

RICHARD: The holiday season is here, but many people across the country may be dreading sitting down with their nearest and dearest all because of politics.

ASHLEY: They're steeling themselves for eyerolls, heated exchanges, and awkward silences. But our guests on this show say it doesn't have to be that way. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: First, we meet a father and daughter with different political views and talk to them about how they talk to each other. Clare Ashcraft and her father Brian both live in Ohio. Clare is a college student who appeared in a recent podcast of ours. She leans liberal. Her father Brian is an engineer and a conservative.

RICHARD: And then, in the second half of this podcast, we turn to an expert for advice. Tania Israel is the author of the book, *Beyond Your Bubble*, and she gives us some very practical ideas on how to keep things civil if you feel your blood pressure is rising and how to minimize conflict and maximize cooperation with parents, friends, and family.

ASHLEY: We begin with father and daughter, Brian and Clare Ashcraft. I started off by asking Clare if she took part in political discussions at home when she was growing up.

CLARE: I didn't participate in the beginning because I didn't know what I believed. I listened and sometimes repeated that at school or something, but as soon as I started to form my own beliefs, I did eventually participate because I felt like I couldn't not participate. It was something that I had begun to feel passionate about. So, when I felt like my parents were wrong, and I cared about them, and I wanted to teach them what was right because that's genuinely the way I felt when I was that age, I did feel like I had to speak up and participate in those discussions.

RICHARD: Can you give us any examples, any early memories of when you thought you had to put your parents right?

CLARE: The first one I remember is actually talking about abortion. I think we ended watching a movie, and my dad said something about like, "Oh, it's their responsibility. Like, if a woman makes her own choice, then she has to deal with the consequences." And I was like, "Wait, what?" Like, I was completely jarred by that, and I was like, "But people don't always have to deal with the consequences. If they drive drunk and get in a car crash, we're not just not going to fix their broken leg." So, obviously now I would consider that to be a slightly less apt example, but it was foreign so close to me didn't have what I saw at the time as compassion for people going through that experience.

RICHARD: Brian, you want to chip in?

BRIAN: Yeah, sure. That is not quite what I said during that time, but that's maybe what you heard. I do recall that because, actually, it was a surprise to me. I don't even remember what show we were watching, but, yes, the topic of abortion did come up, and it was actually a shock to me to hear the beliefs of her and my son included of just kind of... I'll just say they were for the Pro-Choice agenda, and that's just not something that me and Mom agreed with, right?

We were on the Pro-Life side, and, again, we've always been just based on our religion and our beliefs and stuff with that, and it was kind of a shocker to me when I did hear that because we thought we were translating that for our kids well, that they probably had the same thought process. But it was okay because, A, it was learning for me to get some insight into what they're thinking and where they're getting their information from, and, for us, it did tip off the conversation of abortion.

I believe the point I was trying to get across was that I believe that a woman does have her choice, but I believe that a woman's choice is earlier in the scenario, as in does she choose to have unprotected sex with somebody? Does she choose to even have sex with somebody? And the consequences of our choices come into effect, and I'm saying that just because you can do something doesn't always mean you should have the right to absolve yourself of your choices and the consequences of those choices. But it also comes back to the belief of just it being a life and that I don't think we should have the right to kill that because that just happens, again, to be the consequence of that choice.

RICHARD: So, just to be clear, Brian and Clare, your political views and are different, right? If you could, just give us a sense of that.

BRIAN: I will base myself more of a realist type, and I'm sure people mark that as being conservative leaning. I know Clare's more liberal than definitely what I would be, but I have other friends that are also very liberal-minded that I have discussions with, too. But a lot of the things we talk about, nobody denies what you want the endgame to be. We agree with that. Like, could we have free education? Everybody would love that. I would love that.

But I think where we disagree is on the roadmap of how we get from A to Z. And what my thinking -- of course I'll say I'm more of a technical person, being the engineer-type person that I am -- I tend to get the rational part down. How am I going to get from A to Z? We just don't actually get to the endgame and say, "This is all good. Free education for everybody, yippee!" There's a lot of work that needs to be done to get from A to Z.

And we disagree on how money should be spent, what does it mean? How do you build the roadmap for that? That's just one example of something that we've talked about in the house and how we want to get there. The endgame? It would be great if we could afford to do that, but just that roadmap and the reality in-between of getting there is where we tend to differ.

ASHLEY: Clare, what about you? Your dad's describing him and your mum as more conservative, and you grew up with them. How do your views evolve?

CLARE: I think everyone, at some point when they're really young, just parrot what they hear in the house, and pretty much immediately, when I started doing that, I got a little bit of a visceral reaction at school. No one was ever rude to me, but friends would just be like, "Wait, hold on a minute," and then would tell me their perspectives. And it gave me an opportunity to start to see, what do I believe? And how do I come to those beliefs? Not just taking what any adult says as true or what any of my friends says is true, but being able to hold all the new perspectives that I'm getting in conjunction with one another and make a conclusion.

So I think, at a certain point, I ended up veering kind of far to the Left because of not just the information I was getting, but when you agree with people on certain issues, you start to trust them, like public figures, like, "I agree with you on x so your opinion on y and z is also pretty likely informed." And I

think I started adopting some beliefs before I fully fleshes out what they were and understood. So now I'm a little bit closer to the center, and I think my dad and I still disagree a lot on social issues just like we did in the past, but there's a little bit more overlap than there was.

RICHARD: Right now, both of you are sounding incredibly reasonable. Were there moments, were there times where your conversations got heated or one or the other of you stamped off and went, "Ugh, that's ridiculous!" or you raised your voice?

CLARE: Okay. For me, the tipping point that I really was like, I don't know if I can do this anymore was the summer of 2020 with all of the Black Lives Protests going on. I actually didn't want to really talk about it because I was like, "I'm going to get emotional and frustrated, and I'm just not ready to talk about this right now." But then, actually, my mom was like, "Oh, I know you have an opinion about this. You have an opinion about everything." She was like, "Why are you being so quiet?"

So I did get into the conversation that we were having about it, and I remember my dad saying some things that I really disagreed with. I remember I was very careful. I didn't call him a racist, but I said, "Some of the things you're saying sound like they could be interpreted as racist." I just came out of that conversation not understanding, not feeling heard or understood, but also not really wanting to understand where he was coming from, I think.

So I just was incredibly frustrated, and I was like, "How can I go to dinner after this in an hour and act like everything's fine when I'm really distraught over how that conversation went and what I perceived his views to be?" I was like, "How do I reconcile this amazing person that I know with these views that they have and what they're saying that I think are really cruel?" So that, for me, was a really big turning point where I was like, "Something has to change."

ASHLEY: Brian, what do you remember about that?

BRIAN: I really don't remember us having that conversation or what I said during it. Obviously, if I said something that would've offended you, apologies because I honestly don't remember what it was. So it was obviously something that didn't impact me.

ASHLEY: Brian says he always tries to be mindful about the impact his words have on other people, but obviously this time, what he said was more inflammatory than he intended.

BRIAN: And you can always feel free to call me on that at any time if I do that. I got no problem shutting my mouth if I have to. But what we've done with both our kids, and especially Clare -- yes, you've always been very opinionated on everything, which is a wonderful thing -- we tried to raise our kids to think for themselves, not parrot what we taught because we're teaching them to grow up and be adults in the world. We don't want them to be scammed, bamboozled, hoodwinked, whatever into something that they don't really believe in. But if they don't know why they believe in something, it's easy for them to get taken advantage of.

Clare's one of them who's always researched her beliefs, and she has a stance for why she believes something. I love to hear that because, to me, that's my child evolving right in front of my eyes into an adult. And I truly enjoy the conversations. Whatever it was, again, I'm sorry for whatever I said there, Clare.

CLARE: No, it's okay because it brought me to where I am now. At the time, it felt really tumultuous, but now I'm in the career of bridge-building, which I might not have been had that conversation not happened, honestly.

RICHARD: Speaking of bridge-building, Clare, you're now part of BridgeUSA, the student movement that aims to bring people of different points of view together. We should point that out.

CLARE: Yeah, I was just going to add I do remember at the end of a lot of hard conversations we've had, you saying, "Well, I'm glad, at least, you can think for yourself." At the time, it didn't feel like much of a solace in the heat of the moment, but after, I could go back to those words and be like, okay, you respect that we're having our own beliefs, and that's something that's really important.

ASHLEY: Clare, I'm still thinking about something you said when we first met you in a previous podcast we did with you in which you said that, for your dad's generation, you thought that political debates were a fun intellectual exercise, but you said, "In my generation, it's more attached to morality." That really struck me.

CLARE: Yeah. For me, growing up, the beliefs that were instilled in me through social media and through my peer group was that how you feel about immigration and abortion and gun safety, these are all issues that tell about how you treat other human beings. When you're growing up in a generation that is -- Gen Z is predominantly more on the Left and more liberal, it's very easy to slip into, "People who don't agree with me are bad people. They don't treat other people equally." I think when you reduce it and oversimplify it that much, you're losing a lot of nuance and a lot of interest in meeting other people with different ideas and experiences that led them to where they are.

BRIAN: I actually listened to that podcast, and I did hear you say that, too. It was actually kind of a surprise to me because I don't equate our playful conversations to it being moral. Yes, I'll say it's more of an intellectual exercise for people of my generation, older people, than it is being attached to our feelings. I don't know if that's our generation or just my way of thinking about it just because, again, my personal belief is going to be, if you have to make a set of laws, rules, regulations for the common good of the 300-some million people that are in the United States, creating those based on feelings makes it very subjective to who's feelings you're rating that against.

RICHARD: Given what both of you have told us, what's your advice to other families, some of whom are torn apart by political and other differences? We have Thanksgiving coming up. Any ideas?

CLARE: I would say Monica Guzman makes this great analogy to when conversations get heated, as if they're on a stove, sometimes it's cooking up new understanding, and sometimes that heat is actually burning our relationship. You can tell the difference, and if something's burning, you need to step away in that moment and make sure you're setting boundaries. If you're not ready to have a conversation at that time, then I think it's on to one to say, "Hey, can we come back to this another time?"

So I think boundaries are important, but if you're interested in having conversations, I think that's always a good direction to go. I know a lot of people who have cut off family members, frankly, because they felt that their political beliefs were immoral, and I think there's a little bit of a narrative that you have chosen family, you have a community. That may work for some people, but I don't think community can replace family in the way that some people say that it can. I wouldn't burn a bridge

to your family because you think you can just choose the people you want to surround yourself with and then it will be equal.

RICHARD: Just for our listeners, Monica Guzman is the author of the book *I Never Thought of It That Way*. She's one of the leading voices in the bridging space. She works with Braver Angels in trying to bring people of different political viewpoints together.

ASHLEY: Also a former guest on this podcast.

RICHARD: Exactly.

ASHLEY: Brian, what do you think?

BRIAN: If you care about your family -- first off, if you know what the trigger points are, and political conversation can be a very big one, don't bring it up, number one, if you can't separate the animosity out of it. But the other thing is, why not listen? Let the other person talk. Let them be heard even if you don't think it's going to sway you in any way, shape, or form and also having the knowledge that what you might say isn't going to sway the other person, you can still have a rational discourse about it and at least talk about what they're hearing because it may not be something that you're hearing if you're isolated to just one news source, one information stream, and in order to get the whole picture, you got to listen to both sides.

You got to hear the arguments or the discussion of what both sides are going to bring to it because the vast majority of the time, it's going to be skewed to what their political beliefs are and what your political beliefs are. And then the actual reality is going to be somewhere down the middle, and you got to be able to see that middle ground. You got to see the reality of it. It's just, especially if it's your children, why do that to your children? I mean, you don't love their children and want them to be part of their life, and you want to be part of their life? The only thing that I have to hope for that -- as both my children are getting older -- is that me and Mom can still be a part of their lives as they get older and have families of their own. We still want to be there for that.

The worst thing that we can have is to not be able to see and spend any time with our own kids. So I'm just like, why would you let that wedge happen? As the parent, hopefully I'm not going to let that happen.

ASHLEY: Are you looking forward to a good family Thanksgiving?

BRIAN: Oh, I am. I love our family Thanksgiving, eat too much and watch some football and have some good conversations.

CLARE: I'm for sure looking for a good family Thanksgiving. I love the food and the dog show. That's my favorite.

RICHARD: Will there be any conversations that are off-limits for you guys?

BRIAN: I don't think so. Again, it's pretty open conversations we can have in the house. I'm not thinking of anything that would be off-limits.

RICHARD: Clare?

CLARE: I think it's up to each person what their limits are, but I think we've worked through a lot of hard issues. At this point, I feel like I'm comfortable. Anything's on the table.

ASHLEY: You've been listening to Brian and Clare Ashcraft on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. Clare and Brian certainly seem like they're in pretty good shape for a relaxing Thanksgiving, but if you're worried about getting into it with a friend or relative at the dinner table, Common Ground Committee has a gift for you.

ASHLEY: If you go to our homepage, you'll find a link to our Essential Guide to Civil Political Conversations -- how to bring down the temperature, set aside personal biases, and seek agreement, among other things. You'll find that link at commongroundcommittee.org.

RICHARD: Now, as promised, Tania Israel is back on our podcast. We first spoke with her a couple of years ago. She's a psychologist and the author of the book *Beyond Your Bubble: How to Connect Across the Political Divide, Skills and Strategies for Conversations that Work* kind of sums it up, doesn't it? Ashley asked Tania the first question.

ASHLEY: Tania, we're going into the holidays. A lot of people are going to be nervous and possibly steeling themselves for some testy exchanges. Any words of advice?

TANIA: The holidays are such a challenging time in this context of political conflict, and so I know people have some anxiety going into this time period. And so the first thing that I would say is to be aware of that coming up and to try to figure out if there are ways to adjust that before you go into the situation itself. So the first thing is that often our ideas about people who disagree with us politically are misconstrued. We have these cognitive biases that cause us to see people on the other side of politics as being more extreme than they actually are, being uninformed or misinformed, being morally bankrupt. There are all these things that we believe about other people based in part on what we see in the media and social media but partially on our own minds. So, if we can know that going in and have a more open mind to the people who we're going to be dealing with, then that's a really good place to start.

RICHARD: You mentioned the role played by both the news media and social media. So much of what we read and hear is divisive and often stokes the flames of our political division. It also reinforces the idea that those you disagree with are not good people.

TANIA: Yeah, and actual human beings are more complex than what we are being exposed to in media and social media. So, if we're going in with a feeling of openheartedness and curiosity to really find out, "Who are these people, and can I find out something more about where they're coming from that might be different from or at least more multidimensional than what I'm seeing in the media?" One of the better ways to do that is to try to have some one-on-one conversations with people because, in a group context, we just don't do as well connecting and really being focused on that relationship and understanding because sometimes it gets to be a little bit too performative.

ASHLEY: Yeah, that's a really good point because shouting across the table -- that's what often ends up happening, I think, this idea of taking somebody aside, as it were -- if you're willing to do the work to really shut up and listen, and I think we used that phrase in our last podcast with you, that you, the

person with the preconceptions, has to zip it and actually listen to the other person talking about where they're coming from.

TANIA: Yeah. It's something we can even do in preparation for the holidays. We could reach out individually to some folks who we want to have that kind of conversation with and say, "You know, I know the holidays are coming up and I'm going to see you, and things haven't always gone so smoothly in our discussions about politics before, but I'm interested in hearing more about where you're coming from, and our connection's so important to me." I think communicating that to somebody -- well, and then you actually have to do it.

You have to actually be interested in where they're coming from, and that listening part is so important. So giving somebody uninterrupted time to speak and then, after they've spoken, reflecting back to them what you've heard and encouraging them to say even more before you even go anywhere near sharing your own views, that's going to be the best way to really create a stronger and warmer connection.

RICHARD: Tania, you're speaking to the good side of me, which is saying to myself, "Be reasonable. Be kind. Listen. Don't put your views forward too fiercely." But there's another side of me, and I'm thinking of one person I love dearly in particular, that just wants to put them right. They have this crazy view of the way the world is, and I can't wait to be with them at Thanksgiving and say, "You know what you were saying the last time about this? You're wrong."

TANIA: I am the angel on your shoulder. The thing that I always come back to is: what are your goals? What is it that you're trying to get out of this conversation? And reliably, there are four things that people tell me their goals for dialogue across political disagreement. One thing they say is, "There's somebody in my life who I want to maintain a good connection with, and we're having trouble doing that because of politics." Some people say, "I want to persuade or convince somebody to see things the way I do." Some people say, "I want to heal the divide or find common ground," and some people say, "I simply cannot fathom how people can think or act or vote as they do," and that there's some curiosity there.

So that part that you were just talking about with, "I want to persuade or convince somebody," the thing is that by sharing stats and slogans and, "Here's the latest study that I saw," that's actually not going to convince anybody to see things the way you do. You're actually not even working towards the goals that you have set out for yourself. I think it's helpful to really think about what it is that you want to get out of it and then try to use the skills and the approach that's going to be helpful. I actually laid this all out in something that I call "The Flowchart that Will Resolve all Political Conflict in Our Country" because I wanted to help people be more intentional about thinking about what their goals are, and what are the different ways to get there? And there is even a Thanksgiving-themed version of that that you can buy on Zazzle.

RICHARD: At Thanksgiving, we aren't just talking about those with opposing political views. People may see things differently because of their age.

ASHLEY: It came up with Clare Ashcraft and her dad. This is a young woman and her father we spoke to who are going to be in the show. Clare had said to us, "For people my age" -- so early 20s -- she said, "Your politics and your beliefs are aligned with your morality, whereas, for my dad, he can have a good political debate, and it's about politics. It doesn't speak to whether you're a good or bad person." That

really struck me, that there was somewhat of a generational divide in how they thought about arguing about politics.

TANIA: If we're speaking from our own values, it's not that the other person doesn't have any of those values. They're just not their top priority. So the problem is that we kind of flip things around to think, for example, if somebody says, "I'm Pro-Life because I value children. Then, if you're not Pro-Life, you must not value children." We flip things around so that the meaning that it has for somebody else isn't really what that other person would embrace at all. Or somebody says, "Well, I support gun control because I care about children. So, if you don't support gun control, you must not care about children."

There's two things going on here. One thing is that we might have some differences in terms of our moral priorities, and the other problem is that we tend to flip the meanings around for other people. So we assume that they are basically devoid of any of the positive morals that motivate ourselves.

RICHARD: Tania, how do you deal with people you love who believe in crazy conspiracy theories? That's tough, isn't it?

TANIA: I think it is, and most people are not extremists, and often we think that if somebody disagrees with us, then they must believe all of the things on the most extreme of the other side. So the first thing to do is recognize that we should treat everybody as if they're a conspiracy theorist because they may not be.

RICHARD: But what if they are?

TANIA: If they are, then I still go back to, well, what's your goal? What are you trying to do here? And the best thing that you can do is to really try to have a connection that is warm and that promotes understanding. Don't you want to understand where they're coming from, and how did they get there? I think that that's such an interesting question. If we don't do that especially, and we just try to lay out there all of the reasons that the way they're seeing things is wrong, we're just not going to have any impact.

ASHLEY: If you know, in your opinion, they're a conspiracy theorist, do you avoid the topic altogether? Or do you wait until they raise it, and then you'd listen and encourage, as you've spoken about, to encourage them to sort of tell their story?

TANIA: I think that people have to make their own decisions about whether or not they want to approach these conversations. I always say it's an opportunity; it's not a mandate to have dialogue across political lines. So some of it has to do with, am I even going to have a chance of achieving my goals? Honestly, when people are dealing with family members, there's also often a lot of baggage that comes along with that. So it's not just about the political disagreement. There's a whole lifetime of history that's there. So you have to decide, do I want to have any kind of conversation more conflictual than apple or pumpkin pie?

There's a lot of choices to make about these conversations, and I think it's really important to think about: what is it that you're trying to get out of this conversation? Do you have the skills to do that? And to really decide how you want to go about it then.

RICHARD: In the case of a family member, someone we really love and care for, what should we be trying to get out of that kind of conversation?

TANIA: You might really want to understand them better. You might be curious about just where are they coming from, and how did they get there? And how is it that somebody I care so much about seems to be coming from a different place? You could also say, "Wow, I wonder what I'm not being shown in the media?" because we all have this confirmation bias where we're more likely to pay attention to things that confirm our perspective and to ignore things that don't. So there's probably a lot that we're not seeing.

Speaking of pie, we're probably only seeing a small slice of the pie. So we might say, "Oh, what are you looking at? What are you hearing? I'm curious about your sources." And rather than just jumping in to challenging them, be interested in, "Okay, I'm curious to know more about that, and tell me about how is that making sense to you? Because it doesn't quite sit with me, but it really seems to be a good fit for you." And sometimes, really, why it fits for somebody has to do with particular things that they care about or particular perspectives that they already had before they saw that. So it's not even something that you're going to change their mind about.

ASHLEY: Do you have a story or an anecdote from your research or maybe from a friend about how the strategies you suggest worked out? Because I'd love to hear an example.

TANIA: Sure. Well, it's not a holiday dinner, but it is a family situation that a friend of mine, she had a family member who was dying and needed help, and this was during the pandemic. It wasn't from COVID, but she wanted to go and help to take care of him, but they had very different political views, and she was really concerned about going and being with him. Was she going to be able to tolerate that?

And she really was able to be with him during his end of life and take care of him and see the news on -- he wanted to have the news on that just was completely abhorrent to her -- but she cared about him and was able to really focus on that. And also, his friends who would come around, they also, you know, had very different political views than her own. But they were working together in support of him.

RICHARD: Why do you feel so passionately about this stuff?

TANIA: Back in the 1990s, I started a group to bring together Pro-Choice and Pro-Life people to have dialogue with each other. And I had been working in a clinic that did abortions, and there were protestors, and it was very conflictual. I was so angry because I felt like they weren't helping the women who I was trying to help, and I was really in this angry state for years. And I got tired of it. So is there something else I can try?

So I had heard about this group in St. Louis that was doing these dialogues that they were calling Common Ground. So I started a group like that where I was living at the time, and I reached out to the person who headed up the Pro-Life pregnancy center, and we did it in collaboration and brought in the people on our sides and people who really wanted to try a different approach, who were tired of what we had been doing. And it was an absolutely transformational experience for me. It didn't change anything about how I felt about reproductive rights, but it changed so much about how I felt about people who disagreed with me on it. I could really see them in greater complexity. It humanized them

for me. And I was like, if we can do this, we can do anything. That's such a heated issue. And so, after the 2016 election, it was so clear to me that we were having trouble connecting across the divide. And in the years since then, it's clear that are still in such distress about it, and that distress is not only hurting our connections with other people, it's hurting our health, and, frankly, it's hurting our democracy. If there's anything that I want to do, it's to strengthen our connections with other people, our ability to tolerate and even embrace disagreement because that's what we need for a healthy democracy. I'm really committed to that more than anything else.

RICHARD: Tania Israel, thanks very much for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

TANIA: Thank you so much. It's been delightful to be here.

ASHLEY: Tania's book on bridging divides is called Beyond Your Bubble. We make this show for Common Ground Committee, and we couldn't do it without the support of our team: Bruce Bond, Erik Olsen, Donna Vislocky, Mary Anglade, Isabella Moore, Brittany Chapman, and our producer, Miranda Shaffer.

RICHARD: And we wish all of our team and you, dear listener, a convivial, conflict-free Thanksgiving. I'm Richard Davies.

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

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.