in a positive conversation, and asking questions. But if they are someone who does take their faith seriously, so if, for example, I'm asked to speak at a chapel service at a Christian college or talking to somebody who very clearly is concerned about their faith, then I wouldn't give them a science-based answer. I would go... And this is what I can do because I'm a Christian. I would go directly to what we believe in. I would take them through the verses in the Bible that talk about our perspective and attitude towards nature as well as, in my opinion, even more importantly, our perspective and attitude toward people who are less fortunate than we are.

RICHARD: Okay, but what about people who may feel they're already surrounded by people they agree with?

KATHARINE: You are actually who I wrote the book for because it turns out that over 70% of us in the U.S. are worried about climate change, over 70%. But only a tiny fraction of us are activated, a tiny fraction. Only 14% of people are even talking about this issue according to a poll that just came out two weeks ago. And if we don't talk about it, why would we care, and why would we ever do anything to fix it? So, if we live in a community where people are already in that 70% of being worried or concerned about it, we live in the perfect place to have a conversation about what we can do about because you know what, most people are doing nothing because they don't know what to do.

So having that conversation about what we, as individuals, can do, what our place of work could do, what our school could do or our university could do or our neighborhood or our community or our city, that is the perfect place to be having that type of conversation. It isn't about convincing the 7-percenters, the dismissives who

would dismiss 200 years of science, 2,000 climate scientists, and 200,000 scientific studies. It's about the rest of us, most of who are worried but we just don't know what to do about this. That's where our conversations matter the most, and that's where they move the needle the most.

ASHLEY: Okay, but how do you start a conversation like that, especially if it's with somebody who isn't your twin in ideology, like over the water cooler? What do you do?

KATHARINE: Every conversation needs to begin with something that we have in common that is already important to them. And if we don't know what that is, then the best thing to do is to ask questions rather than to start talking at them. So 99 times out of 100, if I just ask somebody questions about themselves and their life and what they enjoy doing, I can find something to connect on, whether we're both parents or we're both really into cooking or we love wine or we live in the same place or we visited the same place or we care about the same activity like we both ski. Now, we're not always going to be the perfect person to have that conversation, and sometimes there's people who I really don't have anything in common with that I can't genuinely have a constructive conversation with, and that's okay because it's not on you or me or us as individuals to talk to every single person in the world. We can talk most effectively to people who share something with us.

So I have conversations, and I talk in the book about how I've had conversations that started with being a mom or started with knitting or started with just talking about food. And the first thing we can do is take an inventory of who we are, take an inventory of what's important to us, and then sort of keep our antenna tuned for other people who might share that. In the book, I talk about how one girl is a ski racer. So she talks to people about winter sports. Somebody else decided to just ask people a question about how worried they were because he was worried. So he just asked an open-ended question, like, "On a scale of 1 to 10, how worried are you, and why?" And he listens to what they say. There's all kinds of ways that we can begin this conversation, but the way we do not want to begin it is by arguing or by dumping a bunch of scary facts on people because that has already been done. It's already reached all the people it's going to reach, and it's not going to reach the people who haven't been activated yet.

RICHARD: So we've been talking about what all of us could do. Are we responsible for most of the greenhouse gases that are being emitted, or is it larger organizations?

KATHARINE: The reason the climate is changing is because, since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, we humans have been digging up and burning increasing amounts of coal and gas and oil. And when we burn these fossil fuels, they produce heat-trapping gases that are building up in the atmosphere, wrapping an extra blanket around the planet that we do not need. And just as you would if somebody snuck into your room and you already had the perfect blanket on, and then they put this extra-

heavy blanket on you, you'd wake up sweating, saying, "Hey, I didn't need this." So that's why climate is changing.

Where do these fossil fuels come from? It turns out that 90 corporations, 90 corporations are responsible for two-thirds of these heat-trapping gas emissions since the dawn of the Industrial era. Just 20 companies are responsible for a third of our carbon emissions since the 1960s. That's why, although it certainly is important to take personal steps in our personal lives to cut our personal carbon footprint, it is not enough to fix this problem. Not even half of the problem will be fixed by personal lifestyle choices because it is a system-wide problem. We need to change the system.

Here's the good news. The good news is that systems are made up of people. Systems have absolutely changed before in the past. And the way they changed was when people used their voices to advocate for that change. Think about the fact that 200 years ago, the United States's economy was based largely on owning other human beings and profiting off their labor. Think about the fact that, 100 years ago, a woman didn't have a vote. So how did the world change? It absolutely changed by people making changes in their personal life, in the case of slavery, boycotting sugar and people freeing their slaves. But the world didn't change because the biggest slaveowners decided they wanted it to. The world didn't change because the president of the United States woke up one morning and decided, "Oh, women have to vote." It changed because individual people used their voices to advocate for that change powerfully, the way so many of our children and young people are today with climate change.

RICHARD: So, Katharine, what is the one thing that all of us can do about climate change that we're not doing now?

KATHARINE: I am so glad that you asked that. The answer is we are not talking about it, and every single person can. I'm not talking about unloading doom-filled facts on people. I'm not talking about guiltting people for their personal behavior towards this. I'm talking about starting with something that we agree on, connecting the dots to how climate change is affecting us, something that we care about already, and talking about positive, constructive solutions that we could implement where we work, in our neighborhood, at the church we attend, at our child's school, at our own school, in our personal lives, too, and at the city level and at the state level and, of course, at the federal level, too. There are so many ways that we can use our voices to make a difference, and frankly, that's the only way the world has ever changed in the past.

RICHARD: Are there some ideas we should borrow from overseas, from other cultures, from other countries?

KATHARINE: Well, we're always humans. Ultimately, to care about climate change, we only have to be one thing, and that one thing is not a Liberal Democrat living in California. That one thing is a human being living on this planet, which we all are. So

I think that we absolutely can learn from other countries. Did you know, for example, just last year during the coronavirus pandemic, 90% of new energy installed around the world was clean energy, 90%? We know that large organizations, like, I just heard yesterday, the Presbyterian Church of Ireland, voted in their General Assembly to divest from fossil fuels. That's something that could be considered by many other churches, as well. Here in the United States, I know they're talking about it, too. So we can absolutely look around and see what others are doing.

ASHLEY: Are you hopeful, then? You sound hopeful, and the title of your book does have the word "hope" in it.

KATHARINE: I am hopeful, but that hope, as I describe in the book, is not based on the fact that we're looking at a 50/50 odds or better of a better future. Hope, true hope, rational hope, courageous hope begins in a dark place. It begins by recognizing it's bad, and it's going to get worse. And success is not guaranteed. But what we do know is that there is a chance of success, and the science is very clear. Our future is in our hands. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concludes... They're the ones who issue those big scientific assessments every few years. They say literally every year matters. Every choice matters. Every action matters. But recognizing that there's a chance of a better future and recognizing that each of us, by acting, by using our voices, by advocating for change at every level, we can alter the probability of that future by just a little bit more. That is what gives me hope.

ASHLEY: Thanks, Katharine. Thanks so much for coming on.

KATHARINE: My pleasure.

RICHARD: Climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe on Let's Find Common Ground. And now to that giveaway we teased at the top of the show. We have three copies of Katharine's book, *Saving Us*, and we'll send them to the first listeners who email us at podcast@commongroundcommittee.org.

ASHLEY: That's podcast@commongroundcommittee.org. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.