

RICHARD: Who are the bridge builders? How is this growing movement pushing back against toxic polarization, incivility, and the cultural and political barriers that separate us as a nation? That's the subject of this episode. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. We look at a diverse and vital coalition and how they're tackling racial, cultural, and political schisms. Our guest, Nathan Bomey, is a reporter for USA and author of the new book Bridge Builders: Bringing People Together in a Polarized Age.

RICHARD: In this interview, we hear about people from many walks of life who are building the structure of a new, more united America. Thanks for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

NATHAN: Thank you so much for having me.

ASHLEY: Let's start with your book, which is called Bridge Builders. Who are bridge builders?

NATHAN: I think bridge builders are people who are trying to bring people together despite their differences whether it's politics, race, religion, class, or culture. They may approach it from a different perspective or a different strategy, but their qualities are similar. They acknowledge the past. They don't label people. They embrace conflict. They understand that sometimes conversation's not enough to get people on the same page. But I think it's really interesting that their qualities are similar because, although the areas they work in may be completely different, we see that bridge builders actually do have a lot in common. I think that's encouraging, and it suggests that there's a lot we can learn from them.

RICHARD: Ashley and I are both journalists, Nathan, and in your new book, Bridge Builders, there are lots of good stories about people involved in the bridge-building movement. Do you get a sense that the movement is growing?

NATHAN: Yeah, I think it is. It's incredible to see how much conversation is going on about this, and I have to say, when I started this project in late 2018, I never anticipated that we'd get to a point in this country where so many people would want to have a conversation about this. It certainly goes beyond politics. I think that there's cultural divides and racial divides, of course. So I think that the hunger for something different is there. If you look at 67% of Americans, according to the More in Common project, are part of what they call an "exhausted majority," people who are just so sick of all the arguing and all the division and want something different. You can't get 67% of Americans to agree on pretty much anything, and yet, 67% say they're exhausted and they want something different. People really do want to see politicians and other people starting to cooperate wherever possible.

ASHLEY: Well, talking of politics, can you give a couple of examples of bridge-building in action in Congress or state legislatures?

NATHAN: Yeah. In the federal level, I think we are often subject to this caricature that federal legislators never work together. There's absolutely nothing that they can coordinate on. If you look back to 2020, I think they actually did work pretty well in the early going in the pandemic in terms of getting economic relief out there. But I think, more recently, look at a group like the Problem Solvers Caucus, which is a couple dozen lawmakers in Congress, half Republicans, half Democrats who really believe firmly that they can find common ground, ironically, on bridges, for example, which is kind of funny, infrastructure. Actually, we need to build bridges to build bridges.

RICHARD: You mentioned infrastructure, and that is a really good example of Moderates, or at least people who want to work together from both the Democratic and Republican sides in Congress coming together on this infrastructure bill, which was a compromise between what the Biden administration wants and what most Republicans were prepared to give.

NATHAN: Yeah. We've gotten to a point in this country where the idea of compromise is viewed as a negative thing, that it is compromising to compromise. But the reality is that compromise is actually a principle. It's built into our system. But when I talk to bridge builders about how they approach it, they just see it from a completely different perspective. They don't see it as compromising. They see it as a value. I am not going to take half of the pie from you, and you're not going to take half of the pie from me. We're going to build a bigger pie together. And although we may not get everything we want, if we build together, we can actually achieve progress for both of us because our two-party system, whether we like it or not, is built on the premise that we have to work together to progress.

ASHLEY: We actually interviewed a couple of members of the Problem Solvers Caucus some months ago now for this show, and they did see it as getting something done.

NATHAN: Yeah, I think that's right. Bridge builders are not going to live in the hot take culture where they believe you can argue people on to your side. They're going to stay off of cable news zingers and this idea that maybe if you call someone out on social media, you can somehow achieve something. I mean, I think, in a lot of ways, they are practical. They are not Pollyanna-ish. They're not overly optimistic or unrealistic about the challenges. They understand that there is ignorance, but they are also optimistic in the sense that they believe people can change because they've seen people change.

RICHARD: You mention media, Nathan. Is the media part of the problem?

NATHAN: Yeah, I think it is, and I think, I, as a journalist, couldn't write a book like this without training the lens on myself personally and as an industry. I will defend, all day long, journalism from false accusations of fake news. That is harmful to us as an

industry. It's harmful to our democracy, and it's usually not fair. But I also think we can't escape this conversation about how we may have contributed or may continue to contribute to our national divides. It starts with things like where the headlines get just a little bit more sensational, where the news judgment trends just a little bit more towards what people want to see, not what they need to see. It's a huge issue. When Google is your editor, when Google Trends is your editor, you've got a problem because you're following what people are searching for and not telling people what they need to know about the world around them.

Now, I think journalists, we are obsessed with conflict. I understand that. We're always going to cover conflict. We need to do that. But the question is: how do you frame it? I am encouraged to say there is a movement in journalism more towards solutions-oriented reporting and stories where we say, "Okay, we're going to cover the conflict, but we're going to frame it around: what is the solution?" I think that Americans are really hungry for that, and if you look at the readership data, they actually do follow those stories. That is encouraging to see.

RICHARD: I'm glad you mentioned solutions journalism. There is a group that I've often worked with in the past called Solutions Journalism Network, which has really shined a light on this question, as has AllSides, which is a member of the Bridge Alliance. What about social media? It does seem that the conflict entrepreneurs really profit from trying to keep us apart and trying to sensationalize division.

NATHAN: Yeah. No, there's no doubt. It is one of the most significant issues of our time. I was intent with this book on doing a chapter on someone who was using social media to bring people together. There's got to be someone. And I was able to do that, although it was the most difficult subject I had to find. It took me the longest. But I finally found this great group called The Everyday Projects led by a couple journalists who just started posting photos when they were on assignment in Africa of daily life, of someone getting a cup of coffee, taking the elevator, getting their car repaired. And these photos ricocheted around the world on Instagram, and people on the other side of the world realizing that, "You know what, I actually have shared humanity here. I get a cup of coffee every morning. I get my car fixed. I go up the elevator."

That was so encouraging to see, that these mundane pictures of authentic life, real life can actually draw people together and give you a shared respect for your shared humanity. The problem isn't social media. It's the highlight reel. It's not the mundane. It's the sensational. It's something that makes you outraged or extremely happy or something extreme. But I think what they have shown is, actually, your assumptions may be wrong. It may not always be the sensational that people want to see.

RICHARD: We're going to mention some of those groups and sites on our website, just in case some of those names and concepts went by a little too fast.

ASHLEY: And also, though, that story in the book about that project was so interesting, but ultimately there's that problem of the algorithm, right? The algorithm surfaces the conflict, doesn't it? That's what's so depressing for those of us who are involved in this movement to build bridges and to find common ground, is sometimes, because of that kind of thing, it can feel like pushing a boulder up a hill. It can feel like, how do you get people to notice this work?

NATHAN: Yeah. I think that we have to acknowledge the gravity of the challenge, which is when you're working against a structure that is designed to profit off of tearing people apart, this is a huge challenge. We can hold out for hope that the profit-making companies decide to change their mind and not to elevate things that people want to see because of our human tendency to gravitate toward that sort of content, or we can look at it from a grass-roots perspective, and maybe it starts with education. How do we teach young people on how to engage with social media?

When the printing press was first introduced, it took decades for people to adjust, for society to adjust to the fact that suddenly information was available so widely. And I think we haven't had much time as a society to adjust to the fact that the internet has completely undermined or overturned how we usually interact with information. Most people are not really well-equipped to validate and authenticate information on their own. We don't really equip people with that in school. We teach them things. We don't say, "Here's how you authenticate information."

RICHARD: You wrote in your book a chapter called "From Caricature to Nuance," and how some people in West Virginia have tried to reestablish trust between the media and the people who live in the state. Could you tell us more?

NATHAN: Yeah. This is so critical because, and I believe really passionately in the importance of local journalism. I work at USA Today now, but my career started when I was 17 years old for the local newspaper in my hometown in Michigan. I'm sitting at Lodi Township Board of Trustees, really small, rural area with my little yellow notebook, and I'm covering things like gravel quarry mining regulations, and I have no idea what's going on. I don't know why the editor trusts me to do this, but the point is that I was there. I did it over the course of five years and ended up establishing these relationships with people in the community who at least knew... They knew who I was and maybe could trust what I was reporting.

I think the problem is that, in so many cases throughout America, those reporters aren't there anymore. I actually called the supervisor for the township that I used to cover many years ago and asked her, and she said, "Yeah, there's nobody covering us anymore." How can we expect people to trust a journalist if they don't know one? I think a group like 100 Days in Appalachia is doing such great work because they are on the ground, local, grass-roots journalism, nonprofit-funded. They're saying, "We're going to tell people's stories authentically in Appalachia," people who have been caricatured by the national media, my colleagues.

It's embarrassing, I think, a lot of the coverage that happened after the 2016 election where national media swooped into these communities in Appalachia and profiled these people, who were like, "Who are these people who would vote for Donald Trump?" And it illustrated how important it is for us to establish those relationships with local journalists and rely on those relationships to begin rebuilding those bonds of trust that have been torn apart over the recent years.

ASHLEY: I love that chapter because the stories really struck me that journalists, national journalists were coming into the state saying, "Can you get me a miner who voted for Trump?" They went in looking for a specific character for their story, and how demoralizing that was to so many people.

NATHAN: When I talked to the people there in Appalachia who are doing this work, they said, "We know we have challenges. We know we have problems. But we also have diversity. We have LGBTQ members of that community in Appalachia. We have Muslims here. We're not just what you might assume us to be." For example, in 2018, when there was a teachers strike in West Virginia, the media was shocked, like, "How could this happen? I thought only Liberal members of unions would strike." And it's like, no, that illustrates why we don't understand people of these cultures. It just illustrates how important it is to choose nuance over caricature.

ASHLEY: Nathan Bomey of USA Today is our guest on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard. This interview is about a movement of bridge builders, and Common Ground Committee plays a leading role with its public events, blogs, Facebook conversations, and this podcast.

ASHLEY: Find out more about what we do at commongroundcommittee.org. Sign up for the weekly newsletter and follow us on Twitter where we share links to interesting articles and events. Common Ground Committee is also a member of Bridge Alliance, a community of more than 100 organizations across the country.

RICHARD: Now more from our interview with Nathan Bomey. You've made the case for nuance. So how do people like us get people on board with this work of finding common ground when we have this social media landscape the way it is?

NATHAN: I think that people are more willing to engage on this than you might think. Again, when you look at the numbers in terms of the percentage of people who believe, for example, that... Let's take an issue like immigration. Republicans are more likely to believe that Democrats are more pro-immigration than they are, and Democrats believe Republicans are more anti-immigration than they are. Maybe we aren't as divided on the issues as we think we are. The problem is we're tribalized. We're caught in these tents, not willing to move out of our camps. There are ways, though, to begin building

relationships between people who aren't like each other whether they look differently, think differently, pray differently, vote differently, and we can do that, actually, on a more national scale without waiting for it to happen on a grass-roots basis.

ASHLEY: I have another question about the media, the wider media. So I know people, white people in my circle who, at the moment, feel that there are so many stories in certain media with a racial justice angle. There are just so many that they're beginning mentally to tune out. They feel like this is just too much, and, as a result, they don't want to take action. They just want to switch off. I think that's a sort of unacknowledged problem. What do you think? Should the media be building bridges or not?

NATHAN: Well, I think that we do have a role to play, and I think that historically we have viewed ourselves as not having a role to play. And I think that's actually part of the problem, that oftentimes we end up looking like unemotional, uninterested observers at the very best and then, at the worst, actively working against bringing people together, which is an even bigger problem, of course. But when it comes to the kind of coverage you're talking about, I think it's important to be telling stories about diversity and these challenges because, for so long, white people like me have controlled the media, have controlled those stories and oftentimes ignored those stories. So we have to be telling those stories. But I think the way in which we do it is key. And I think it comes back to solutions. You want to write about the problem, but you can't dwell on the problem without getting to a solution and saying, "Here's what we can do." Bridge builders do not shame or humiliate, and there's a big distinction between accountability and shame.

ASHLEY: Accountability versus shaming people, can you give me an example of that from your reporting?

NATHAN: Well, I think a woman named Natasha Morrison is a really great example. She's the head of a group called Be the Bridge. She has tens of thousands of members in her group that are basically people who tend to be Christians throughout the country who are interested in this issue of racial and religious reconciliation. But she's a Black woman, a minister. She goes to mostly white churches, white, Evangelical congregations throughout the country, and she's speaking to these churches that the media have told us are not receptive to conversations about race and what has happened in America in the past. She's having very difficult conversations about what has happened in the past, how Christian churches have contributed in some cases toward oppression of Black people.

But she says she draws a distinction between shame and what she calls lament, which, as you know, is the root word for Lamentations, a book of the Bible, that she's connecting with Christians by saying, "We can lament what has happened without shaming you for what has happened." And I think a lot of times, the response you would get is, "Well, I wasn't around when slavery happened and Jim Crow happened.

Why am I responsible?" I think that's an understandable response, but what she's trying to explain is that, "No, you're still benefiting from that legacy. Let me explain why," without saying, "I'm going to shame you."

RICHARD: There are many examples around the country of where bridge-building can work to increase understanding and make progress. You worked as a reporter in Detroit. That city has a majority African American population. It went through a huge and very wrenching bankruptcy in 2013. This problem was part of what led to a lot of tension between the city and the suburbs of Detroit. Can you explain what happened? There's also a case of two men who tried to bridge the gap.

NATHAN: Yeah. Essentially, what happened was a white Republican from Livonia, which is often called the most white large city in America, basically worked with a Black Democrat from Detroit, often considered one of the most Black large cities in America to help bring about a legislative resolution to the bankruptcy and what is now being called the Grand Bargain, which is essentially how they resolved the Detroit bankruptcy. It was the essence of compromise.

RICHARD: What happened? What was involved?

NATHAN: Essentially, they basically said, "We're going to try to raise some outside funds, but we're going to match it with state money to then reduce the pension cuts that the retirees were facing." They were facing massive pension cuts, ended up getting it down to a much more manageable level, less than 5% for most, less than 1% for some, and also preserved the Detroit Institute of Arts, which was facing liquidation because the city owned it because they realized that, "Even if we don't get everything that we want, we're better off together if Detroit is better off." Detroit is central to Michigan's vitality, and although a lot of Republicans have historically not believed that, they ended up convincing most Republicans in the legislature to vote for that package. Then, at the same time, they convinced most Democrats to vote for the package. It just was a fascinating compromise, but I think it illustrates the fact that you can't always look at compromise as a bad thing. Really, oftentimes, there are alternative solutions when you realize that, if we work together, we can grow this pie instead of just splitting it in half.

ASHLEY: You write about national service and say that we should encourage a national service movement. Talk about why.

NATHAN: Yeah, I think this is one of the really cool ways that we can, on a national scale, begin to build bridges. This is actually, again, a pretty bipartisan thing, this idea that we should invest in public service. Under President Obama, Republicans and Democrats authorized the tripling of the number of public service positions in this country like AmeriCorps, for example, where you're going out and you're serving the community because, a lot of times, Republicans and Democrats maybe have different reasons for it, but they like public service in general.

The reason why is because public service is a dynamic way in which people can actually begin to gain understanding of each other. When you're serving alongside someone, when you're shoulder to shoulder with someone, it's much easier to gain an appreciation for who they are than it is when you're more face to face in a confrontational posture where I'm going to tell you how it is. If you're shoulder to shoulder, you're more showing people how it is. English class, they tell you, "Show, don't tell." I think public service is a way in which we can do that, and you gain appreciation for the person you're serving.

RICHARD: We hear these phrases, national service, public service, spoken about from time to time. Can you give us an example of a public service project that brought people of different backgrounds together?

NATHAN: Yeah. This is not part of AmeriCorps or part of a government-funded position, but a fascinating example would be this group called the Iraqi and American Reconciliation Project, which I write about in the book. It started with just some peacemakers in Minnesota who were interested in trying to send a different message to the people of Iraq than what has historically been sent because of all the military action that's happened there. And they visited Iraq in... I believe it was 2012, Najaf, Iraq, and they just actually went into to do a couple things, to help install water filters because the water system had been really fundamentally destroyed, and just to plant tree saplings.

That's all they were there to do, just plant some trees. And it gained significant attention in the community because people were like, "Wait a minute. The Americans came to plant trees, not drop bombs." It created such an amazing impression among the people of that community, so much so that one of the people who they engaged with has now moved to the United States, is the Chair of the Iraqi and American Reconciliation Project, and is building these international bridges, realizing that, you know what, actually public service can be a starting point.

RICHARD: We've talked about the media. We've talked about politics. We've talked about voluntary grass-roots efforts. What's the role that high schools and colleges can play in bridge-building?

NATHAN: I do think education is often a good place to start because if you and I can agree that maybe adults are a lost cause, I think we can agree that probably our young people are not. They are still forming their worldview, and the way they engage with others is still kind of forming. So I think that school is a place we can start, and I think it can start with something as simple as doing class projects with people from different districts. We now live in this Zoom-oriented schoolwork world in which people are doing work with kids and teachers who aren't in the same place. Why can't we have students from one district work with students from another district? We live in a society, unfortunately, in which oftentimes kids go to school with people who look just

like them. But why can't we say, "Hey, why don't you do this project with someone from this other area who may be different off financially, have a different background in terms of race or ethnicity?"

And at college, I think you can do the same thing in freshman dorms. Why are we letting freshmen pick their dorm roommates before they go in? This is a huge problem, actually. People don't think about this, but freshmen end up finding freshmen just like them. In fact, the Washington Post basically said, "The rich white kids find the rich white kids." Now, that's not helping anybody. So there's some universities that have actually started to intentionally room students with people from different zip codes, for example, and just try to get people mixed in and say, "This is a place where you need to learn the world is a lot different than you may have learned in high school, and you need to encounter people who aren't like you because those relationships are what will make you into a better citizen."

ASHLEY: One final question, are you optimistic that people can change? Because many are deeply skeptical about this. What's the evidence for change from someone you spoke with?

NATHAN: Take it from the Reverend Dr. Alvin Edwards who is at the Charlottesville Clergy Collective. This is the man who's dealing with the aftermath of 2017, what happened in Charlottesville, the legacy of Jim Crow, the legacy of slavery. I said, "You've been living with these things, in some cases, for your whole life." I said, "How do you maintain faith that people can change?" And he said, "I have to believe that people can change because, if I don't, then that's a belief that I can't change, and I can't accept that." Listen, we've seen people in this country change before. It happens all the time.

Look at an issue like gay marriage, for example. 2005, only 30% of Americans supported gay marriage rights. Now, in 2020, according to Gallup, 70%. I think that if you look over time, progress happens. It can be really difficult to see when you're face to face with the painting. But when you step out, you can see there's a broader mural that's being sketched.

ASHLEY: Nathan, thank you so much for coming on.

NATHAN: Thank you so much. It's so great to be with you. I really appreciate it.

RICHARD: Nathan Bomey on Let's Find Common Ground.

ASHLEY: During our interview, Nathan mentioned several bridge-building groups and individuals. They include The Everyday Projects, a site that uses photography to challenge the stereotypes that distort our understanding of the world.

RICHARD: Be the Bridge is a Christian group led by Latasha Morrison that seeks to empower anti-racist bridge builders.

ASHLEY: A third group is the Iraqi and American Reconciliation Project. That encourages communication, understanding, and support between Americans and Iraqis in response to decades of sanctions, war, and occupation.

RICHARD: We have links to all three groups at our website. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.