

Richard: This episode is for the holiday season. A time when families and friends come together for meals and parties and - hopefully - good times.

Ashley: But what happens when people of opposing viewpoints and diverse backgrounds have conversations, or even sit across the table from each other? How do they speak with and listen to other people who see the world very differently?

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

Richard: And I'm Richard Davies. Today we share some fascinating insights from past guests on "Let's Find Common Ground." First up, a mother and daughter who share deep love and respect for one another but vote for different parties.

Ashley: Robbie Lawler is a Republican who voted for Donald Trump last year. Her daughter Becca Kearn supported Joe Biden.

RICHARD: Both of you sound very reasonable, but you do have political differences. How do you talk about them? Does it ever give rise to tension?

BECCA: Maybe from siblings right now there's some tension just because of the way that they lay out their ideas. I would say that, for me, it's more about seeing the human being, both in how I consider the issues, it's seeing the human beings that are affected by issues or by policies, and the same thing when I'm talking politics. It's about seeing the people that I'm talking to. So, if you have a really good relationship of trust, if you're able to be honest and authentic with each other, then I think it's easier to talk politics because I can understand all the reasons that lead you to vote the way that you vote or, with my parents this election cycle, it was understanding how conflicted they were and how much thought and how much processing led to their ultimate decision. I was able to separate it from the larger rhetoric of: if you vote this way, you must be fill-in-the-blank.

ROBBIE: That's just what I was going to say, Becca. I think we have developed a family culture that we can talk about difficult things. Especially with this election process, I think we kind of went on the journey together. Becca ended up doing the fork in the road and going one way, and we did the other, but we were both pretty honest in things that we would find or hear or see. I just think having that open communication also helped.

ASHLEY: And do you think that communication, did that originate in the way you raised your kids? I'm really curious about how you grew up as a family, whether you raised your kids to talk about current affairs at the table, how that came about.

BECCA: My dad really emphasized the importance of communication, and it wasn't something that I always appreciated. I remember, even, there was a time when I didn't like face-to-face communication, which is interesting based on what I do for a living now, but he would write me a note. I would read the note, and then I would respond. It was easier for me, but it was so important that there was communication for him that he was willing to think outside the box. There are six of us children. I'm the oldest, and we all have very different lives. We all look at things in a different way and bring a different perspective. But I feel like we were always able to be ourselves.

ROBBIE: Yeah, I would agree. I think, too, one of the practices we did was at the dinner table. Dinner table was not just a time to complain or whatever. And Becca's whole life, we do highs and lows. So you go around the table, and you say what your low was today and what your high was today. I think that opened up communication at a really young age. I think Becca still does it with her kids. We still do it, and we do it with our grandkids. I just think having that open communication, because on the political spectrum, I think, of the six kids, five of the six all voted for Biden. I'm perfectly fine with that, and we all have talked about it.

Ashley: Robbie Lawler and her daughter Becca. Both live in Utah, and as you can hear they are close.

Richard: Our next guests became friends after being on opposing sides of a contentious issue.

Ashley: Dr. Gisèle Huff is a philanthropist and longtime proponent of school choice, including charter schools. Becky Pringle is president of the National Education Association, the nation's largest labor union.

Richard: After some initial skepticism they came together to work on a new vision for the future of education. They did so in-person. Both of them say there's a big difference between online Zoom meetings that have been so common during the COVID pandemic and being face-to-face.

Gisele first.

GISELE: There's no comparison. There's no comparison because when you're in person... There were five get-togethers that I attended, and they were for two and a half days each. So, just like Congress in the old days when they used to go out and have a drink at the end of a session, we had dinners together. We had breakfasts. We went to places and talked to each other. It was a completely different experience, and that is what I can say, without any question, that it was like night and day.

RICHARD: Becky, what are your thoughts on that? How important was it that you were face to face in the same room, eating together, meeting together informally rather than just sitting in front of a computer and being remote the way all of us have been during COVID?

BECKY: Gisele and I had this seminal moment. That could never have happened through technology. When I asked her to step outside the room and just talk to me, you can't do that in a virtual setting. You have breakout rooms, but you kind of have to organize those ahead of time. You can't just reach into the box and say, "Could you step outside with me?" Anyway, my point is those moments where you have the opportunity to connect one-on-one, there's just nothing like breaking bread together, to Gisele's point. There's just nothing like it because you just start talking about your family. I learned more about... She had shared that in the group, but I learned more about her history. We both suffered a tragic loss, her of her son and me of my husband, and just talking about that over dinner, there's nothing like looking in somebody's eyes. Makes me cry. There's nothing like that, just nothing like that, looking into somebody's eyes. When you do that, you see their humanity, and that is what allows you to connect to that larger human experience and vision that we all want for our kids, that we all want for our families, that we all want for this country, honestly. You can't replicate it over Zoom. I love seeing you, Gisele, right now, but I can't wait until I get to San Francisco and see you.

GISELE: Hugging is the thing I missed the most during that year and some months that we were separated from each other. That hug, that ability to just take somebody in your arms or be taken in someone's arms, it's humanity. It makes you feel like you're part of something bigger than yourself.

Ashley: Becky Pringle and Gisele Huff. Knowing that we're all part of something is a key ingredient in any group meeting — whether you're with your family or at the workplace.

Richard: Next, we discuss some practical things we can do to have fruitful conversations that reach across deep political and social divides. Psychologist Tania Israel wrote the book "Beyond Your Bubble":

ASHLEY: We are living at a time of great division right now, mostly over politics. Have you noticed change, or a worsening of that divide?

TANIA: Sure. There is a worsening of that divide, and I would say particularly in terms of not even differences of opinion on the issues but views of people on the other side seems to really be where so much of the tension and the vitriol is.

ASHLEY: You mean people just see the other side as un-talk-to-able?

TANIA: Yes. Seeing the other side as not only wrong but actually immoral, unkind, idiotic, that they can't understand, but really the immoral piece stands out to me because I feel like it's very hard to have a conversation with somebody who you view as not having morals.

RICHARD: You offer one piece of advice that I found very helpful recently, which is: ask questions from a place of curiosity rather than judgment. Why is that worthwhile?

TANIA: You can hold very strong opinions, even extreme opinions, but still be respectful of and interested in a different perspective and really want to know about different perspectives and not find that threatening to your own view. Coming from that kind of intellectual humility, that really generates curiosity that makes you want to know where someone else is coming from. And if you have that foundational stance, then it's going to help you to be able to implement these skills.

ASHLEY: What that might involve for the asker, say the curious person, is that they might feel vulnerable putting themselves out there like that. You said in the past that being vulnerable can be seen as a sign of weakness, but in conversation, being vulnerable is not knowing how the other person will respond and making space for it, anyway, which sounds kind of uncomfortable.

TANIA: Absolutely. Vulnerability, I think, can be felt for everybody in this conversation. Whether you're asking, whether you're trying to share where you come from, that can be really hard if you know that the other person might disagree with you, might have a really different perspective on it. I once said to my therapist, I said, "I don't mind being vulnerable as long as I know that the other person is going to respond with warmth and

support and openness." And she said, "That's not vulnerability." And she's absolutely right that being vulnerable is about you just don't know how the other person's going to respond, and you're going to put yourself out there, anyway. "

Ashley: Professor Tania Israel. To hear more from this and other interviews go to our podcast website, Common ground committee dot org slash podcasts.

Richard: We have 44 episodes and counting! You're listening to Let's Find Common Ground

Richard: I'm Richard.

Ashley: I'm Ashley.

Ashley: Before we hear more from our guests we have one suggestion - Richard?

Richard: Tuesday, November 30th is Giving Day. Please remember Common Ground Committee in your plans. You can visit commongroundcommittee.org to donate.

Ashley: We also have a complimentary downloadable holiday guide and blog post – Your Essential Guide to Civil Political Conversations as well as a webinar on the same topic.

Richard: Learn more at our website: Common Ground Committee dot org.

Ashley: Our next guest who we spoke with earlier this year, is Ashley Ahearn, a public radio journalist and podcaster. She moved from Seattle, where she was surrounded by liberals and progressives...

Richard: To rural Washington State where most of her new neighbors and friends are conservative. What did she learn from them in her new life on a small ranch?

ASHLEY AHEARN: There's a lot of quiet out here, and there's a lot of visiting. Country people visit. They don't catch up. They visit. I think that, as I've built rapport and relationships with them, it's opened the door for conversations that I have never been able to have as a journalist showing up for a brief stint or a vacationer coming to country like this. I think it's made me a better journalist. And I can only say that I think, through

conversation and through being the only person that's driving an electric car on my road, but also drives a pickup truck and hauls horses and moves cows, certain conversations happen with me and my husband in this community that aren't happening among the people who have always lived here, if that makes sense. And I think, by translation, I'm learning, and my perception has changed in terms of the kinds of questions I ask and the way I approach stories and the angles that I choose to interrogate that I don't think would've been possible if I was doing it from Seattle.

Ashley: Tell us a little bit more about your neighbors *of* the place that you now live. What do they believe? What are their politics?

ASHLEY AHEARN: I had come here with certain assumptions that everybody was hardline, rabid Trump supporters out here, gun-toting, pro-life, all of that. The truth is much more gray. I move cows for one rancher who thinks climate change is cyclical, it's not real. But we have conversations now about how the wildfires are getting worse and more frequent, and the droughts are longer, and he can't find water as easily in his pastures in some of the high country areas where his cows go that used to be full of water for longer stretches of the summer. So, while I would just assume that some people are hardliners, I'm finding that the cowboy I had Easter dinner with, his wife's a yoga instructor. He's maybe a little more on the Conservative side, but I think he voted for Biden. He might've voted for Trump the first time because he didn't like Hillary, but he voted for Biden this last time. It's a spectrum. I try not to put people in boxes. I do have other neighbors who are hardline... I have a neighbor who makes gun holsters, and he's very Conservative. He calls me a libtard, and I call him an asshole on a regular basis. Then we laugh, and then we drink whiskey, and then we ride horses. We go on with our lives.

The conversations are interesting because you get to see all of the gray in everybody's politics as opposed to coming to the table with the expectation that we're hardline opposed to one another. Yes, I skew Liberal in the sense that I am a feminist, I'm pro-choice on certain issues, but in general, I would say I'm moving more toward the Independent side of things. So I maybe come from a Liberal background, but I live in a rural place, and I have deep respect and curiosity about this place.

Ashley: Ashley Ahearn speaking with us from her new home in rural Washington State. Next: Race reconciliator Daryl Davis and former white supremacist Ryan Lo'Ree discuss their remarkable work to deradicalize members of hate groups.

Richard: Daryl is a Black musician, race reconciliator, and lecturer, has used the power of human connection to convince hundreds of people to leave white supremacist groups.

Ashley: Ryan now works to de-radicalize people who have been lured into right and left-wing extremism.

RICHARD: Ryan, a personal question, how did you move from hate to love? What changed in your heart?

RYAN: It was somebody actually giving me love in return. Like I said, I had Black friends when I was growing up. Miss Veronica, who is still like a second mother to me, she never gave up on me. Even when I was part of these groups, she still tried to teach me or reach me through voicemail, whatever it may have been, to try to teach me what it is to be a God-fearing man. To this day, I give it to her for a lot of the changes that I made. And one of her sons, Emmanuel, who is my best friend—we have the same tattoo together—he never stopped loving me.

One of the days that I was finally able to sit down with him after I left the group, we just hugged and cried, literally. I mean, there wasn't even conversation there. It was two grown men while other people watched on, and we just emotionally let it out. So I think a lot of it, for me, was another person showing me love, and that person from another color being able to say, "Look, we love you no matter what you made and what you decided to do," was very, very important in my change. Now, not everybody gets that, and not everybody has a strong support group. That's why, some cases, we have to figure out how we can try to give them that support. When we talk to people and sit down with them, you have to come with love and compassion in your heart.

ASHLEY: Ryan, you've obviously changed your mind about a lot since you were in the hate group. But, Daryl, what about you? As you've been doing this work for such a long time, is there anything that you have changed your mind about, any conviction that you held years ago that you no longer do something?

DARYL: Absolutely. It's been a good learning experience for me, as well, and because I changed is the reason why I continue to do this work. When I first got into this, I had a question in my mind that I had formed at the age of 10 after having a racist experience where some people threw things at me in a parade. I formed a question, which was, "How can you hate me when you don't even know me?" All I wanted was the answer to that question. I wasn't out to convert anybody. I wasn't out to change anybody. I just

wanted to know, "What is your process of thinking that, 'I should hate this person just because they have a different skin color'?" They don't know anything about me beyond my skin color. That's all I sought. I'm not out to make friends with the KKK. All I want to know is why. Why do you believe this? That's all. After these conversations took place, they began to humanize me, and I began to humanize them. When you're sitting with somebody face-to-face, having a conversation, even if you disagree, you see some humanity in that person.

Richard: Daryl Davis and Ryan Lo'Ree from episode 34.

Ashley: Our final story is about a road trip. Two friends, one Democrat, one Republican, and their search for common ground.

Richard: Jordan Blashek and Chris Haugh drove through 44 states and on nearly twenty thousand miles of road and highways, meeting an extraordinary range of people along the way.

Ashley: Jordan is conservative. Chris is Liberal. Together they wrote a book about their experiences and why their friendship grew not despite, but because of their political differences:

RICHARD: There's a quote in your book, *Union*, about common ground. You say, "Finding common ground isn't about being right." It's about laying a foundation to argue passionately while respecting the other side. It's not about getting to agreement but getting to the point where disagreement isn't reason to pull away." Jordan?

JORDAN: Yes. What we realized was we were never going to convince each other that I was right and Chris was wrong, even though I am right and Chris is usually wrong. We were never going to convince each other or fully change each other's mind. But what we wanted to get to was the point where we could have these deeper conversations and wrestle over issues and voice disagreements completely honestly and not feel like that was going to pull us apart. So we came to the view that common ground actually has nothing to do with finding the areas we agree. It's about being able to disagree and not have reason to end the friendship over it. Chris, what would you add to that?

CHRIS: Yeah, I think there's a responsibility to that, too, because if we're going to disagree, we have to be able to listen. But coming to that realization, especially with someone who you know and you trust... It's easy for me to say that now about Jordan

because I've literally put my life in his hands before. So I know, if I get angry about a political perspective of his, I know that underneath it all is the guy who helped drag me away from tear gas canisters in Arizona or drove through the night when I was too tired to take the wheel. I think it's really important to be able to say, "I'm not going to convince Jordan of every last point I have," but that's okay.

ASHLEY: Ultimately, would you say that this series of road trips has taught you more about America or more about your own relationship with each other?

CHRIS: That's a really good question. Wow. I'll be curious to hear what Jordan says. I would say more about the relationship. I think what was most amazing is just getting to know each other and letting the relationship grow. We went from fighting almost... Half of our road trips were some sort of heated conversation about an issue of the day. We rarely fight now. We disagree, but we are able to understand one another. We have this shared language that sometimes we worry that, when we open the door of the Volvo and walk out into society, that it might sort of start to dissolve, but at least the two of us have been able to build this amazing way of getting ideas across and sharing where we came from.

RICHARD: Jordan, you get the final word.

JORDAN: It pains me to say this, but Chris nailed it. He's exactly right.

CHRIS: Thanks, buddy.

JORDAN: Yeah, I think that's right. I think we saw pieces of the country that, if we weaved them all together, to us, paints this beautiful picture of who we are and who we can be together, moving forward, and it left us hopeful. It doesn't mean we didn't see all the dark spots and the structural challenges we face going forward. But we saw so many wonderful people working so hard to make life better that it's hard not to walk away hopeful from these trips. But we also know that that was a tiny glimpse of America. We could spend a lifetime out on the road and still not see it all. So, in the end, what we're left with is that our own friendship was strengthened and deepened and made us better people. This book is, in part, a reflection on how our relationship changed, as much as it is... I've been using this phrase lately, and Chris laughs at me for it, but a love letter to the country. It's us saying, "Here's the beautiful things we saw out on the road, and we hope other people can experience this, too."

Richard: Jordan Blashek and Chris Haugh on Let's Find Common Ground.

Ashley: That's our show which we've released just before Thanksgiving. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

Richard: And I'm Richard Davies wishing you a happy holiday, and thanks for listening.