

ASHLEY: Sometimes the future can seem dark. The pandemic drags on. Political polarization remains toxic. When stories of division fill the headlines, it's easy to feel like the only way is down.

RICHARD: But what if that's simply not true? What if we gave less airtime, less space to voices of doom and more to voice of hope? This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Our guests today are Zachary Karabell and Emma Varvaloucas. Zachary is the founder, and Emma is Executive Director of The Progress Network, an organization that focuses on what's going right with the world.

RICHARD: In this episode, Zachary and Emma discuss why it's important to amplify voices of optimism and the possibilities for a more hopeful future. Zachary joins us from New York and Emma from her adopted home of Athens, Greece. Ashley kicks us off today.

ASHLEY: The Progress Network launched during the pandemic, which on the surface might not seem like the most auspicious time. Zachary, why create The Progress Network in the first place?

ZACHARY: This was an idea devoted to... We're paying so much attention to all the dystopia and dyspeptic despair in the world that we're not paying sufficient attention to the idea that things might turn out better than we think and that a public conversation is also a way in which we all collectively are shaping our future. So the public conversation that is dominated entirely by negativity about the future has the risk, as people like Karl Popper and others have talked about, of hastening the future of our fears rather than creating the future of our dreams. I know that can sound hopelessly utopian in its own way, but we could use a little more utopian spirit animating our collective discourse about how we deal with our problems. But we decided that launching during COVID was actually exactly right because it was a low point of collective sensibilities about the future of the planet, the future of human beings, the way societies were meeting the challenge. And I think it turned out to be exactly the right time in its own strange way.

RICHARD: It's very easy to think of the current moment during our pandemic as being a moment of unique tragedy and an example of how things are going to hell for many people. How do you present a case that there are many examples of quiet progress as opposed to loud catastrophe?

ZACHARY: Part of it was an idea of there are lots of these voices that... You just articulated that very nicely, Richard, that do have that sensibility, but they are atomized in a world of noise so that they're less than the collective sum of their parts. And the point of The Progress Network was to create a platform or a network, call it what you

will, that would try to create some critical mass, a connective tissue between these disparate voices, disparate not by sensibility, just disparate by atomized in a noisy culture. So, initially, it was we'll just create a megaphone and a platform that will boost and amplify and connect. But partly because of COVID, we started doing more events.

EMMA: The pandemic is actually a great example, too, because on the one hand, of course a pandemic is an enormous tragedy, but we also were vastly better prepared for this pandemic than any other point in human history. We knew how the virus was being transmitted very quickly. We developed vaccines very quickly. From an execution perspective, maybe not so great, but there was a lot that happened in this pandemic that there's no way that could've happened even 10 years ago. So, even in the midst of very intense tragedy, there is a lot of quiet progress going on. And sometimes we just need people to point it out for us because it's not what we're used to hearing in the news.

ASHLEY: Our show is called Let's Find Common Ground, and I was wondering if you think that the catastrophic view of the world is part of this problem? Does it fuel all this conflict and disagreement that is the whole reason you started The Progress Network in the first place?

ZACHARY: I think there's a chicken and egg question. Is intensely negative, pessimistic, despairing collective dialogue a byproduct of genuinely negative trends? The planet is warming. There's a discernible rise in authoritarian governments that are not always efficient but are continually brutal. There is a collective sense that there's no collective. There's a pandemic. So there's a bill of particulars that you can list that lead to a sense of, "Huh, this is not the most optimal." But I do think that a belief in your collective ability to solve real problems is a necessary ingredient in solving those problems and that, to some degree, what's been striking, for instance in the United States, is really the cultural shift from a culture that was naively optimistic about its ability to solve problems to one that is, I think, probably unreasonably pessimistic about its ability to solve problems.

RICHARD: America is frequently gripped by moral panics, and sometimes the body politic does swing somewhat wildly from one thought to another. Emma, how does it look to you in Athens, this sense of thought America, which has always been thought of as a country of optimism, is now gripped by pessimism?

EMMA: Certainly, I think having far more dysfunctional government than the United States for far longer and, in many ways, a far more dysfunctional society for the last 50 years than the U.S. in a place where there's a lot less opportunity, generally, it does feel sometimes that the moral panic and the hysteria in the U.S. is, in fact, hysteria because a lot of people here, when I say, "Oh, I came to Athens from New York," they look at me, and they're like, "Why? Why would you do that? Why would you ever decide to come here?" Because America is still the land of opportunity and the place where you can really make it. So it's strange that actually, when you're inside the

United States, the general tenor of the conversation is we're terrible, and we're moving toward chaos and destruction.

ASHLEY: Progress often happens slowly and quietly. One example is the fact that there's this big decline in the number of babies to die in the early months of their lives. But disasters are often sudden and dramatic. Do you think this affects the way we all view the world?

ZACHARY: Yeah. There is just a human tendency, which we all know, to pay attention to drama and change. It's why most plays, most narratives, most shows have an arc. Even romance has an arc. You meet someone, and then something bad happens, and then eventually something good happens. But stories of things progressively getting better are almost de facto in terms of human beings' storytelling. They're not stories. They may be facts, but they're not stories because they lack that oomph, and it requires effort to turn that into a story. Walter Isaacson recently wrote this book, *The Code Breaker*, about the massive work underway in terms of unlocking the genome and some of the technology behind our mRNA vaccines, and he managed to make that a story of innovation and change. He did the same with Einstein. But we have done that in the past. There are heroic narratives of, "Look at what people did individually and collectively to surmount problems," but you need a receptive culture for those to be interesting stories, and you need to somehow, I think, change the culture a little bit in order to make it more receptive. That's also part of the point of *The Progress Network*.

EMMA: In some ways, the pandemic helps a little bit with that because, as Zachary said, we first were thinking, okay, we're going to launch in April 2020, and then the pandemic hit. We were thinking for a moment, "How do we tell people that the future might be better in the midst of a short-term future where everything is undeniably a lot worse. But actually, that kind of extreme badness leads to a hunger and a thirst, I think, for people to receive information that is more quietly inspirational, and it has that positive story arc that Zachary's talking about.

ZACHARY: It's also not a crowded space.

EMMA: No, it's not. It's not.

ASHLEY: Emma, I wanted to ask you a little bit about your faith because you're a Buddhist. I was wondering if your religion helps you navigate some of these big shifts we've been undergoing lately, especially, perhaps, the pandemic.

EMMA: Yeah, definitely. Something that people may or may not know about Buddhism, it's really great for tempering your expectations. There's Four Noble Truths in Buddhism, and the first Noble Truth is that life inevitably contains suffering, which sounds extraordinarily basic but is something that, if you go from that as a starting point, that despite everybody's best intentions and despite all the good there is in the world, that it's just of the nature of human existence for there to be suffering. People

die. We grow old. We face myriad problems in our life that we have to deal with. Starting from that point of just, "You know what, I'm going to encounter suffering in my life. It's up to me to figure out how to respond to that in an inspired way," has been very helpful to me rather than going from a starting point of, "I expect things to be wonderful, and I'm disappointed," and think that I'm alone in my suffering when suffering inevitably arises.

ASHLEY: Emma Varvaloucas and Zachary Karabell on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard. The holiday season is about to kick off, and Tuesday, November 30th is Giving Day. This podcast is free to listen to and produced for Common Ground Committee, a nonprofit organization that promotes constructive ways to find common ground at a time of deep division. If you're giving on November 30th, please remember us in your plans. Just go to commongroundcommittee.org to donate.

ASHLEY: We also have a complimentary downloadable holiday guide and blog post on the website. It's called Your Essential Guide to Civil Political Conversations, plus a webinar on the same topic. Again, go to commongroundcommittee.org to find out more and have a good Thanksgiving.

RICHARD: Yeah, and now back to our interview with Zachary Karabell and Emma Varvaloucas. Let's talk about climate change. We're well aware in the media of the possibility of catastrophe. We hear about that a lot. Can we change the lens so that the emphasis is more on trying to find agreement or common ground on the future of the planet and less on just doom and gloom?

EMMA: I think so. I certainly understand why the lens of climate change has been a catastrophizing one because when the issue first started being talked about, there is so much work to be done to just bring people on to the perspective of, "This is a serious issue that needs to be paid attention to." I think we've kind of moved past that point. I think that, for the most part, the world understands that this is a serious issue we need to pay attention to and that we would do better to not understand it as an existential risk to humanity because I think that shuts people down and turns people off, and understand it more as, yes, this is a very issue, but let's come together in a sober-headed kind of way to figure it out.

ZACHARY: I think part of it, too, is even the really bad climate change we're talking about is going to leave however many billions of people inhabiting the planet and living their lives, maybe living their lives in a way that is less optimal than we would like, but there's a lot we could be doing to focusing on, okay, what does a lived life look like in a warmer world? It's not: we're all going to be dead. It's: we're all going to be here. So what does that look like? How do we make sure we create the most constructive planet for that? And less hospitable does not mean inhospitable.

ASHLEY: There's a lot of angst or hysteria even, some people might say, in the U.S. over things like race and gender and gender identity to the extent that you would think that America was torn apart by this stuff. But is it really? Who's stoking the outrage here?

EMMA: We had Jonathan Haidt on our podcast recently. Jonathan's a Progress Network member, and he had a little phrase from David Brooks that I thought was really applicable for this, which is that David Brooks calls the culture wars "the rich, white civil war," meaning that the people who are really stoking those fires are both from the Right and from the Left of a particular cohort, being rich and white. And for people who don't fall into those sects, so to speak, the culture wars aren't actually as flaming as they may seem online. We do have another Progress Network member, Bobby Duffy, who's done some interesting research in the UK about how the culture wars start in the media and then filter down to the rest of society. I believe that's what we've seen happen in the U.S., as well, that there's a lot of arguments going on in various publications, in various newspapers, in various magazines, places online, and that starts to feel like that's actually the conversation that's going on on the ground in the U.S. I'm not sure that it really is. Certainly, when I look at my own experience on a day-to-day level, even with people that might not fully agree with me, we're not hating on each other and being unable to communicate with each other the way that it seems sometimes when you read some of these columns and these articles about the culture wars.

RICHARD: From where you sit, Zachary, do you think that polarization in America is getting worse, or do you see some hopeful signs that people are now realizing that this is a real problem and it's holding up progress in many spheres of our public life.

ZACHARY: My first professional incarnation was as a historian. I trained as a historian, got a PhD in history. From my vantage, America's always been intensely polarized, but that there's a Baby Boom generation that had an experience of faux consensus, Cold-War generated that really only existed for a brief period of time in the mid-'50s into the early '60s and then a kind of magical redux moment in the '80s. I think that illusion of consensus shapes a perception of polarization. What I mean by that is the perception that polarization is somehow anomalous and negative and decline as opposed to much more of a steady state. So I think the United States, like many societies, has been full of intense, angry, brutal, hateful conflict. While that is in no way something one should celebrate, the belief that that's aberrant or that there is a point from which we have declined and are therefore spiraling down, I just think is a complete misreading of our past in a way that both the Left and the Right are equally guilty of. So I don't look at our present polarization and go, "Oh, my god!" I look at it and go, "This is par for the course. What's different is an expectation that it be different and a belief that it's inherently bad." Even the most stable societies today got there after a long period of really negative stuff happening over a lot of centuries, and that informs my view.

ASHLEY: It's really good to be reminded of that because even if you just go back to the 19th century and think about, A, the Civil War in the U.S. and then, B, what immigrants had to put up with when they came over to places like Ellis Island and the great resentment of the population that had been there for tens of years or 100 years. I mean, that alone shows you that there was plenty of conflict in the 19th century.

ZACHARY: There were signs in the 1850s, "No Irish Allowed," when this wave of Irish immigrants come in in the 1840s because of the Potato Famine. It's not as if... The fact that Emma Lazarus's poem graces the Statue of Liberty, "Give us your tired, your hungry," that there is a welcoming mantra that evolved over time did not mean that people were actually that welcome. We chronically forget this. Americans are very good at telling themselves a fictional story of who they are and trying to live up to it.

RICHARD: A personal question, Emma, why did you decide to get involved with The Progress Network?

EMMA: I was facing, as a Millennial, a lot of very deep uncertainty and just upset-ness about the world. I looked around, and I looked at the narrative around climate change and that not only the world might end in 20 years but that we had done it, we had destroyed the only home we've ever known, and humans are terrible... I was in journalism school when journalism was in a very steep decline and right during the financial crisis. I was told while I was in school, "There's no way you're going to find a job. It's a terrible job market. We don't know what your future is going to look like." So there's something very, very attractive about The Progress Network and the, to me, what was a counterintuitive and refreshing idea that we could talk about things in a more constructive way, and that's not to stick our heads in the sand and pretend that the problems don't exist. It's just that there might be a better way out there to deal with things.

RICHARD: Finally, Zachary, are you worried about competition, that there'll be other groups in your field that will crowd out The Progress Network?

ZACHARY: No. You want more. You don't want less. I would love there to be 14 Progress Networks even if they had the same name. I don't care. I care about the amplification such that this is more part of our conversation. It's probably not going to happen through mainstream media, which I am often in and therefore complicit with, but there's so many channels and pathways to ideas entering the world by virtue of the technologies that we've created over the past 10 to 20 years. So I am an optimist in the sense of I believe this to be possible, and I hope that this is only one of many similar and like-minded endeavors.

ASHLEY: Zachary Karabell and Emma Varvaloucas of The Progress Network on Let's Find Common Ground.

RICHARD: Emma and Zachary are also the hosts of their own podcast, aptly named What Could Go Right? This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

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

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.