

ASHLEY: When you're fuming at a friend or relative over their political views, it can be hard to keep your cool. You want to tell them all the ways they're wrong and you're right.

RICHARD: But this approach doesn't usually work out that well. Our guest today says curiosity about the other person is key to understanding them better and finding a way to connect. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. In this episode of Let's Find Common Ground, we discuss ways to use our own sense of curiosity to have cross-partisan conversations.

RICHARD: Our guest is Mónica Guzmán, author of the new book, "I Never Thought of It That Way." She's also Director of Storytelling at Braver Angels, an organization working to depolarize America. Before she became a professional depolarizer, Mónica had personal experience of seeing the world through other people's eyes. Ashley starts our conversation.

ASHLEY: You have lived for several years in a rather famously liberal city, Seattle, and you're on the Left yourself. What first got you interested in seeing the world from another perspective?

MÓNICA: The relationship with my parents was pretty instrumental, at least for seeing the world from a different political perspective. We became American citizens in the year 2000. We immigrated from Mexico, and it was soon after that I saw a Bush-Cheney sign suddenly appear on my parents' office wall. I didn't realize until that moment that they wouldn't look at the world the same way I did ideologically. And I was just 17. I was in high school, but that was certainly instrumental. Earlier than that, though, because we immigrated from Mexico when I was six, my life was just full of contrasts. So the way that I had done kindergarten in Mexico and the way that we were doing kindergarten in Fort Worth, Texas was so different, and my mind was so full of questions. Why are we doing it this way and not that way? How do you say this in English? How do I communicate that to this different world? So I do think that, from pretty early on, I just had to figure out what the differences were, and I had to see things from another point of view in order to understand the new world that I was in and in order to help the people in this new world understand me.

RICHARD: Mónica, tell us more about your parents and how they view politics as opposed to your own way of looking at things.

MÓNICA: Well, we have had a lot of conversations, me and my parents. Some of them have been very angry. It's really one unending conversation. Do we understand each other's politics completely? No, because we keep evolving. But where we have talked about politics and we do understand some of the differences, I know that they are true

Conservatives, and I'm a true Liberal. They focus more often on the individual, and I focus more often on the overall system.

RICHARD: They're not only Conservatives. They're out-and-out Trump supporters, right?

MÓNICA: Yes, and their support for Trump, each of them has their own reasons. For my mother, she started the Respect for Life club at my Catholic high school. She cares deeply about abortion, and it's very hard for her to put a worse devil on the other side of the devil that would be okay with killing unborn children. Then, for my father, there's several reasons I could get into, but the one that I'll say now is he looked at the American government and the American political system and saw a lot of politicians not saying what they mean, not seeming to really stand for the principles of this democratic republic. He saw it all just be really smarmy and false and fake, and then here comes a guy who says what he means and doesn't seem to be scared of anything, doesn't seem to have any shame about what he thinks, and just calls it like he sees it. He saw a lot of authenticity, and he thought, "This guy might be able to shake things up and get us all to snap out of this false place we are in our politics." So that was one of the big reasons my dad voted for Trump.

ASHLEY: Didn't you actually watch the results of the... was it the 2016 election or the 2020 election that you watched with your parents?

MÓNICA: 2020 election, yeah. I had asked them, "Hey, so next Tuesday, you busy? Can I come over?" And they were like, "Yeah, sure."

Later, my mom pulls me aside and goes, "But, Mónica, you have to understand you can come over, but please let us watch FOX News. Just let us watch FOX News and don't complain about it."

I said, "Of course. I'm there at your house. Can we also watch CNN?"

"Yes, we can also watch CNN." Okay, and so we spent that night flipping between the channels, and every little bit, blowing up at each other about something and kind of going from reigning it in and having a sip of sangria to just all out-and-out arguing again, and then back and forth and back and forth.

ASHLEY: Is there anything else you would like to say about your parents' views? Because you do have this line in the book where you say, "My friends or acquaintances, when they heard I had Trump-voting parents, could almost not believe that I was still speaking to them. And yet I know that if I were them, I would feel the same way as them." They are immigrants to the U.S., which is the main thing that shocks people, doesn't it?

MÓNICA: Yes. Well, and Mexican immigrants because, in the minds of many Liberals, well, Trump just insulted all Mexicans. Right? He talked about rapists and criminals coming over from Mexico, but I think what is often left out that I've learned from my parents is, like, turn it around. How do I put this? It's like we think that all Mexicans identify with all Mexicans, but all Americans don't identify with all Americans, obviously. So there's something hilarious to me. When my parents heard Trump say that, they didn't think he was talking about them. They didn't get offended and insulted at all. At all. It didn't even register for them as an insult to them. My dad, also, in particular, has a really incredible background when it comes to looking at America's ability to enforce its own laws. I grew up necessarily very curious or practicing curiosity because I came from Mexico, and I had to make a lot of contrasts. In Mexico, unfortunately, you can get away with more. You can. Lots of homicides go unsolved. Lots of taxes go unpaid. There's more corruption. I'm not saying that there isn't in the United States, but come on, it's another level. So, for my dad, the United States, one of the reasons it is great is because it can enforce its own laws. It doesn't allow people to cheat. So he looks at our immigration policy and the gap between what's in the books and what we actually do, and he wants to close that gap because, to him, that's part of what's great about America, and that makes a lot of sense to me. I disagree with him on immigration. I want a path to citizenship. I want other things. But I get it. After talking to him a lot, I'm like, "I see that. I see how you came into that point of view. You brought our family to this country for a reason. So I get it."

RICHARD: You are now a bridge builder, and you are Director of Digital and Storytelling at Braver Angels, which is a cross-partisan organization working to depolarize America. Have your views of how to handle people who don't think like you politically, culturally, have they changed a lot in the last few months, in the last couple of years?

MÓNICA: I keep learning. This is not something where I feel like I already know, I have all the answers, we've just got to do it this way, guys. No, that's not a thing. There's so much wisdom out there about how to do this that is untapped. There's so many families working on it, friends working on it, but no one's asking them about it. They're not talking about it. It doesn't seem okay to do. So no one's learning. Since I joined Braver Angels, I have met so many more and more and more people who have to come to this work in their own lives, and they might be volunteering for Braver Angels or just following along, but talking with them has been eye-opening. I will say, though, that some of the principles that I had detected before joining Braver Angels and very much still apply, one of the ones that I write about in my book is the importance of understanding differences in language, that differences in ideology are really in anything, when they form really separate communities, those communities form different languages. For example, one thing that I learned at Braver Angels, thanks to my Conservative colleagues there, is that it turns out that the way we describe our government is becoming divided. So the word democracy is now coded blue, not unifying red and blue.

RICHARD: Wow.

MÓNICA: Yeah. If you want to talk about our government in a way that folks who are Liberal and Conservative can both see themselves and don't suspect that it's charged with a political intent, we use democratic republic. So I now talk about our government as a democratic republic, which is more accurate than saying it is a democracy.

ASHLEY: How important is curiosity to have these bridging conversations?

MÓNICA: Critical, absolutely critical. Curiosity is the thirst for knowledge. It's the craving for knowledge. It does incredible things to leave our minds open. The analogy I use is in the hallways of your mind, when you're very certain about everything, you're walking down the hallway in your mind, and there's doors to either side of you, but they're all closed. What curiosity does is it puts down doorstops in those doorways, puts down doorstops so they're not all the way closed, and you walk down those hallways, and you're asking questions. You're noticing assumptions you have in your mind. That is curiosity without even talking to another person. That's self-inquiry, but then there's the level of curiosity when you're actually engaging with another person. What does that mean? And there's all kinds of levels there, but it's the same idea. You have to be open. You have to hold your beliefs, have your convictions, but in a conversation of difference, a curious bridging conversation, can you hold those beliefs just a little bit loosely? The analogy I use is on many smartphones is something called Wiggle Mode. So, if you want to move your apps around or delete them, you sort of hold them down, and they start to wiggle in place, and that's your cue that you can move them around. That's why I try to do with my convictions and my beliefs in a conversation of difference. A lot of people are afraid of doing that because they think that if they hold their beliefs more loosely in a conversation, they could drop them. You will not drop them. That's not how opinions work. That's not how perspectives work. Don't worry. All you're doing is allowing there to be room to breathe.

ASHLEY: Mónica Guzmán on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard. At Common Ground Committee, we have an online event coming up that we're pretty excited about. It's on April 24th. "Media, Politics, and Polarization" features three well-known journalists: Chris Wallace, who recently left FOX News for CNN; Jonathan Karl of ABC News; and Jacqueline Adams, formerly of CBS.

ASHLEY: It should be a meaty debate, and we'd love to see you there. To register, just go to our website, [commongroundcommittee.org](http://commongroundcommittee.org). Now back to our interview with Mónica Guzmán.

RICHARD: This bridging work is difficult. For some, they may even think it's insurmountable. Certainly, political differences have spoiled many Thanksgivings and

ruined a lot of family occasions, not to mention friendships between people. But you say that the barriers between us are lower than we think.

MÓNICA: I say that because the evidence, particularly around the political divide, is showing it. Study after study that asks one side to guess at the beliefs of the other shows that we are constantly overestimating how extreme people's beliefs are on the other side, and we are constantly overestimating the amount of resentment and animosity that the other side sends to our own. This happens on both sides of the divide. The research is showing us that we are wrong about each other. The barriers between us are lower than we think. It is true, but is it true between you and your uncle? That's a different question. Is it true between you and your friend? These are individual relationships, but what you can go in confident about is that the probability is on your side. And I can say, from my experience, I've talked to a lot of people on the other side and whatever side. I've witnessed people doing these conversations with each other. I have yet to see two people come away from one of those kinds of conversations really, really affirming that the other person is exactly as bad as they thought. Does it take courage? Can it take patience? Yes, but I think a lot depends on our ability to be curious even if all that means for you is not burning a bridge you would've burned.

ASHLEY: You write about our tendency to sort, other, and silo people. Can you just talk for a minute about the differences between those three things?

MÓNICA: Sorting, othering, and siloing add up to the big SOS. Help! Our society is in deep trouble, and, yes, the SOS begins with sorting, which is the very natural human tendency to be around people who are like us because, especially in times of anxiety and trauma and fear, we want to feel soothed and comfortable. We don't want to be uncomfortable all the time. It makes total sense. What we see, and the evidence is stronger now than it's been in a while, is blue zip codes getting bluer, red zip codes getting redder. People are moving because of politics and because of whether they feel they're accepted by their communities or they can even be heard in the places they live. Makes sense. Othering is the distance that we put between ourselves and anyone we deem different. The social science around othering is terrifying because the differences don't even have to be that meaningful for us to discriminate even in subtle ways between our group and theirs. Then siloing is, in some ways, the most powerful and the most pernicious because siloing is about the stories we tell and the stories we hear and the thoughts that they spark in our own minds as a result of the sorting and the othering, as a result of the groups we feel we belong to and that we have to have some kind of connection and attachment to. Then how far away we are from everyone else means we're just trying to understand them from a distance, which is not going to work. We're people. We're endlessly complicated mysteries. We're not puzzles you can fit together with the pieces in front of you. That's not the way it works. So our silos... technology makes it a lot easier for us to pick our neighbors in our social platforms, and we get to

design the kinds of stimulation to our thoughts, and our thoughts, of course, determine how we see the world.

RICHARD: You're a journalist. You've written about technology. You know a fair bit about how social media works. There's a ton of newspaper columns, TV, radio, podcast commentary saying how social media is dividing us. We know that. Can it be used to bring us together, as well?

MÓNICA: Absolutely, and I'm a big fan of irreconcilable contributions because they keep us curious, and social media is bringing us together, has been bringing us together, has been miraculous in its ability to bring us together. It has also been astoundingly awful in its ability to drive us apart. Both those things are true simultaneously. Having written about technology for a long time, I know the temptation to blame the tools, but it's really just a deflection because it's never the tools. It's us, and it's also whether we are aware of how the tools limit us. Social media restricts the full human communication toolbox, and we need to be aware of the fact that when we have conversations on social media, we are having them with fewer tools in our toolbox. The internet is a non-place that makes us into non-people. Everything travels with text and memes, and we have to be aware of how much less of our meaning can get across.

RICHARD: What do you mean by fewer tools in our toolbox? Can you explain?

MÓNICA: Yeah. The conditions for a great, curious conversation, when you want to figure out, alright, is this the right time? Are these conditions right for me to talk about this issue with this person? you want to think about a few things. You want to think about time. Do you have enough time to really get to the depth of it? You want to think about attention? Will you be able to put your attention into this conversation? Will they? You want to think about parity, which means, are you both actually at the same level in the conversation? When you're in-person, this can be fairly simple. You both have the same range of volume. You're in a room. You can interrupt each other. When you're online, if I am commenting on someone else's Instagram thread, they can delete me. They can block me. They can hide my comment. That is not parity. You want to think about containment. That one is really important on social media. To what degree is the conversation contained to the people actually engaging in it? Social media is full of opportunities to talk and talk and talk in front of a mass invisible audience that you can't see, and you don't know how they're reacting. That makes you want to perform your views safely, grab a talking point under which you can take some shelter rather than actually explore your deep-down, honest views. Then, finally, embodiment. Embodiment is I've got a voice. I've got expressions. I've got the little laugh that I said after, "I've got a voice." I went, "Ha." You can hear something more in what I'm saying and in my face and in the way I smile or grimace or whatever, and you can see my gestures. I gesture a lot. My whole body is in this communication, and on social media, it's not, and we miss so much there. But we gain a lot, too. The tradeoffs are wonderful. We can now speak to thousands of people. That's cool, but it's also risky.

ASHLEY: Several years ago, after Donald Trump was elected, you and a bunch of Seattle Democrats got on a bus and traveled several hours away to a rural community in Oregon to meet some of the people who lived there. What led to that trip? What was that all about?

MÓNICA: I started a newsletter called The Evergreen in Seattle, and right after the 2016 election, people in our community were really confounded. Lots of Liberals, obviously, in Seattle, and people wanted to be curious. That was one of the core values of our community. But they were like, "How? We hardly know any Republicans, and there's also the fact that we're in a city, and we don't understand this other lifestyle." So we saw this interactive feature online that showed what county nearest to yours voted exactly opposite in the election. We learned that that was Sherman County, Oregon, a county of 1,700 people, second-smallest county in Oregon.

ASHLEY: So Mónica teamed up with some leading citizens in Sherman County and arranged for a visit to take place.

MÓNICA: We brought about 20 people down from Seattle to Sherman County. There were 16 people from Sherman County there. They donated sandwiches. We had a meal. We did a quick bus tour of the wheat fields, just rolling, rolling wheat fields as far as the eye can see. And, after a lot of that, we brought out a housewarming gift. We brought a plant and a card. Then we talked. We talked, and we talked about politics, and we just scratched the surface. The point was not to hash it all out right then and there. The point was more to have faces for each other so that the stereotypes that Sherman County had about the big city could be humanized, and the stereotypes the big city had about Sherman County could be humanized. We learned a lot on that trip, and it was really incredible.

RICHARD: Was there anything that particularly surprised you about what you learned?

MÓNICA: Oh, yeah, and this was not just me. I talked with a lot of folks who went down from Seattle, and everyone had the same surprise. They all remembered when the farmers from Sherman County brought up the waters of the United States rule, and that is a federal regulation that regulates when the federal government can claim control of land. There's certain rules about the size of ponds. If there's a certain sized pond on the land, then maybe the federal government has some claim to it. The issue for a lot of farmers is they're extremely concerned that the way that the regulation is worded could be interpreted to mean that if a big rainstorm creates a pond between some hills on their land, then that's it, they could lose that land, or if a lot of water accumulates on furrows, which are the little ditches between rows of crops, that then the government could claim that land. You would think that that would be absurd, but there's actually been some situations that have been pretty close calls, and they just do not trust Democrats at all to take those concerns seriously. They don't get a sense that

Democrats understand that lifestyle and understand the mechanics and the economics of it. But they were like, "Well, this Trump guy, he's a businessman. My money's on him." So the surprise for a lot of folks from Seattle that I talked to was that that was a powerful reason for their vote that no one in Seattle knew about or even knew existed.

ASHLEY: Did you expect to learn more from the rural community, or did you think they would learn more from you urban types?

MÓNICA: Oh, yeah, and this was humiliating to admit, but as much as I pride myself on being a bridge builder, I didn't realize until I was there that I came in with the assumption that they were going to have, in some ways, more to learn from us than vice versa. That was an extremely self-serving assumption and idiotic as I think about it. I'm a bit ashamed because what I realized there, listening to the people from Sherman County speak, the main thing they saw from this trip was that no one from the big city ever comes to Sherman County, and they go to the cities all the time. If their kids go to college, they go to cities. All their relatives live in cities because the economics of farming means not everyone can stay. So they know the cities real well. They talk to people there all the time. They know the culture, but nobody ever goes to Sherman County. That, I didn't expect, and it was beautiful to see. The folks from Sherman County were so grateful to be seen by the people from the city, which, for them, are the people with a lot more power. That's up for debate, I know, but that's the way they saw it.

ASHLEY: Thank you do much for doing this.

MÓNICA: Yeah, totally. Thanks again. I could talk about this all day, if you can't tell. There's a lot to say. So thanks for the curiosity.

RICHARD: Mónica Guzmán joining us on Let's Find Common Ground. Monica is the author of "I Never Thought of It That Way." For more on how to have curious conversations, you might want to go back and revisit Episode 22 of our show. It's called "Depolarizing America: What Can We All Do?" with Tania Israel.

ASHLEY: Before we go, we want to tell you about another podcast on The Democracy Group, the network we're part of. It's called The Bully Pulpit, and it's produced by the Center for the Political Future at the University of Southern California.

RICHARD: On The Bully Pulpit, Republicans and Democrats come together, transcending partisan divisions and exploring practical solutions to some of our most pressing national and global challenges. The goal is to respect each other and respect the truth. Opponents are adversaries, not enemies, and if you lose, you don't burn down the stadium. Subscribe to The Bully Pulpit podcast today.



ASHLEY: If you enjoy listening to our podcast, please take a couple of minutes to give us a review. We try to bring you a high-quality show every two weeks, and the more reviews we have, the likelier it is that new listeners will find us.

RICHARD: And the more people listen, the more chance we have of spreading the word about depolarization. That's it for this episode of 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.