

RICHARD: We start in 1994. Two women were murdered at two abortion clinics in Brookline, Massachusetts. Five people were injured. The killer was caught, found guilty, sentenced. Justice was done.

ASHLEY: And then something happened that might have seemed impossible before those terrible crimes. Leaders on both sides of the abortion debate met together for a series of secret talks. We hear from them now.

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ANNE: I would trust my life to any one of the women. I felt like we had each other's backs. We were respectful of each other's position, and we certainly became very fond of each other.

RICHARD: This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Right after the murders at the clinics, both sides of the fierce and furious debate over abortion were shocked. Clinic doctors and workers felt their lives were endangered.

RICHARD: And the leaders of the anti-abortion movement spoke out against that terrible violence.

ASHLEY: We speak here with the Reverend Anne Fowler, an Episcopal priest who served on the board of directors for the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts.

RICHARD: And lawyer Fran Hogan. She's been president of Women Affirming Life. They're among the women profiled in the new documentary, *The Abortion Talks*.

ASHLEY: You know, Richard, it took years for the women to go public and explain what they'd been discussing and why they met. The first mention came in an opinion article in *The Boston Globe*. The headline was "Talking with the Enemy."

RICHARD: And in our interview with Fran and Anne, we also learn about what was and wasn't achieved in their many hours of conversations and why these discussions still have a lot of relevance to the abortion debate today.

ASHLEY: So both of you have come a really long way over the years. Can you tell me, first, starting with you, Anne, how and why did your meetings begin?

ANNE: They began after the clinic killings in Brookline in 1994 when two Planned Parenthood staffers were killed in two different clinics. After that happened, then-Cardinal Law and then-Governor Weld asked for a lowering of the rhetoric, a de-escalation of the provocative and sometimes rather violent rhetoric that was happening in the public sphere around this issue of abortion.

And the Public Conversations Project, which is a nonprofit in Watertown, Massachusetts, had been doing work with dialogues. I'd been involved in a couple of shorter dialogues with them. Laura Chasin and Susan Podziba, who were our facilitators, interviewed a number of leaders in both sides of the movement and selected six of us. That's how we got there. And, Fran, you have your own version.

FRAN: Well, it's pretty much the same. On both sides, it was leaders of the two different movements, so to speak. And at the time, I was serving in a leadership position, as the other two women on the pro-life side were. And the day of the shootings, I actually knew the person who did the shooting. So I had been involved in advising the state police who the shooter was at the time.

And after that, we got these calls about the lowering of the rhetoric. Anne had participated in earlier, shorter dialogues. They had asked me to do that, and I would not participate in those shorter dialogues and didn't want to participate in this one, either. It was only through a lot of talking with people and thinking about it that I decided to go ahead and participate with the hope that the rhetoric could be lowered, and any violence on any side could be lowered.

RICHARD: As these conversation began, were both of you scared?

ANNE: I was not scared. I felt obligated and called as part of my ministry to participate. Honestly, as I think back about what my reaction was and what my mood was going into the first meeting, it was more irritation than anything else. It was, "Why do we have to keep doing this?"

FRAN: I was not scared physically. I was scared that people might think that I was caving on my position on the issue. And I was afraid that that would hurt my movement, my side of the movement, so to speak. That's part of the reason that, at least, I think, among pro-lifers, we wanted this to be completely confidential. We didn't know what damage it might do to people on the frontlines. So I wasn't physically scared, but I was nervous about the impact this might have.

ASHLEY: Well, yeah. These talks, certainly initially, maybe throughout, they were top-secret, right? You met in the basement of a house somewhere in the Boston area. Fran, I think, at one point, your secretary had some suspicions about what might be going on.

FRAN: She didn't know where I was going because we weren't telling people where we were going, and I think she thought I was having an affair or something. It was crazy because we really, really only could tell spouses or people that we were living with, and that was it. And that was very important. I don't think, without that—I don't know—cocoon, we would've been able to achieve what we did achieve. It had to be confidential.

RICHARD: Fran and Anne, did you have preconceptions about the other side? And if you did, could you tell us what they were as opposed to how you feel now?

ANNE: I didn't expect them to be smart, you know? They turned out to be really smart, which just added to my irritation about the whole thing because we were well matched. We were six people who were well matched. I think the choice to engage leaders was not exactly political, but it was a public policy kind of decision, I think, on the part of Public Conversations. It was good for them to choose leaders because we all had experience with leadership in tough situations.

FRAN: I think I probably did have some preconceived notions. Nicki Nichols Gamble, who I like very much, was really an icon of the pro-choice movement, I think really known throughout the country for her leadership.

ASHLEY: Gamble was the president of Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts at the time.

FRAN: And before I met her, I didn't like her because of the position she had. I did not know Anne before we met. I was not familiar with Anne at all. We had appeared on many different interview shows or different events where they would have people from one side and the other side, but we really never clicked together. We sort of knew each other but didn't really talk to each other. It was that kind of a relationship, as opposed to today, where we very much enjoy the few times we have to get together and to share a meal and to share updates on family and so forth. It's a relationship now. It never was before.

ASHLEY: Can I just dig in quickly into what you said, Anne? You said, laughingly, "I didn't expect them to be smart." Why not?

ANNE: Well, because I think my main encounters with—I'm supposed to say "pro-life" people—was in the context of a protest where people seemed to be irrational and kind of cult-like and not people that I would expect to be able to engage in the way that our friends on the pro-life side turned out to be able to do.

RICHARD: Was that disconcerting, that sense that you'd got them wrong, or was it refreshing that, "Gosh, we're across the table from people who are smart as opposed to what I thought they were"?

ANNE: Well, it certainly made things a lot more interesting in a good way, I think. I wouldn't say refreshing. It took us a real while to get used to each other. I would say it took a good 8 or 10 meetings before we kind of hit our stride.

RICHARD: How long were these meetings, usually?

ANNE: Oh, endless. They were supposed to be two hours, and they rarely ended on time. I'm a watch witch, so I would always say, "It's 8:00. Time to go home now."

FRAN: Yeah, they were long, and they were emotional. You'd be wrung-out at the end of them, I think, especially in the beginning when we learned what we needed to call each other and what words we could use and not use in order to further the conversation. If we didn't have those facilitators, it would never have happened, I don't think.

ANNE: Absolutely. I said often that I realized this was the closest I would ever come to understanding what it was like to be in the early church, where then, people were gathered together in a basement room, trying to decide as Jews and Christians, or followers of the new Jesus movement, if they could be together, if Jews who wanted to convert could be admitted into the Jesus movement. And they were held together by liturgy, the service, and by food, by breaking bread together.

That's what we were doing. We were in a basement room. We were secret. We were trying to figure out if we could say together, and we were eating meals together. What held the people together in the 1st century was their liturgy. What held us together was those facilitators. Fran is right. We could never have done it without them.

ASHLEY: I want to know some of what you actually talked about. I mean, your talks lasted, unexpectedly, a long time. They went way beyond four or five meetings. They went on for several years. Especially at the beginning, how were you even talking, and what were you talking about?

FRAN: Well, at the very beginning, we had to come up with a vocabulary that we could use so that we could actually talk. That took a long time. We would put up—

ANNE: It did.

FRAN: Yeah, it really did. We put big sheets on the wall. What are the hot-button terms that we ought not use? And an awful lot of our vocabulary was stolen from us. So we had to learn how to speak about these issues in words that were not our normal way of speaking. We're all advocates for our positions, and it was hard to put those words away and talk in a different way. Clearly, the topic was not just abortion, but it was how to lower the rhetoric so that violence no longer happens within the movement? And we had a big discussion, I remember, about—the pro-choice people would speak of the violence that happened when the murders occurred and the shootings occurred. And we totally agreed with that. That was horrible violence. But from the pro-life perspective at the beginning, we talked about what we considered the violence done in the act of abortion. So that would be one of the things, in the very beginning, that we talked about, but we went on to everything you can possibly imagine from one end of life to the other. Who would you throw overboard in the lifeboat? And I don't remember that conversation. It was everything you could imagine, partial-birth abortion. We tried very hard to figure out some activity maybe we could do together unrelated to abortion. We couldn't do that. The only thing we ever came up with was the article that we wrote for The Globe.

ANNE: That was the best thing we could've come up with. I mean, we talked about planting a tree or doing some public service or something like that. But the best thing that we came up with was the best thing, which was to make—and we spent a long time deciding whether we could, as we kept putting it, "taking it out of the room." We spent a long time, and I think it's fair to say that the pro-life people were much more trepidatious about taking it out of the room.

RICHARD: When you say "taking it out of the room," you mean that, as a result of your conversations, you took it out of the room and went public with this big article in The Boston Globe, which was, by far and away, the biggest newspaper in the region.

ANNE: Absolutely, yep.

FRAN: That's right. And as a result of that, we got invited to I can't even imagine how many places to speak, from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard to the Rhinebeck up in New York. We were everywhere. It was a little crazy. The day that we went with this, we figured no one would show up. They were going to have a press conference. No one was more shocked than we were. The room was full of media. We had no idea of the impact this would have, and from a pro-life perspective, purely from my perspective, it was the best thing because we were heard in places we never had access to before. We would never be invited to many of these places. Now, was it scary going to places? Anne will know this. Everybody in the room feels differently than you do. Yes, it was, but I felt it was a real opportunity to present a message that they just never heard before. So it was a great thing, I think, but it's ancient history now. It's a long time ago.

ASHLEY: But it does relate to what's going on today, which we're going to get to a little later in the conversation. Just to quickly go back to your developing relationships with each other over the years, because by the time that Boston Globe piece came out, it was early 2001, would you consider yourself friends by that point, the six of you?

FRAN: I would. Would you, Anne?

ANNE: Well, it depends what you mean by friends. I think we were friendly acquaintances, fairly close acquaintances. There are some elements of real friendship that I have to say, for myself, were lacking. But I think, most important, we learned to trust one another, and, to this day, I would trust my life to any one of the women. I felt like we had each other's backs. We were respectful of each other's position in a lot of ways. We were respectful of each other, and we certainly became very fond of each other. And we had a lot of laughs, and we went through a lot of different people's life experiences—death of spouses, death of siblings, birth of grandchildren—and those experiences forged deep relationships.

RICHARD: That sounds great, but was there a moment, or were there moments when somebody threatened to get up and walk out, or there was a moment when you thought, "Oh, gosh, this whole thing's just breaking apart," or, "We're going to have a yelling match here"?

FRAN: I don't think anybody ever threatened to walk out that I can recall. One of the things they taught us to do, and it was a very important lesson for me, was to listen to what the person is saying, not preparing our response to what the person is saying, and then saying back to them because half the time, what you thought they said, they didn't really say. That was one of the gifts of these facilitators who taught us how to really listen and respond to what was actually said. I think that was a very good tool in their toolbox.

ANNE: Well, certainly that was true. I had had trouble, I think, really hearing the other point of view. I want to be sure to say this. It was one of the great opportunities of my life because we don't have many opportunities to sit with people with whom we disagree and talk almost exclusively about the very thing that we disagree about. And that is a gift that I wish I knew how to scale up.

RICHARD: In the podcasts that we've done on Let's Find Common Ground, we've had a number of guests who've said that, that if we're speaking or in a dialogue with somebody who we disagree with, we need to listen to what they say before we really prepare a response in our minds. So I think that's a very interesting point. But did either of you go into these discussions at any time wishing to change the minds of the other side?

FRAN: Well, we definitely were told that we were not to go in to try to change the minds of the other side. For myself, it was extremely difficult for me to do that because I wanted to change theirs, knowing that wasn't going to happen, but I did want to change their mind. But I think the ground rules made it clear we were not supposed to be trying to do that.

RICHARD: Once you came to respect them and even like them, did you wish even more fervently that you could change their minds because you thought, "Oh, these are good people"?

FRAN: I did. I never gave up that hope, never ever. Never ever. But one thing that Anne said—we talked about respecting each other. I did respect all the people involved, but we had a big discussion one time about the fact that I did not respect their position. I respected them having dignity as human persons, but I did not respect their positions. And there was a fairly hot discussion about that because they felt differently, or at least my recollection is they felt differently. But I never changed my mind on that. I remember that. Yeah.

ANNE: Can you respect a person if you don't respect her position? I think was what we struggled with.

FRAN: That's right. Yep, that's right, but that's where I came down. Yeah.

ASHLEY: We're speaking with Anne Fowler, who's pro-choice, and Fran Hogan, who's pro-life. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. If you're interested in learning more about the conversations that Fran and Anne were part of, we recommend a new documentary.

ASHLEY: The film is called The Abortion Talks. You can learn more about it at their website, abortiontalks.com.

RICHARD: As both women made clear in their conversations with us, they had facilitators who helped them work out who would be involved in the discussions, how long they'd go on, and also some of the things that could and could not be mentioned.

ASHLEY: The nonprofit group Essential Partners played a crucial. Their website, whatisessential.org, explains more about how they partner with civic, civil, and religious groups to restore trust and understanding.

RICHARD: Again, the website for The Abortion Talks documentary is abortiontalks.com. Now back to our interview.

ASHLEY: Anne, how did it feel, as a member of the clergy, working with the pro-life women, given that I'm assuming that they claimed moral authority? You're a member of the clergy. Where does that leave you?

ANNE: I felt it left me in a particular hotspot. They always seemed a little skeptical about, "This woman is a minister. She's an Episcopal priest, and she believes what she believes?" And I asked them once, quite far along, if they thought I was a moral person, and they could not answer that question. That was painful, after everything that we'd been through together.

FRAN: Just a couple of comments on that. One is that I think it's important, at least from my perspective, the three of us were Catholic on the pro-life, but I was not coming from a faith perspective. So, in terms of moral authority, I never thought of it that way. It was just how I thought in a secular, reasoned way. But second of all, if my brother asked me if I thought he were a moral person, I wouldn't answer that either, Anne. I can't judge another person's morality. In my mind, each person has to judge his or her own morality, and that would be why I wouldn't comment on that. I don't know the fullness of any other person's life.

RICHARD: Politically, we live in very heated times, perhaps more now than when you first came together. And so often, the debate over abortion is framed by the media that, as I know, having been a reporter for a long time, loves conflict and clashes. And highlighting the worst about the other side can also be a good way for the two movements to raise funds and rev up their supporters. So what's wrong with the way the debate over abortion is currently being framed?

ANNE: It happens I went to the Maine State House on Monday to support some bills that our governor has proposed on expanding access to abortion and removing certain restrictions that have been on the

books for a long time. There are 65 of us that had signed up to testify in support of these bills and 650 who had signed up in opposition. And they had been bused in from all over. They were not all Mainers.

And I was waiting in line on this rainy, cold day to go through security, and a man sort of ran down the hill where we were waiting and said, "Call them baby killers! That's what they are. They're baby killers!" And I had a moment of real panic like I've rarely ever had because he sounded like somebody who could kill somebody, who would kill a "baby killer." And then I realized, well, if he started shooting, he would shoot all the pro-lifers who are outnumbering me 100 to 1. So I stopped worrying about it. But that's not the way to go. That's something that should be reined in by anybody who cares about making progress in finding common ground.

ASHLEY: Fran, what do you think?

FRAN: Well, I think that it happens both ways. We were having a march here on the Boston Common, and we got called terrible names by the pro-choice people, but I don't think they were representative of the entire movement. I would reject what happened to Anne completely. It's antithetical to everything that we've tried to do, and I think it's probably true on both sides. There was an inability to have these conversations that we had to try to see what could be done. It turns out there's not much we can do on the issue together because it's just there is no common ground on the issue, without a doubt. But yelling and screaming is not furthering any conversation at all. As a pro-life person, I've worked toward incremental legislation, without a complete ban, trying to slowly—Anne, I don't think, would agree with this—but slowly put on restrictions until we wound up with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. But that's done not by yelling and screaming. I don't think Operation Rescue did us any favors, and I don't think calling people names does us any favors. I think, as a result of these conversations, as I mentioned before, we were able to get to places which probably only heard the people screaming, "Baby killers!" and which finally heard people who could articulate the position in a more positive and thoughtful way.

ASHLEY: Fran, you just mentioned sort of the lack of common ground on this issue. Those years that you were talking together, if you didn't find common ground, what did you find?

FRAN: We did not find common ground on the abortion issue whatsoever.

ANNE: She wants to make sure you know that.

FRAN: Make sure, right, exactly. But we did find the beauty and the dignity of all human life, even human life with which we profoundly disagree, and the importance to respect that human life as much as I respect the life of the unborn child or the person at the other end of life. In my mind, all those people have to be respected the same way, and because a person has a position I don't agree with doesn't mean I don't respect and honor that person as a human being.

RICHARD: Your conversations began in the '90s. Would it be even more difficult to start a chat around a chat as charged as this today than was the case when you began?

ANNE: Did you call it a chat? A 20-year chat?

RICHARD: I did say a chat. I'm sorry.

ANNE: I think it would be the same. I would hope that people are as motivated today as they were 20 years ago to try to at least talk to one another. I mean, people of good faith ought to be as eager to do that as we were 20 years ago. And people ought to be very interested in facilitating such chats.

FRAN: I agree with Anne on this. I think that it could be done. There are so many more issues that are dividing people today, even than 20 years ago. I have a brother who has a daughter who raises money for Planned Parenthood and one that's in the Tea Party. Same family. So, when you're having dinner with people or talking with friends or family, often you disagree not just on this issue but on a million other issues. And the TV and the media hasn't helped one single bit, in my view. I think they like to rev it up to make it more exciting and more volatile or something, you know? That was my experience with the media.

RICHARD: Throughout the interview, both of you have talked about the vital role played by the facilitators of your discussions, your conversations, not your chats. I stand corrected. What kind of role did they play, and do you think that when it comes to two sides on a very difficult issue coming together that they need a facilitator, they need someone to maybe help them with the ground rules of the conversations?

ANNE: I certainly would say so. I would not embark on this kind of project without the reassurance that somebody—they were a container for us.

FRAN: Yeah, I totally agree with that. And that's the problem with having these conversations, because if you don't have anybody to facilitate them, we don't know how they're going to occur. But I do agree it could never have happened because they controlled us. No, they did. I mean, they told us—if we got out of line, they would bring us back in and so forth. And they allowed it to go along very slowly. It was a long time until we got to talk about real substance.

ASHLEY: I want to follow up on Richard's question. You've both said the conversations that you held years ago could be held now, but we do live in an incredibly polarized time. Could another group from different sides of an issue meet today the same way you did?

FRAN: I think they could. And you got to remember, we're in the middle of two murders and five shootings. It was extremely volatile at the time, and I do think that today it could be done. If I were in charge of the U.S. Congress, I would bring in a facilitator and try to have these guys talk to each other. Seriously, let them listen to what the other person is saying. They're missing that at that level.

And even on the different TV channels, whether it's right-wing or left-wing, there's no real genuine discussion about the content of different issues.

ASHLEY: Anne?

ANNE: I think the more the media can resist "if it bleeds, it leads" kind of journalism and have more spots and more discussions like you're providing, the examples of how we can have a conversation successfully, without expecting to change people's minds but hoping to learn to understand where they are coming from, that would be a great service to the country. I know people listen to the media that supports what they already think, but there are some breakthrough situations. I just think the more encouragement that can be given to people of good faith trying to understand one another, I would hope that would have some effect.

ASHLEY: These, on the whole, were civil, dignified conversations that you had with the help of your facilitators. What would you say you gained from them personally?

FRAN: For myself, I gained the opportunity to understand why I believe what I believe at a very deep level. When one speaks with people with whom one agrees, you tend not to even examine your belief system. I think what happened, for me, at least, is I dug very, very deeply to understand what I believed and to understand the difference between what I might believe as a Catholic as opposed to what I might believe as a lawyer in a secular society, what was possible. So, in that sense, I found it an extremely enriching experience.

ANNE: Part of what I gained, I gained very early on, which is this understanding about how I was getting thrown back to 1st century Christianity, the development of Christianity, and I realized I live in a kind of bubble where I don't have to spend a lot of time with people that I don't agree with. I don't have to listen to them. My family and I are pretty much on the same page. My friends and I are.

So learning that I could love advisedly—I use the word advisedly. I'm advising myself that I love Fran and Madeleine and Barbara. I don't always like them. I certainly don't believe them, but I love them. Do you hear it, Fran? I love you.

FRAN: I heard you, Anne, loud and clear. And, as they say, I love you, too.

ASHLEY: Fran Hogan and Anne Fowler.

RICHARD: That's our show. Let's Find Common Ground is a production of Common Ground Committee. We have many Common Ground podcast conversations and also other events at our website.

ASHLEY: Go to commongroundcommittee.org. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. You know, we always say this, Ashley, and we mean it. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.