

**RICHARD:** All too often, the state of our public discourse is dire, and that includes public insults and threats. We often assume the worst of each other and call people out publicly, especially online.

**ASHLEY:** Our guest on today's show says this behavior isn't just rude, it's uncivil, and that civility, not politeness, makes a real difference in how we think about ourselves and treat each other.

**ALEXANDRA HUDSON:** That human dignity, that high view of humanity and the human person, that is my moral foundation for civility, this mode that actually respects others enough to tell hard truths, to break rules, to be impolite.

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

**RICHARD:** I'm Richard Davies. Alexandra, or Lexi, Hudson grew up in a family where manners mattered, and when she went to work for Education Secretary Betsy DeVos in the Trump administration, she thought that good manners would help her navigate the sometimes-hostile work environment.

**ASHLEY:** But it didn't work out that way. Her experience got her thinking about what true civility is and how it can help us find common ground. She's the author of the book *The Soul of Civility: Timeless Principles to Heal Society and Ourselves*. Richard kicked off our interview.

**RICHARD:** Most of us don't think much about the difference between politeness and civility, but you certainly have thought a lot about that. You say civility goes much deeper than mere politeness. Discuss the difference and why it's not just a matter of simple manners.

**ALEXANDRA HUDSON:** So I came by this, my interest in this topic, honestly. My mother is something of a manners and etiquette expert. So I was raised in this home very attentive to social norms and social expectations, yet I always questioned norms. I am constitutionally allergic to authority. I hate rules. I hate being told what to do. But my mother promised me that following these rules of etiquette and politeness would serve me well in work and life and school. And she was right until I got to federal government.

And when I was in government, I saw these two extremes. I saw, on one hand, people who had sharp elbows, people who were willing to step on anyone to get ahead and obtain their objectives. On the other hand, I saw people who were polished and poised and polite, and I was like, "Okay, these are my people. I can work with these people." But these are the people, I quickly learned, who would smile at me one moment, stab me in the back the next. And that perplexed me.

My mother had said that manners were an outward expression of our inward character, and here were people I was surrounded by who were well-mannered enough yet ruthless and cruel. And that experience clarified for me this essential distinction between civility and politeness, that civility is different. So politeness is manners. It's etiquette. It is external, it's behavioral, it's superficial. Civility, by contrast, is internal. It's a way of seeing others as our moral equals who are worthy of respect just by virtue of our shared moral status as members of the human community. And that crucially, actually respecting someone means being impolite. It means telling a hard truth, engaging in robust debate. So we need less focus on politeness, and we need true civility, the actual disposition of respecting others and not just the gestures that pretend to respect people that, at their worst, can be tools of manipulation.

**ASHLEY:** And yet, for most people, I would say politeness is actually easier. It's easier for people to be polite than it is for them to be civil or cultivate civility. Why is that? Why is it so hard to be civil?

**ALEXANDRA HUDSON:** People yearn for these neat, simple rules and maxims by which to just live their life, and the reality is that humanity and human social relationships are so complex, far too complex to just be governed by static set-in-stone rules, and that the reality is that actually flourishing, actually having friendship requires breaking these rules from time to time. One example, the story I love to tell, is Queen Victoria, when she had the Queen of Persia to her home for a state dinner, she sat down, and everyone was about to eat, and the Queen of Persia did the unthinkable. She took the bowl in front of her and tipped it to her lips, and the whole room stood and stared. They couldn't believe she had done this because she drank like soup the finger bowl, the bowl in front of her that was meant for washing hands.

What did Queen Victoria do in this instance? She took the bowl and tipped it to her lips, as well. This is Victorian England that very much cared about regimented etiquette and rituals and social norms. This is the Victorian England that John Stuart Mill famously railed against. He hated these norms and proprieties. He thought they were so constraining and deforming of the human personality, the human social spirit.

And why did Victoria break this rule of propriety? To make her guest feel at ease, to foster social trust, to foster human relationships, to ensure that she felt comfortable, and they could have a nice evening together. So people like rules because they're easy, but civility, the decision of actually respecting others is hard, but that's what's really necessary to thrive and flourish.

**RICHARD:** So that example of Queen Victoria is not about her just being polite, but it's about civility. It's about something deeper than just norms and conventions. Looking at politics today, civility is not exactly a word that easily comes to mind. There's been so much anger, so much bitterness in our political discourse. You worked in politics for a while, and I know you mentioned this. What was your experience? Why did you end up leaving government feeling so disillusioned?

**ALEXANDRA HUDSON:** I was tired of being manipulated and kind of discarded and undermined. And I tacked really hard in the direction that seemed most suited to success and the one which I was most comfortable with, the polite track. And for me, politeness became a mode of survival. I brought in cupcakes for people's birthdays. I brought in Christmas cards and Easter cards. I invited my colleagues to my home, out for lunch to get to know them outside of the office context. These are hospitable, gracious gestures that I was raised with, that I still practice, but even though they were good gestures, they had a subliminal motive.

I hoped that they would help me rise above the office politics and make me too well-liked, too beloved to be fired or to be undermined. It was a tool of survival, and it felt really fake. It felt really constricting that I was doing these things for the wrong reasons. That felt really exhausting to my soul. It's because my motivation wasn't in the right place. It wasn't just to love people and know people. It was also to survive and hope that they would help me transcend the bullying and the hostility. And so I was disillusioned by these extremes.

I left government, and I reflected on this experience, and what I realized was that the extreme politeness and the extreme hostility, they seem like polar opposites, but they're actually very similar. They're actually two sides of the same coin because both modes see other human beings as means to their

selfish ends. They see other human beings as either pawns to be destroyed—that's what hostility does—or pawns to be manipulated—that's what extreme politeness does. I realized I hungered for a mode that was actually respectful, that could transcend and cut through these two extremes that were instrumentalizing of the human spirit, and that's how I settled on civility. I thought, what is the bare minimum of respect that we are owed and owed others by virtue of our shared personhood? And what does it look like in practice even when we deeply disagree? That is my moral foundation for civility, this mode that actually respects others enough to tell hard truths, to break rules, to be impolite, to suspend temporarily with rules of politeness for the greater good, for the project of human flourishing with others.

**RICHARD:** In your argument for civility, you're not asking for more agreement in our conversations, are you?

**ALEXANDRA HUDSON:** I'm not asking for agreement. Politeness is what demands agreement or wants to pretend that disagreement doesn't exist. I love etymology, and the etymology of politeness and civility supports this distinction I make about these two topics. The Latin root of "politeness" is a word, "polire," which means "to smooth or to polish," and that's what politeness does. It polishes over, it papers over difference. It tries to diminish that difference even exists as opposed to giving us the tools to grapple with difference head-on.

The Latin root of "civility" is "civitas," which is the root for all words related to a city, citizenship, and the citizen. And that's what civility is, is the tools and the habits befitting a member of the city, a citizen of the city.

**ASHLEY:** Changing the subject a bit, identity is a really common buzzword in current debates. Do you think we focus too much now on political identity?

**ALEXANDRA HUDSON:** It's such a great point. It's such a great question, and I argue that as these traditional touchstones of meaning—family, civil society, community, church—these have been on the decline in recent decades, that more and more people have misplaced their meaning from those traditional touchstones of meaning to public and political life. Everything has a political dimension now: where we grocery shop, what newspaper we read, what neighborhood we live in, where we send our kids to school. It's not just the obvious things like who we vote for, but it's how we live our lives. Everything has a political dimension. We've allowed politics to seep into all aspects of who we are.

We can longer have rational conversation across difference anymore. It's not just, "You think one thing about a public policy issue, and I think something else." It's now, "Oh, my gosh, I perceive that difference to be an existential threat to who I am. It's an assault on my very being, my very identity." And that is bad for our democracy because our free and flourishing way of life depends on deliberative discourse, on rational deliberative discourse. If we're in fight-or-flight. If we feel like our identity is being assaulted by everyone who disagrees with us every moment of every day, that's bad for public discourse, bad for our democracy. So it's kind of ironic that, on one hand, democracy and politics, they are a good thing, but the problem is when political discourse breaks down, violence is back on the table. So it's really bad for democracy, bad for our public life, bad for our social life, when we're not able to have conversations, healthy, rational conversations across difference. The stakes are really high.

So one thing I talk about in order to resolve this issue to relegate politics to its proper place. Politics in healthy proportions is a good thing, but we can't let public issues and political issues and political ideas

become our be-all, end-all and seep into all aspects of our lives. We have to relegate it to its proper place, and we have to reclaim things in our lives that give us joy, that bring meaning, that fill our souls like friendship, like intellectual inquiry and dialogue, like beauty. I talk about the sublime. I talk about having awe walks, just encountering beautiful things in nature, things that elevate our minds, that displace the self, and then things that allow us to come back to life with others refreshed. If we're only talking about the hard things all day, every day, having the controversial conversations, we're not going to do them justice.

**RICHARD:** Our podcast is Let's Find Common Ground, and one of the reasons why we find it so difficult to find common ground is perhaps that we're much more likely than previous generations to be lonely, to live independent lives. And you referred to this membership in voluntary organizations such as churches or clubs is much lower than it once was. Do you think that there's a link here between living independent or even lonely lives and the lack of political civility in our dialogue?

**ALEXANDRA HUDSON:** Absolutely, there is, and one of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century, the Jewish German philosopher Hannah Arendt, she observed this, too. In her book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she said that personal loneliness and personal dislocation and alienation, that is fertile ground for a tyrant and for a strongman to arise and take advantage of people's loneliness, give them an out. When people are lonely, they're angry. They're hurt. There's this cliché that hurt people hurt people. That's another thing that we have a really hard time grappling with and sufficiently understanding.

Today, there's a lot of viciousness, a lot of savagery in our public world and public life right now, and we should be critical of that. But what we insufficiently realize, and one thing that my grandmother, for example, was excellent at, was seeing the origins, the thing beneath the thing. Where is that savagery, that viciousness coming from? And for me, for example, I find it so easy when I encounter a rude, discourteous, mean person, to tell a story like, "Okay, they're a mean person," just end it at that. And I think that's really common for people to do. My grandma, she told, instead, a story of exoneration, like, "That's not a mean person. That's a hurt person who's having a bad day, and how can I not respond in kind but respond with graciousness and respond with kindness in a way that might soften them and elevate their day because they're already clearly very much suffering and very much alone?"

Back to Arendt, she realized that hurt people hurt people, right? It's a cliché, but it's also true. So she saw the power of social trust, of friendship, of human social bonds in supporting a free society, a free and a flourishing society as an essential buttress against strongmen, against totalitarianism.

**ASHLEY:** You're listening to Lexi Hudson on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

**RICHARD:** I'm Richard. And we'd like to politely—

**ASHLEY:** And civilly—

**RICHARD:** Ask you to type the numbers 53555 into your phone followed by the letters CGC. Texting is an easy way to donate something to support our show. That's 53555 and then CGC for Common Ground Committee.

**ASHLEY:** Conflict and division always grab the headlines. The painstaking work of building bridges and finding common ground, not so much, but we think it's vital. That's why we bring you this podcast every two weeks.

**RICHARD:** Help us to continue to get the word out about the good work being done by common grounders all over the country.

**ASHLEY:** Again, that number is 53555 followed by the letters CGC, and thank you.

**RICHARD:** Now back to our conversation with Lexi Hudson.

**ASHLEY:** We are coming up to Thanksgiving, and a lot of us will be hosting friends and family and maybe even a neighbor who we don't know very well because we're being hospitable, and it's holiday time. Talk a little bit about the part that hospitality plays in civility.

**ALEXANDRA HUDSON:** Unfortunately, today when people hear the word "hospitality," they think of hotels and fancy trips to Italy and plane rides. There's a whole industry called the hospitality industry. When people get a degree in hospitality, that's what they're being trained to do, to be a service worker in this big hospitality industry. But there is this hidden history of hospitality, of showing kindness to the stranger, of welcoming the outsider to become an insider, that we actually find this ethic of welcoming the stranger across history and across culture. We see it in Hebrew Bible, Abraham showing kindness to the strangers who are angels in disguise.

And so I think it's important to elevate and reclaim this hidden history and forgotten history of hospitality because it is an incredibly powerful tool to heal our very broken world. People rarely hate people that they share a meal with, they share a conversation with, that there's something beautiful and forgotten about that power. We are so sick as a society right now. We long for relationship and for community, but there is this power, this transformative power of hospitality to create healing.

**RICHARD:** For most of us, Thanksgiving involves not strangers but welcoming family members and friends to our tables, and yet, many families are broken apart, are wounded or damaged in some way. Maybe they are also politically at odds. What are some ways that people can heal one another in this time of year?

**ALEXANDRA HUDSON:** Well, one thing I think is so important is to remember what the purpose of that dinner table is. It's to come around shared bonds, shared history to give gratitude for all the blessings in our lives. I've heard these heart-wrenching stories of family relationships breaking down, family members not talking to one another anymore, decades-long, lifelong friendships ending over political difference. And that's a prime example. That's a symptom of the way in which we've misplaced our meaning in politics and allowed ever-important public questions to become the most important things when they're not. The most important things in life are sacred: the bonds of friendship, the bonds of family. Those are beautiful. Those are treasures to be guarded and to be preserved.

The Thanksgiving dinner table is not a university classroom. The university classroom, for example, or the Floor of Congress, the purpose there is, at its best, the collective pursuit of truth where you should debate, you should be able to freely voice differences of opinion and converse across dialogue and across difference. But the Thanksgiving dinner table is not that. You don't have to talk about the COVID vaccine and the presidential election and all these hot-button topics that are bound to upset people. They're bound to get people's blood boiling. Just make it a controversy-free zone. That's okay. It's okay to say, "I value this relationship so much that I'm not going to introduce really controversial hot-button

issues," and I think we should absolutely talk about politics less if we want to flourish and if we want these social relationships to be vibrant and sustain.

**ASHLEY:** We do, of course, end up talking about politics a lot on this show. I was just wondering if there's anything else you'd like to say about how civility can help us find common ground.

**ALEXANDRA HUDSON:** Absolutely. My philosophy of civility is about personhood and that as we appreciate our own humanity that we appreciate the humanity and dignity and personhood of others, as well, even those, especially those that we disagree with. When the stakes are high or feel really high—in times of war, in times of political elections—where it feels like an existential threat, it's very tempting and very easy to dehumanize the other, degrade the humanity and dignity of the other because then it's easier for us to justify doing and saying whatever is necessary in order to win. And so how can civility help us find commonality across difference? What we need right now is a radical reorientation of our values of our values towards preserving and elevating personhood and human personality. This is what Dr. King called for throughout his life's work but also in his Letter from Birmingham Jail, that we need to be willing to dispense with norms, practices, rituals that are degrading of the human personality and do whatever we can to uplift, affirm, elevate human personality and human dignity, and I think that common humanity disposition, that approach, that's the disposition of civility that we so desperately need right now.

**ASHLEY:** I wanted to touch on the digital world, which is something that comes up from time to time on this show. Some of us are going to be possibly contributing to the less savory side of online life, even if we don't mean to. How do we take a step back from this digital brink?

**ALEXANDRA HUDSON:** I think history is both a caution and a comfort to us. It's a caution because history's been really bad before. This question of how might we flourish across deep difference, this is the most important question of our day, but it is also a timeless question.

**ASHLEY:** Yes, you point out that George Orwell was worried about the radio back in the 1930s.

**ALEXANDRA HUDSON:** That's exactly right. The Hebrew Bible, the book of Ecclesiastes says, "There is nothing new under the sun." And I think that's especially true as we look at the history of technology, that people have been worried about the way that novel technologies are disruptive and foster trust and mistrust in one another and in institutions for a really long time. Exactly. Orwell was worried about the radio and how it was going to corrupt society and degrade social trust. People were absolutely terrified of an invention, a technological invention that is now, today, considered the greatest invention in human history, the Gutenberg printing press, but the invention of the printing press similarly sowed mistrust in society, in institutions, in political authorities and religious authorities. And it is really interesting, I think, to see how history retells itself. The story of history tells itself differently with time.

So, yes, we're in this age of disruption right now where we're rightly worried about how these technologies are affecting our social bonds, and we should be skeptical and critical. We should never be unthinking and unquestioning in how we embrace new technologies, but also, at the same time, I think it's helpful, it's healthy to be a student of history and realize that we've been here before. However, it can feel really overwhelming to look out around us and say, "What can be done?" And what I've instead tried to do, instead of focusing on what other people can change, is focusing on what I can control, and I've chosen to wield how I engage on these platforms with a certain ethic of civility. I've chosen to what I call "cultivate my digital garden," making what I can control, my little corner of the internet a little bit

better, a little bit more beautiful, a little bit more filled with grace than maybe the median place in the internet is.

So I've created my newsletter called Civic Renaissance, and it's an intellectual community of people dedicated to beauty, goodness, and truth. And I've grown it to about 50,000 people, and that's small, but it's growing because people are hungry for this. They want that, and that's the beautiful thing about this digitally connected world, that you can find like minds that care about these issues. I'm sure that you've found the same with the community that you've created around common ground and dialogue across difference, that it might feel small, but our actions have great power. They can create a ripple effect for good. We do have far more power to be a part of the solution than we realize.

**RICHARD:** Lexi Hudson, thanks very much.

**ALEXANDRA HUDSON:** Thank you both for having me.

**ASHLEY:** Lexi Hudson on Let's Find Common Ground. And Richard, I really liked her focus on the unsung benefits of hospitality because I don't think a lot of us think about this. And I know a church where, every Thanksgiving, they put on a free dinner for anyone in the community who's alone or can't afford to have a Thanksgiving meal. And I think the best thing about this is the feeling of fellowship you get when all these people, mostly strangers, sit down together to have this incredible meal that's been cooked and served by all these different people from the town. It's really lovely, and it feels like a true coming-together.

**RICHARD:** Sounds great, and there are many similar efforts all across the country. I've been working with a group called Interfaith Volunteers in New Haven, Connecticut, and a local soup kitchen, days of preparation for a project called Thanksgiving for All. The goal is to deliver over 1,000 fresh meals on Thanksgiving morning to older residents in houses and homes where they live. Many people live alone, and they rely on their neighbors for help. I think Thanksgiving is a time of gratitude and a good holiday to resolve to be helpful and also—the theme of our podcast today—civil.

**ASHLEY:** And kind to strangers. That's our show for this week. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

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

**ANNOUNCER:** This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.