

ASHLEY: How do we bring people together and get Americans of different viewpoints, ethnic, racial, and social backgrounds in the same room, talking and listening to one another about some of the most divisive issues of the day? That's what this episode is all about. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Dinner and a Fight is the playful and provocative name for a series of grassroots events in northeast Ohio. This local series of meetings on controversial topics may be one of the most innovative ways to get people out of their political bunkers, find common ground, and move beyond rigid polarization.

ASHLEY: We'll speak with the organizers, but first, we're going to hear from journalist Simon Montlake of The Christian Science Monitor. He went to one of these dinners and dialogues and spoke with those involved. Let's find out more about them and why they're needed.

RICHARD: Welcome, and thank you for joining us.

SIMON: It's a pleasure to be here.

RICHARD: How divided are we right now in America? Let's kick off with that question.

SIMON: It's a hard one to answer. I mean, very divided in terms of people's political preferences and particularly when they're primed by hot moments, hot coverage, and animated conversation. But, on the other hand, I've sat in groups of people who disagree who manage to get along just fine talking about both about those issues and then turn to things that they do like. I always find it fascinating if you just listen to sports coverage in this country, and people are obsessed with sports. People feel very passionately about their team, their players, but they can also discuss with partisans from other teams about the sport itself and about the way the game played out. And so the love of the sport and the game and the rules somehow gets above the partisan belief in the team.

And I think that that does happen sometimes with politics. So I do feel that there's a lot that brings the country together, and the party politics is just impossible to manage in that context because the incentives are always there to divide. So those things are always in tension, it seems.

ASHLEY: You met a guy called Ted Wetzel when you were reporting a little bit earlier this fall. What are he and his friends and colleagues trying to achieve in Akron, Ohio?

SIMON: He wants to bring people together in a way that allows them to express themselves, to feel heard and to also feel that they can learn better how to disagree. And I think his feeling is that disagreement is hard, and it's easier to either shy away from that disagreement or to stick with people who you know you will agree with. But he actually thinks that disagreement is fundamental to democracy and, in some ways, can be invigorating. And to him, as he told me, it's patriotic. Having a good disagreement, when you come out the other side knowing more, knowing more about the other side, how they think and maybe not converting your opinion but understanding the differences, that's the hymn of patriotic duty. So it's almost like a civics class to him. He comes away very energized by a good, civil disagreement.

RICHARD: You work for a national newspaper, The Christian Science Monitor. You're based in Boston. You decided to get on a plane to chat with Ted and his friends about this effort. Why did you think that this was a worthwhile story? Why do you think it's important?

SIMON: Well, over the last several years -- it's all picked up a lot after the 2016 election -- we've seen many well-meaning groups and initiatives trying to address polarization, trying to bring people together. Myself and colleagues have written about these efforts, and it's always struck me that there is a constituency that do want to get together and try and talk through these issues that are concerned about the polarization, that do want to bridge these divides. But I've always questioned how inclusive that process is and whether you're actually reaching the people who perhaps don't want to be reached or the people that are most primed for a tribal fight, and I just wonder how you get to those people.

So what really got me interested in Ted is talking to a retired newspaper editor in Akron, Ohio, who I'd met before on previous trips and always found to be a very thoughtful, reasonable sort of guide to his community. He just said that what struck him about Ted and his events is that there were people there, he says, you don't normally see at a well-meaning, structured debate. He said, "These are angry people, let's say Trump people. They could also be Bernie people. They're just people who feel alienated, disenfranchised. They feel distrustful of the whole process." And he told me, "Look, Ted manages to -- somehow he manages to get those people in the room, and that's what makes him special." So that just planted the seed in my head. I thought, "Well, who is this guy? How does he do it? And what does it look like, and what does it feel like? I mean, I also wonder about whether it all ends up as a screaming match. Am I going to be witness to something ugly?"

ASHLEY: You mentioned just now that Ted was energized by -- I think you might've used the word "civil discourse," and yet his organization is called Dinner and a Fight, which, on the surface, sounds certainly more combative. How does his organization or effort differ from some of the other groups out there that also try to bring people of differing views together. There's Braver Angels, and of course there's Common Ground Committee that we're part of. How do you think this group is different?

SIMON: I think that you just nailed it. The title itself is different, and the way that he -- I guess you would say markets it or styles it -- it's somewhat jokey. I mean, there is a certain humor to that. There's also an acknowledgement that it is a fight, that we shouldn't shy away from the idea that argument can be quite invigorating. Talk radio is sort of founded on the idea of the angry argument, the angry caller, the self-righteous host, and I think that's kind of, perhaps, his insight, his contribution to this. He just wants to create a space in which it's okay to seek disagreement as long as you come there with an open heart, and open mind that through this process you might learn something. You have respect for the other side but that, I mean, a fight is kind of entertainment. Politics and entertainment cross over a lot.

RICHARD: How did these events differ from what you'd imagined?

SIMON: They start off very sedate. We're all sat at a table with strangers. The idea is to mix it up with other people, and there's icebreaker questions, and people go to the buffet and come back. It's almost like a prelude, but I think the whole time, you are conscious of, "This is the dinner. This is the warmup. We are breaking bread together, but at some point, we're going to move to another stage." And in this case, there's the chairs and the stage set up at the other end of the room. So I found myself always looking over there and wondering about what comes next.

Crucially, you don't start talking about the political or social issue that's up for debate because you actually don't know what the debate is. When you arrive there, you have no idea what the dialogue will concern, and that's deliberate. That is all sort of, as it were, teased out and built up to the moment when you move to the dialogue.

ASHLEY: Do you think local efforts to bring people together are often more productive than attempts at the national level to find common ground?

SIMON: I think that's very likely, that what he has found is very attuned to the local circumstances and builds on that culture and those, frankly, class and geographical and racial divisions that shape Ohio and its politics.

ASHLEY: The three of us are all very familiar with the class-bound society of the UK, and I was just going to ask you -- you mentioned class just a second or two ago -- do you think, in this country, there is enough attention paid to divisions of class and how to broach those?

SIMON: Frankly, no. I always find that even though race is a great divider in the United States and historically a very shameful and painful issue that still comes up in domestic politics and perhaps still drives some domestic politics. As much as race matter hugely, so does class, and I think you see that within racial groups. There is a big difference within Latino communities, I know personally, between those who are welfare people, exiles from Columbia moving to Miami versus someone from Nicaragua who has come over the border with very little to start with. There are big differences in socioeconomic class within every ethnic and racial group. So class is something that I think is slightly difficult to talk about because the ideal of America is that anyone can succeed and that class doesn't matter because the American Dream offers that opportunity of upward mobility to everyone. The reality is that there's actually a slowdown in social mobility and that, perhaps, you could argue, is one of the reasons why things have become so unstable over the last 10, 20 years, is that I think the American Dream is receding.

ASHLEY: Simon Montlake of The Christian Science Monitor.

RICHARD: Coming next, our interview with the organizers of Dinner and a Fight, Ted Wetzels and Tom Hach. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley. We release new episodes of Let's Find Common Ground every two weeks. This is Episode 75.

RICHARD: Yeah, and Common Ground Committee also has a YouTube channel. Our podcasts are there and so are highlights and video from special live events.

ASHLEY: One of them is Finding Common Ground on Guns. The Common Ground Committee event with Democratic Senator Chris Murphy and Will Hurd, a former Republican member of Congress, was held during the fall. The moderator was former CBS News Correspondent Jacqueline Adams.

RICHARD: It was a lively discussion of a contentious, complex issue. You can watch it at YouTube on the Common Ground Committee site.

ASHLEY: Now more of our podcast, all about Dinner and a Fight. And on their posters, the word "Fight" is lightly crossed out and replaced by the word "Dialogue."

RICHARD: Ted Wetzel is the creator of this local effort to help people of all political viewpoints disagree constructively.

ASHLEY: Ted is the founder and executive director of Fighting to Understand, a nonprofit group that encourages people to become more skilled at healthy disagreement. His politics are moderately left of center.

RICHARD: We also hear from Tom Hach. He's an active participant in Dinner and a Fight and is a former IT program manager and retired Navy Reservist. Tom is Director of Ohio Freedom Action Network and calls himself a constitutional Conservative.

ASHLEY: Richard, you did this interview on your own. I was away when this was recorded. We first hear from Ted Wetzel about what happens at the beginning of each event.

TED: People enter. It's usually in a community hall. It is arranged with dinner tables in the entrance to the hall, and then, beyond that is the audience setup, which is used later. We like round tables with five chairs. We like the number five because of the five from disagree strongly to agree strongly.

RICHARD: At the start of the evening, people are greeted at the door before they sit down and have dinner. The fight, or dialogue, comes later.

TED: We have cute signage up that's kind of comical. One of the signs is a big warning sign that says, "Warning! I know everything." From the very start, people know that this is going to be humor. They're instructed to sit with people they do not know. No one has any idea of anybody's politics. They actually do have dinner, and they're given some icebreaker questions to pick from, and those are typically questions that will be about their growing up. One of my favorite questions is: what was your favorite outfit as a child? And people will start to come alive and talk about their childhood favorite outfit.

RICHARD: The dinners usually last about 30 or 40 minutes, and then people are asked to move to their seats in the audience section of the hall.

TED: Then we introduce the topic, and people volunteer to take the five chairs. And those people who take the five empty chairs then dialogue for 20 minutes or so. The facilitator helps the conversation go, and then the audience is invited to make comments. So it's really interesting because the five chairs can be a little bit of a hot seat, but the audience is processing all of this, and some gems come from the audience. Then everyone's invited to go back to their tables to be with their original dinner partners, but this time, enjoy dessert, and they're given a sheet with four questions that talk about, "What seems to be the elephant in the room? Or did we seem like maybe we're in agreement on something?" People tend not to want to leave. They just love the dialogue. And that whole thing takes about two and a half hours.

RICHARD: So far, there have been about 12 Dinners and a Fight. Topics are picked in advance. They've included the proper role for the police, the right to bear arms, and gender identity in the classroom, so plenty of room for disagreement.

TED: And these five empty chairs are in front of the audience: disagree strongly, disagree somewhat, neutral, agree somewhat, agree strongly. And people assume those chairs after we introduce a divisive topic.

RICHARD: What's an example of a divisive topic?

TED: The very first one that we did -- we've done 12 of these now -- the very first one we did was about 15 months ago in the activity of COVID, and the topic was "Wearing a Mask Is the American Thing to Do." Actually, Tom assumed the chair that was "disagree strongly."

RICHARD: Okay, Tom. So why did you disagree strongly with that statement?

TOM: So, when I participated, we did not know what the question was going to be. Being part of the audience, we didn't know what the question was going to be until we actually got into -- we were done, completed dinner, and we sat in the audience portion of the room. So that question really resonated with me. I strongly believe that people need to have the personal choice whether or not to take action whether that be wearing the mask, taking the vaccine, doing other things, that in the end government can have a recommendation, but, in the end, it is up to the individual to do so. When that all was coming down, and this was a little while ago, but the bottom line is, as members of society, we all need to be prudent. But when we step out our front doors and go into the world, we have to accept the risk of doing that.

What's un-American is to expect others to take care of us. No one should be required to take precautions for somebody else's comfort. It's up to that person. If that person is uncomfortable, then I think the obligation is on that person to decide whether or not to go out. It is not their obligation, it's not their right to say, "You have to do X, Y, and Z to make me feel comfortable outside." That really sets us up for the loss of liberty and individualism. Those are some of the things that come to mind as I sat in the "strongly disagree" chair that "Wearing Masks Is the American Thing to Do."

RICHARD: Ted, your thoughts on that night.

TED: Several things were interesting. One was that, in the opposite chair -- Tom was on "disagree strongly" -- in the "agree strongly" chair was a medical professional who felt really strongly about safety and the medical view of this. And the person who was "agree somewhat" had lost his mother to COVID. So all of a sudden, it gets logical, yeah, but also emotional, and that's where -- we all come from these various positions when we're disagreeing and agreeing.

RICHARD: Ted and Tom often don't agree politically, but...

TOM: What unites Ted and I is that we understand that if we do not come together and focus on what we agree with, then other forces are going to usurp us. And if we want to live in a representative republic, which includes a broad spectrum of people, not only people who think like me but people who think like Ted and perhaps you, as well, Richard, we have to focus on what unites us and not what divides us. If we don't band together, then I don't know what our government looks like. I don't know what our country looks like. I don't want to come across to your audience as saying that we don't have an obligation to take care of those who are in need. I think that volunteering and taking care of

those who are less fortunate in our society, it's very important, but when it comes to personal choices of engaging in society when you walk out your front door, it's your obligation to assume those risks.

I also think that, in retrospect, there are a lot of things about the masks that have come out. We had a very one-sided conversation in the public forum of say, for example, Twitter and Facebook and others, that I don't think we really got the information, or the average person did not get the information they needed to really ascertain whether or not wearing a mask actually made a difference or not. You only got one side of the story, and that really does go to the heart of the issue that we have, is: are we going to live in a representative democracy, which requires freedom of thought and freedom of speech, or are we going to be in a situation where we take government dictates and whatever they're promoting from their own perspective?

TED: Tom, I've been thinking that maybe we should do the masking issue again, and basically the statement might be something like, "In Retrospect, We Overreacted About Masks," and see how that floats up.

TOM: I agree. And what if we had asked each other to help our neighbor? What if we said, "Hey, knock on your neighbor's door. Go to the grocery store for your neighbor. Do odds and ends. You could still maintain a distance and not really have an issue with infecting them with COVID"? What if we had done that instead of creating so much divisiveness in our society?

TED: Yeah, had we to do it all over again, I think there's a lot of lessons. It would be fun to harvest some of those lessons.

RICHARD: Let's talk about your politics. Ted and Tom, how do you differ personally?

TED: I lean Left, especially on social issues. I'm pretty centrist on economic issues. My personality is such that if we're having a three-way conversation here, Richard, I'd say, "Boy, that's a really good point, Richard." And then Tom would make another point, and the opposite point, and I'd say, "Boy, that's a really good point, too," and not be so strong with my own. I'm sort of the personality that wants to see all sides of things before I make a decision. Tom is very -- well, I would say very Conservative in a moderate way, in a considerate way.

TOM: I would describe myself as a Constitutional Conservative. I probably am a social and economic Conservative. Ted said words to the effect that I'm moderate or whatever. I'm not sure if I am or not, but I do try to understand the other side so that I at least have a basis for having further dialogue and can better understand what unites us, what we agree on versus what we disagree with. If we focus strictly on items that we disagree with, then we are never going to come together and be able to renew the contract between ourselves, the Constitution, and the government.

RICHARD: A little bit more about Dinner and a Fight: how many people gather, and are they politically very different quite often?

TED: The more difference we can get in the room, the better. Typically, we like to see a minimum of 30 people participating, and the most that we've done Dinner and a Fight is 60. There's an odd thing, Richard, that the name Dinner and a Fight is oddly attractive because people realize that we need to disagree. They see the tongue-in-cheek use of the word "fight," and of course, in our graphics, we cross out the word "fight" and handwrite in the word "dialogue."

RICHARD: So it's Dinner and a Fight but also Dinner and a Dialogue.

TED: That's right, yeah, and anecdotally, people have told me after the events that they were concerned that they might have been ambushed at the event, but they were pleasantly surprised that they were not and that their input was welcome. But still, I would say 20% to 30% of the attendees fall in the Conservative spectrum, and then the rest would be 70% centrist and Left.

TOM: Yeah, I would agree with Ted that it'd probably be about 30% were on the Conservative side, but that's a high enough percentage to make sure that all perspectives were covered during the conversation.

RICHARD: So you don't feel cornered. You don't feel like this unfair somehow.

TOM: No, and frankly, I think the facts are on our side, so I'm happy to engage.

RICHARD: Tom, why do you think that events like this, bringing people of different points of view together in a real setting, in a physical setting as opposed to something online, is worthwhile?

TOM: Because people naturally tend to associate with people that they agree with, right? Sometimes you do, but most people probably hangout with people that have similar points of view. So having the opportunity to be in an environment where people don't necessarily have your point of view makes you think. It strengthens your perspective because you actually have to defend yourself, right? You don't necessarily -- if you're in a group of people who agree with each other, you just agree. You don't necessarily have to defend yourself. This puts you in a situation where you actually have to articulate why you think what you think.

The other thing that is important is then it allows you, as well, to hear perspectives of other people that you hadn't heard before. I think the more you understand people who disagree with you, they may actually have some good ideas then and perspectives that you hadn't considered.

RICHARD: Ted, do you have any examples of what Tom just talked about, where at one of your events, somebody went, "Huh, I hadn't looked at it like that. That's kind of interesting," or changed somebody's mind?

TED: We are pretty clear about the purpose is not necessarily to change everyone's mind. We use a metaphor of a snow globe being shaken up. At the beginning of the event, everything is settled down in the snow globe. During the event, we're shaking that thing up and looking at it from all different angles, and it is very common, I would say, very common that people leave saying to themselves, "Hmm, I'm thinking about this differently," not necessarily changing their mind yet. These topics are complicated. We're not going to solve them in 45 minutes, and everyone acknowledges that.

So we are in agreement that these complicated topics take time. We're also in agreement that democracy is rooted in disagreement. And, third, we're in agreement that we're not very skilled at constructive disagreement. So where are we going to learn? And that's one of the reasons for what we do.

RICHARD: Tom, do you agree that the roots of democracy are in disagreement?

TOM: I believe a better, more accurate statement is democracy is a mechanism to resolve disagreements.

TED: To which he wins me over, and I have to agree.

RICHARD: So do you think that Dinner and a Fight, that these events could go on the road, that they could be copied elsewhere? Are you hopeful that perhaps you've hit upon something that may be useful to other communities around the country in these very divided times?

TED: We do believe that this is transportable. So we are taking it on the road to Phoenix, Tucson, San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and then we're doing one in Washington, D.C. in May. We do hope to produce a kit that this could be done in Albuquerque or Peoria.

RICHARD: Tom?

TOM: I think that this is a great first step in trying to bring people together who have different backgrounds and perspectives. It needs to be the first step, not the last step, and Ted has spent a lot of time thinking about how we can progress from the basic outlines that he described with Dinner and a Fight to something that is more enduring and allows for a consensus-building because nobody is in a position to dictate the exact outcome they want. It's got to be through conversation, negotiation, and understanding that allows us to get to the point where a consensus can develop that maybe not everybody likes but people can live with.

TED: And we're in agreement on that. Dinner and a Fight alone is totally insufficient. Dialogue alone is totally insufficient. It needs this deliberation component that Tom's talking about.

RICHARD: But before consensus can be reached, people first need to know how to disagree, says Ted.

TED: We believe that this feeling of wanting to disagree is not part of northeast Ohio. It's happening in every county in the country, and I think, although people have a hard time articulating this, that they see it as a civic duty, to do it well. The problem is we don't know how to do it well, and so it's something that we can learn.

ASHLEY: Ted Wetzal with Tom Hach. Learn more about this episode and others at our website, commongroundcommittee.org.

RICHARD: You'll find our shows under the Listen tab on the website, and you can also hear Our Take, a new series of short podcasts with Common Ground Committee Cofounders Bruce Bond and Erik Olsen.

ASHLEY: They discuss areas of opportunity and reasons for hope on some of America's most timely and pressing issues. Find all of our podcasts at commongroundcommittee.org.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Thanks for listening to Let's Find Common Ground.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.