

RICHARD: We're releasing two shows this month on what we can all do personally to find common ground.

ASHLEY: The next podcast will be about friendships. This one is about speaking with strangers. Kio Stark is our guest.

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

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: How often do you strike up a conversation with a stranger? A lot of us may smile, maybe open the door for someone we don't know, but often we don't go further than that. We may feel uncomfortable talking to someone we don't know. That said, Richard, I know you are not one of those reticent people.

RICHARD: No, reticence is not really in my vocabulary, and perhaps it should be. Usually, I like talking with strangers, and I remember, as a kid, my dad saying that I would never learn anything talking to other people. He thought I should listen. So this show is about listening and about listening to people who are not like us, people who may put us outside our comfort zones.

ASHLEY: Yeah, we tend to live in bubbles where we interact mostly with people who think like us and who often look like us, too. But our guest, Kio Stark, says even a brief conversation with someone outside of that bubble can really change the way you see things. She's the author of the book *When Strangers Meet*.

RICHARD: As we'll hear, Kio is a big advocate for getting outside your comfort zone and connecting with people you don't know as a way of expanding your perspective and finding common ground. Let's begin.

ASHLEY: A lot of us find talking to strangers quite awkward, but you say that doing that can be transformative. Why?

KIO: For me, the reasons that I think that talking to strangers can be transformative are both personal and public. On a personal level, it's a form of intimacy. We all need intimacy, right? And who do you get intimacy from? Who are intimate relationships with? Your partners, your children, your parents, your friends. There's also a kind of intimacy called fleeting intimacy, which is where you have a momentary, brief feeling of real connection. That interaction also gives you a sense of belonging and being recognized as a human, and known. Let's say you have a set amount of intimacy you need to be a happy and fulfilled person. The little moments of fleeting intimacy contribute to that. They fill your jar, as it were.

On the other hand, there is a really important political or public good component to talking to strangers, which is when you talk to people who are different to you, you really expand your idea about who counts as human and who counts as "us" versus "them" in that arrangement that we all think about. You're learning about them. You are treating them as an individual rather than understanding them through stereotypes if you stop and take that moment to do so.

RICHARD: I think your message is even more urgent now, Kio, than it was before COVID hit. We've just, most of us, emerged from the COVID pandemic, and for quite a long time, there was a lot of enforced isolation. Levels of fear and anxiety went up over the past three years. Has this made it harder and yet also more important to consider speaking with strangers?

KIO: Yeah, I think that our isolation during COVID has, as you say, made it both harder and more important. It's harder partly because we're all so awkward, and we forgot how to do it. You go to a dinner party, and I'm meeting people I don't know, or even meeting people I do know, I just say, "I forgot how to do this. It's super awkward, but let's just try it, anyway." I think you have to work your way up from the beginning. Even if you are comfortable talking to strangers, it's the smile and eye contact. You're back to baby steps and maybe saying hello rather than putting pressure on yourself to initiate an actual interaction that is more extended, that is like you might've had before.

ASHLEY: One of the things I really hated most about COVID, especially in the early months, was that it made us all suspicious of other people, and that felt absolutely horrible to me the way that people would cut a wide berth in the street. Even though I don't live in the city anymore, and there weren't that many people on the street, it felt insulting and as if we were all supposed to stay away from each other and find each other scary. I found that profoundly depressing.

KIO: Yeah, I know what you mean. When I was in a city a few times at the beginning of the pandemic, I also felt that uncharacteristic estrangement. The word "stranger" is in there, and estrangement is when stranger-ness becomes bigger. It sucked. I think many people I've spoken with had that experience of this uncomfortable increased estrangement that made them really upset. So this sense of estrangement that people experienced was really unpleasant and uncomfortable and made us feel alienated from our places when we were already feeling alienated from our former public lives. That was heartbreaking to me.

ASHLEY: Most people these days live in cities or suburbs or places where we often don't know many of our neighbors, if any of them, sometimes. Are there unspoken rules about how we interact with people we don't know, and, if so, what are they?

KIO: Yes. This is a fun and also crucial question. There are always unwritten rules, sort of tacit contracts that we have with the people in a place that we spend time. Those are different in different places. So, in general, sort of regionally, they're different. City and suburb, they may be a little different. For people in different neighborhoods, they may be a little different. But they're always there, those expectations about what people will do and not do about how people might approach each other or avoid each other. You don't really see those rules until they're broken. So you might observe something happening, and you're like, "Wow, nobody usually talks to people sitting on that side of the park," or, "People with dogs always say hello to each other and stop and let their dogs sniff each other." And so when somebody is snobby with their dog, you're like, "Wait, the rule is that the dogs have to get to say hello to each other." One of the most consistent rules across regions and cultures and neighborhoods is some form of what's called civil inattention.

ASHLEY: Civil inattention, that's an intriguing phrase. What is that?

KIO: This is a concept that a wonderful sociologist from the '50s and '60s called Erving Goffman named and observed. This is the idea that when we live among strangers, we want to both, hopefully,

acknowledge each other as humans sharing a place and a space and a set of ideas about what's okay and what's not okay and that we are from the same planet. So what people generally do -- let's say the interaction is people are walking towards each other on the sidewalk. There's a sort of distance, and that's going to vary, at which people might nod or smile or wave and then turn their attention right back to, "I'm not paying attention to you." So I've given you civility, and I've given you back your permission not to talk to me.

RICHARD: I think we've often made the case on this show for the importance of listening to and even speaking with people who have different points of view from your own or who might even make you feel uncomfortable, especially with their politics or their views on culture or religion. But what you've just been talking about is something quite different, isn't it?

KIO: Yes and no. I think if you're in a place where you're having a longer interaction with someone, you might end up in that position of having a meaty conversation, and that can be very meaningful. It can be very uncomfortable. I think it's worth trying it sometimes. One of the things that I do when somebody tells me something they believe that's something that I don't support or I disagree with or makes me uncomfortable, if it feels like a safe moment and that they're being respectful, I might say, "When do you remember first thinking about that or feeling that way?" Because sometimes that's where the shared moment can be. That's sometimes where a sort of shared understanding can come with respect without having to agree because you're talking about your beliefs in terms of how they were developed.

I will also say that no one is under any obligation to try to have a conversation with somebody who is clearly racist or bigoted or misogynist. Any of those kinds of things, you can walk away, and you probably should. If you're somebody who feels like you can enter into that while keeping your heart and your body safe, it could be worth a try, but it really has to be under the right circumstances and a person who is in the right position in a lot of ways.

ASHLEY: Yeah, I was going to ask you about that. Interactions land differently depending on who we are, and you alluded to that just now. Walking away is one thing, but is there an elegant way to get out of a situation that perhaps you started off hopeful, broaching something with a stranger, and then it kind of went south?

KIO: Yeah. There are physical signals that people don't always recognize or notice, but you can physically back away a little bit because we have a kind of interaction space, which, as always, the size of it is going to vary, but there's a sort of distance at which people are in an interaction and a distance at which they start to be out of the interaction. So there's backing away.

There's just saying, "Hey, nice talking to you," and leaving. You're going to feel rude, probably. You're going to feel like you're interrupting what somebody wants to say. But it's okay to say, "Hey, I got to go. I'm in a hurry," those kinds of things. If you're at a party, it's the usual, "I got to get a drink," or "I have to go to the bathroom." You can just say you have purpose, and it's okay to do that.

I've had a couple of experiences lately where somebody really was laying into me about something and in an interaction I didn't start, and I just said, "Thanks for sharing your opinion," and kept walking because it seemed like, in that moment, if I just walked away without acknowledging them, they would keep coming to me, and it wouldn't have a closure for them. So, for me, it was like, "Hey, thanks for sharing," and keep walking.

ASHLEY: You're listening to Kio Stark, author of *When Strangers Meet*. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. *Let's Find Common Ground* is a production of Common Ground Committee, and this is our 80th episode.

ASHLEY: We've done shows on loads of different topics, including guns, the environment, polarization, and what Millennial politicians are doing to find common ground.

RICHARD: In addition to podcasts, there are videos of our public events as well as blogs.

ASHLEY: One of the latest series of blogs is about the rise of corporate civic engagement: what is it, why does it matter, and how is the rise of corporate social responsibility important for business and politics.

RICHARD: You can find that and all of our blogs, videos, and podcasts on the website, commongroundcommittee.org.

ASHLEY: That's commongroundcommittee.org. Visit as often as you like. Don't be a stranger.

RICHARD: Now more from our conversation about chatting with strangers with Kio Stark.

ASHLEY: What about confined spaces when it comes to talking to a stranger. I'm talking about airplanes in particular because I am one of those people who dreads it when my seatmate starts talking to me at the beginning of a flight. Should I be more open?

KIO: So, on airplanes, you're there much too long to expect or initiate a sustained interaction. It's fine to do the -- you're already seated, somebody sits next to you, "Hi." And then, if you don't want to talk, get absorbed in something right away while everybody's waiting for the plane to take off. You may have to do a certain amount of faking if you have a talker next to you. Headphones are great for that because headphones tell people you don't want to be interrupted, and you have to just think that that's okay. That's a signal. That's like whether somebody's making eye contact or not. If they're wearing headphones, they don't want to talk to you, probably.

You can interrupt them for -- and this is an unwritten rule -- if you need help, you need directions, what's the Wi-Fi password? Legitimate excuses for interrupting someone are fine even if they aren't displaying openness, but other than that... And if the person isn't respecting your headphones or your being buried in your book, you might have to be prepared to say, like, "Sorry, I'm working," or, "I'm really focused on this. I'm really enjoying this."

That said, I had one of the best stranger interactions of my life on a plane sitting next to a guy who turned out to be the person who named colors for Benjamin Moore paints, like house paints. For me, that was like, "No way. Oh, my god," and I wanted to ask him questions. He was clearly open. He wanted to chat about it. I don't remember exactly how that conversation started, but we talked for an hour. And then after an hour, it was like, "It was so great to talk to you about this. Thank you," and go back to something.

RICHARD: You've mentioned dogs several times. By the way, if you want to meet more strangers, and there are some of us who do, get a dog. They're the best for meeting strangers.

KIO: Yeah. When I was in college, the really sort of offensive thing was that dogs were a chick magnet, which is gross. But I do think they're a people magnet, or they can be.

RICHARD: I want to ask you about social media because so many people behave so badly to people they don't know on social media. It seems that many people feel they have a license to behave like total jerks. What's going on with social media?

KIO: People feel like they can say anything when there's no accountability. So, when you're interacting with somebody in person, there is a certain amount of accountability just because you're in each other's personal space. "On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog," is the old joke. I mean, that lack of accountability to the people around you, to a community is very, very damaging, and it's part of what gives permission.

ASHLEY: Not entirely related but somewhat because it is about technology, one thing I've noticed is that when I'm in the kind of public space where people perhaps used to gather to chat, like a café, for instance -- I was in café just the other week in New York, and every single person, and it was full, was on their laptop. And the only interaction might have been to squeeze past somebody to get to another seat. Hasn't it become harder to connect with strangers and perhaps find some commonality in our digital world?

KIO: I think about this a lot, what's happened in cafés where I used to have more interactions even when people were working on their laptops. Part of it is headphones, and I started to realize that I'm looking for opportunities for interactions in the wrong place now. I'm using 10- and 20-year-old ideas of where people are open to interactions. People still, in my experience, might smile at each other when you're sitting down. Again, you ask for the Wi-Fi password. People talk to each other when they're in line to get the coffee, and so sometimes that makes a kind of opening. You might ask somebody if you can share their table. There are these tiny, tiny moments, so I'm hopeful.

RICHARD: We talk a lot on this show about the political and social bubbles we live in and how they can prevent us from understanding the views, the perspectives of other people. Can talking to strangers help us find common ground?

KIO: If by common ground, you mean developing respect for the existence of other opinions than your own and the humanity of people who aren't like you, my answer is yes. I don't know that we can change each other's minds about anything. I don't know that we can come to agreement from these conversations with strangers, but I do think that it's a step. A conversation with a stranger can open up your idea of who you think of as part of the society in which you live. The idea that somebody has a different opinion or culture, and that's not scary to you might happen for you if you're talking to somebody who's from a different set of political beliefs or a different community. It's a baby step. It doesn't make a transformation in an instant. It makes a transformation potentially over time in the accumulation of experiences.

RICHARD: But just having that different attitude towards speaking with people not like you or hearing from people not like you can help, even if it's a baby step, right?

KIO: I think so. If I'm talking to somebody who I feel like we share a basic respect for humanity and the upholding of democracy, then I'm open to having a conversation with somebody whose beliefs are

different. As long as their beliefs aren't telling them to or justifying hurting anyone, I'm listening. I may not change at all, but I'm listening, and I'm hearing even just what they have to say.

ASHLEY: Why are you so interested in talking to strangers? Tell us a bit about your background and how you got here.

KIO: I came from a family where everyone talks to strangers. It's what everybody does. My father was a city planner, so it was part of his job in the small city that we lived in to hear people, to find out what's going on, to help solve conflict. My mother was an emergency room nurse, also required to talk to strangers and have empathy for the families of anybody who ended up there, so a lot of talking to strangers, a lot of bedside manner. I majored partly in anthropology, so I have training in ethnography and talking people and listening to people and observing people.

But I didn't realize that I was weird until I went to graduate school in a northeastern small city. And one Sunday morning, I was walking to the library. It was my first semester. I went to college in the South, in North Carolina. So here I am, coming from this setting in the South where there's a broader level of friendliness, and I'm walking to the library. And there's a guy coming towards me who is in clothing that suggested he's, like, a maintenance worker at the school.

We get to passing each other, and I say, "Hey, how you doing?" He stopped, and he looked at me, and he said, "You must not be from around here." And that was my little epiphany of, "Oh, my god, wait, not everyone does this." So that's when I figured out that it was something I was actually interested in, not just something that everybody does.

RICHARD: Is there a story you can recall that was especially memorable, an interaction that you had with a stranger that you thought about for a long time afterwards?

KIO: The one that really sticks with me, and this is when I lived in New York City, and there was my local bodega. And I had just dyed my hair fire-engine red, you know, red, red, red. And I went to my bodega, and the woman behind the counter was wearing hijab, not like full niqab or anything, but the woman is wearing hijab, and she complimented my hair. And she said, "My daughters dye their hair all sorts of colors. And she's telling me all about that, and then she said he son wants to, and that's where she draws the line, and I asked her if her daughters wear hijab, if anybody sees their hair outside of their family and their female friends. She said, "Oh, no. I have my beliefs. They have to find their own beliefs. They'll decide for themselves."

And I realized, much to my shame, that I had made a lot of assumptions there. I had assumed that anyone who was wearing something that marked them as somewhat observant of a particular religious culture would insist that their children do the same thing, that that's how her household works, that that's how her community works. She wasn't offended, but I noticed it and thought, "Oh, my god. I'm the pro at this, and I just made that mistake." It was a big deal to me.

RICHARD: Kio Start on Let's Find Common Ground.

ASHLEY: Richard, I loved that anecdote at the end because it proves how easy it is for all of us, even a trained researcher like Kio, to fall into these traps of stereotyping people based on what we think we know about their culture. I can easily see me having done that, too, if I'd been in that store.

RICHARD: I think we live in a culture of complaint and denunciation, especially on social media, and this often leads many of us to assume that the people we don't know are likely to be bad, whereas very often I find when speaking with strangers that I'm surprised by kindness and caring more than I am by bad behavior or something rude that shocks me.

ASHLEY: Yeah, and this conversation has definitely been a good reminder to me, who despite being a journalist and speaking to strangers for a living, I'm definitely more shy about talking to people I don't know in public. So it's reminded me that I should really do more of that.

RICHARD: Coming up next on our podcast, we're going to talk about friendships and how to either avoid falling out with somebody who has irritated you or having friends who are not like you.

ASHLEY: Yep. That show is coming up in two weeks. And please tell us what you think of our show. Give us your input. There's a link to do that at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.