

RICHARD: As we record this episode, cities are erupting over racial injustice, communities of color facing visible threats. Leaders who should bring us together seem incapable of doing so. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. We speak today with musician, activist, author, and band leader Daryl Davis, a Black man who spent well over 30 years speaking with and, at times, befriending white supremacists.

RICHARD: We hear from Daryl about his extraordinary quest and strategy to improve race relations and find common ground. Welcome to Let's Find Common Ground, Daryl.

DARYL: Thank you. Thank you both very much for having me.

ASHLEY: Daryl, before we hear this story, we're doing this interview at a time of national despair and deep anger over racial injustice. What's your response to the killing of George Floyd in police custody and to everything that's happened since?

DARYL: Well, one, a lot of anger, a lot of frustration that must be channeled into communication and dialogue, not police training as everybody wants to say. Training has nothing to do with it. When you're out there selecting a particular group of people, in this case Black people, and you're not treating white people the same way, it has nothing to do with training. It has to do with humanity.

ASHLEY: You emphatically said training is not the answer. What's an alternative?

DARYL: An alternative is having regular meetings with your community explaining police procedure, listening to your community about their concerns and their fears of the police. Listen to the police concerns about the community, and don't do it every time something happens. Do it on an ongoing basis. It has to be an ongoing, proactive thing. When you are given that kind of authority, that you have the authority to take somebody's life, then you need to be more accountable than the average person.

RICHARD: Can there be anything positive that comes out of what has happened?

DARYL: The upside of this particular protest and murder, lynching if you will, is that a lot of people who look like the officers who committed this lynching are now joining in the protest, and that's different. We've always had white people in protest with us since the Civil Rights Movement. But this time around, it's a lot more, and maybe now they will be heard because in the past, when they were predominantly Black, they were never heard. And that's why that is happening again and again and again.

The reason I call this a lynching is this. I'm sure you've seen the pictures of a Black man hanging from the tree, and the crowd gather around pointing and smiling. It's like a family affair. Even little girls are there with smiles on their faces. There've been several

pictures like that of different lynchings. That group is called a lynch mob. When you have four police officers on camera, two of them holding a Black man down, the third one choking him to death with his knee on his neck, and the fourth one holding the crowd back of passersby on the sidewalk, that is a lynch mob, especially when it is illegal. The hold was illegal. The man was not resisting. He's on his stomach. He's crying out for his mama, and he's saying, "I can't breathe," and you are murdering him while looking into the camera with defiance, wanton, blatant disregard for the law that you are sworn to uphold. What is the difference between that and the pictures that we've seen from the 1920s?

RICHARD: Your work is with extremists, with white nationalists, with racists. But are you saying that there's also a huge problem with bystanders, with people just not speaking up?

DARYL: No, no, no. The bystanders have spoken up. They were speaking up right there during the lynching, saying, "Get off him. He can't breathe. He can't breathe." If you watch that video again, you'll see one of the bystanders try to come a little closer, and the guy on his neck reaches for his gun. Those other three officers should've pulled their fellow officer off that man. They knew he was doing wrong. Charge them, and let the jury decide whether they're guilty or not and what their fate should be. But yet, they're out running the streets. We have complained. We've been complaining for decades about this, and it's fallen on deaf ears.

People want to know: why do these buildings get burned down every time something like this happens? Now, I'm not advocating that kind of destruction. I'm not justifying that kind of destruction, but I will tell you why it happens. If you get pulled over by the police for running a red light or for speeding, you're issued a citation. If you do something wrong to somebody, they might sue you. All these situations are attached to money, and the reason being is because when somebody separates you from your money, it acts as a deterrent. When people have talked to you and told you time and time and time again what's happening and you don't listen, then people feel they have no choice but to write you that speeding ticket, to sue you, to impose that fine upon you. That's what they do when they burn down these buildings. It costs the city money.

Now, Officer Derek Chauvin, the man had 18 complaints against him. Obviously, somebody or plural somebodies spoke up 18 times, and nobody listened, which is why it led to what happened. Why did they allow this man with that many complaints that they have in his personnel file, allow him to roam the streets and continue his job? They brought this on themselves, and this is not something that happens in a vacuum. It's been happening, and nobody's been listening. So they figure, "Well, now maybe we'll get their attention."

RICHARD: Daryl Davis on the outrage over the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

ASHLEY: The rest of our interview with Daryl was conducted before this happened and after the outcry over the murder of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia.

RICHARD: I began by asking Daryl Davis about his years of discussions with white supremacists and how he convinced members of the Ku Klux Klan to hang up their robes and quit.

DARYL: Well, let's say this: I did not convince them. They convinced themselves. I was simply the impetus for that. I planted the seed, and I nourished it and gave them enough reason to think and do some introspection and reconsider their path. And in doing so, they made up their mind to choose another direction.

ASHLEY: Take us back. How did this all start?

DARYL: Okay. Well, we have to go back to my childhood for that. I'm 62 years of age, but my parents were in the U.S. Foreign Service. So I grew up as an American embassy brat, traveling all over the world, living in different countries for two years and then returning home here to the United States for a few months and then being assigned to another country. So, back in the early 60s, when I was overseas in elementary school, my classes were filled with kids from all over the world. Whoever had an embassy there, all of their kids went to the same school as I did. So I grew up in what you would call a multicultural environment, and if you were to open the door to my classroom and pop your head in, you would say, "This looks like a United Nations of little kids," because that's exactly what it was.

Now, when I would return home here, my own country, the United States, I would be in either all Black schools or Black and white schools, meaning the still-segregated or the newly integrated. At that time, there was not the kind of diversity that I had overseas, all kinds of different colors, ethnicities, etc. like we have today if you walk into a classroom. So I was baffled why people could not get along. It was beyond me.

RICHARD: And then you had an incident, didn't you, in the Boy Scouts or Cub Scouts?

DARYL: In the Cub Scouts, yeah. I was the only Black scout in a parade, and everything was going fine. The sidewalks were lined with nothing but white people, and reached a point in the parade where I began getting hit with bottles and soda pop cans and rocks.

RICHARD: How old were you?

DARYL: I was 10. I was in 4th grade. It was not by everybody, just a small group of people mixed in with the crowd, standing together, maybe four or five people. I was so naive that when I was getting hit, I thought those people over there did not like the Scouts. I had no idea I was a target until my den mother and Cubmaster and troop

leader all came running over, and they huddled over me to protect me and escort me out of the danger, that I realized I was the only target. And I didn't understand it, and they were not explaining it to me. They just kept saying, "It'll be okay. It'll be okay. Hurry up. Hurry up. Move along." So, when I got home that day, my mother and father were cleaning me up, putting band-aids on me, and asking me, "How did you fall down and get all scraped up?" And I told them, "I didn't fall down." I told them precisely what had happened, and for the first time in my life, my parents sat me down and explained racism to me.

At the age of 10, believe it or not, I had never heard the word "racism." I had no reason to. I'd been all over the world and got along with everybody. There was no racism. So I did not believe my parents when they were telling me this because my 10-year-old brain could not wrap itself around the idea that someone who had never seen me, spoken to me, or knew anything about me would want to hurt me for no other reason than the color of my skin. It made absolutely no sense. And, about a month and a half later, Martin Luther King was assassinated that same year, 1968. I remember. I remember the riots. Then I realized my parents had not lied to me.

This thing called racism does exist, but why do people hate each other because of skin color? How can you hate me when you don't even know me? And now, for the next 52 years, I've been looking for the answer to that question. Who better to ask than someone who goes so far as to join an organization whose whole premise has been hating those who don't look like them and who don't believe in what they stand for? So I've been seeking out white supremacists and people like that from various groups: the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, etc.

ASHLEY: You say you've been seeking them out. When was the first time? How did it happen? Was it serendipitous, if you can call it that, that you met someone from the Klan, or did you seek to find them?

DARYL: It was serendipitous because I'd bought a lot of books. I have a vast library, starting from when I was a kid, on the Ku Klux Klan, on white supremacy, Black supremacy, anti-Semitism, the Nazis in Germany, the neo-Nazis over here, just trying to learn: where does this ideology come from? I know you're not born with it. So where did you get it? Where is it going? How can it be addressed? And none of my books answered it. So I graduated from college with my degree in music, and I was playing in a band. Country music had made a comeback in this country. So, as a full-time musician, if you wanted to work, you had to play country, and I enjoyed country music. So I joined a country band, the only Black guy in the band and usually the only Black guy where we would perform.

We were performing in a bar in a town called Frederick, Maryland, and we had just finished playing a set of music. We were taking a break, and I was walking to go sit down at a table with my bandmates when a white gentleman came up behind me and

wrapped his arm around my shoulder. Now, this bar was an all-white bar, and I don't mean that Black people could not go in. I mean that they did not go in by their own choice because they were not welcome there. So I didn't know anybody in this bar, and I'm wondering, "Who's touching me?" It's not one of my bandmates because they'll all up ahead of me.

So I turned around, and it was this guy. He said he enjoyed the music. I shook his hand and thanked him, and then he made the remark that he'd never seen a Black man play piano like Jerry Lee Lewis before. I was not offended, but I was kind of surprised because this guy was older than me, and I thought he should've known the Black origin of Jerry Lee Lewis's style of piano playing.

RICHARD: Yeah. Just for listeners who don't know, Jerry Lee Lewis's musical inspiration in the 1950s was from African Americans.

DARYL: Absolutely. He got his style from listening. He'll tell you himself. He's a very good friend of mine. He told me he listened to Black, blues, and boogie-woogie piano players. That's where rock and roll and rockabilly came from. Well, I tried to explain that to this guy, and he was incredulous. He did not believe me, even after I told him that I know Jerry Lee, and he's told me himself. He didn't believe that, either, but he was fascinated enough with me that he wanted to buy me a drink. Now, I don't drink alcohol, but I went back to his table and had a cranberry juice. And he took his glass and clinked my glass and cheered me, and he says, "You know, this is the first time I ever sat down with a Black man and had a drink."

Now I'm wondering, "What's going on here?" So I innocently asked him. I said, "Why?" and at first, he didn't answer me. I asked him again, and he had a friend sitting next to him who elbowed him and said, "Tell him, tell him, tell him." And I said, "Tell me." He looked back at me just as straight as an arrow, and he said, "I'm a member of the Ku Klux Klan." Well, I burst out laughing because now I did not believe him. Why would a Klansman come to me and embrace me and praise my piano abilities and want to buy me a drink? It does not work that way. I'd never read any similar story in any of my Klan books, right? So I'm laughing at him like he's joking. He went inside his pocket, produced his wallet, and handed me his Klan membership card. And I recognized the Klan insignia, which is a red circle with a white cross and a red blood drop in the center of the cross, and I stopped laughing.

But we had a great conversation. It was very friendly, and he gave me his phone number and wanted me to call him whenever I was to return to this bar because he wanted to bring his friends, meaning Klansmen and Klanswomen, to see this Black guy play piano like Jerry Lee. And I'd call him every six weeks, and he'd come. He'd bring Klan people, and they would watch me play. On the breaks, I would go to his table to say hello. I would meet some of them. Some of them would see me coming and get up and scurry off to some other part of the room. They wanted nothing to do with me other

than to watch me, which was fine. The ones that hung out and were curious, I'd meet them and talk with them.

I quit that band shortly thereafter. I lost track of the guy. But then later it dawned on me, "Daryl, there's the answer to your question. It fell right into your lap." There's the serendipity aspect. I'd been looking for this answer to my question since the age of 10: how can you hate me when you don't even know me? And no book and no one had been able to provide it to me, and here a Klansman falls right into my lap. Who better to ask? So I scrambled around, scrambled around and found this guy's number. So I said, "You know what? I'm going to write a book on the Klan. I'm going to talk to this guy, get him to hook me up with the leader, and then I'll travel around the country and interview different Klan leaders and members and find out the answer to my question, put it all in a book.

ASHLEY: Were you worried for your safety at all?

DARYL: No, not really, not really. But I think, Ashley, what it was is the fact that I had been traveling so much as a child and then now as an adult musician performing all over this country and around the world. And no matter how far away I've gone from my own country to the other side of the earth, at the end of the day, I have come to one conclusion: that we all are human beings. We all want the same things.

RICHARD: Have you been successful?

DARYL: Absolutely, absolutely. There have been over 200 people who have renounced that ideology and left those organizations or turned their lives around. I have robes and hoods and Nazi flags and all kinds of stuff given to me by active members, who were active when I met them, and now they have renounced that.

ASHLEY: I'm so curious. What did they say to you? When they decide to give up and give you their robes, what do they say?

DARYL: They say they were wrong. I asked them during the first interviews, "How can you hate me? You don't even know me. All you see is the color of my skin." If somebody sits in front of you and tells you that you're a criminal, that you lack intelligence, that you're lazy and prefer to be on welfare, would you say that what that person is telling you is offensive? Absolutely, but here's the difference. Am I offended? Absolutely not, not because what that person is saying is true, but I'm not offended because what that person's saying is a lie. At the end, when they renounce this, they say, "Daryl, I was wrong. I don't have any reason to hate you," because what's happening is we're having a conversation. They've never done that before. They've had debates, or they've had clashes.

I would disagree with them, but instead of clashing with them, I would listen because I'm there to learn. Everybody wants to be heard. So I would let them get it all out, and then I would explain things to them from my perspective. They would go home, and they would think, "You know? What that Black guy said was right, but he's Black. He's Black, but he's right. But he's Black." So it was a cognitive dissonance thing going on. They had to make up their own mind, "Do I continue living a lie, or do I believe the truth and turn my life around?" That's why I say I planted the seed, I nourished it, and they converted or convinced themselves.

RICHARD: You said something that I think goes right to the heart of finding common ground, which is the people who you spoke to, the racists who you talked to had never had a discussion with a Black person. They'd only had a debate about Black people.

DARYL: Or a confrontation with.

RICHARD: Right. So how important is conversation, discussions, finding common ground?

DARYL: It is absolutely important, and the common ground is this. What you do is you look for things that you have in common. For example, I know neither one of you to be involved in white supremacist groups, but if I were to ask either one of you, "Do you believe that we need better education for kids?" you would say yes. "Do you believe that we need to address the drug problem on the streets?" you would say yes. Well, guess what. They believe the same thing. So now you've got something in common with the Klan. So we may not agree on racial things, but I find things that we have in common. Drugs do not discriminate. They will take anybody out, just like this coronavirus, COVID-19. It doesn't care if you're a Klansman, a Nazi, a Black person, a Muslim, a gay, a Jew, whatever. It will take you out, all right?

So you find these things in common and discuss them and let them see. But then they begin seeing the humanity in you. When two enemies are talking, conversing, they're not fighting. They're talking. They be yelling and screaming, perhaps, at some points, but at least they're talking. It's when the conversation ceases that the ground become fertile for violence.

ASHLEY: We're speaking with Daryl Davis on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. More in a minute.

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BARRY KUDLOW: But I would give you a lot of running room on the personal tax side if you give me my 15% corporate tax rate, large and small [crosstalk 00:23:05].

BARNEY FRANK: With the right tradeoff, we could do that.

BARRY KUDLOW: I mean that. I mean that. I think there's a deal to be had.

RICHARD: Watch full events online at CommonGroundCommittee.org or on our Common Ground Committee YouTube channel. We're back with Daryl Davis.

ASHLEY: Right now there's outrage over recent killings. There have been many shootings and deaths of Black men in recent years. At times like this, is it easier to do your work, or is it harder to have those conversations?

DARYL: It is a bittersweet time. The bitter thing is that we have to have those conversations because yet another Black guy has been shot for no reason, who's unarmed. That's the bitter part, but the sweet part is it brings people together, and we have the opportunity to address these things. But we have to do it the right way. We have been addressing this problem the wrong way for decades. Ignorance breeds fear. We fear those things we don't understand. If we do not keep that fear in check, that fear in turn will escalate. It will grow just like weeds. If you do not keep that hatred in check, that hatred in turn will escalate and breed destruction.

RICHARD: So what is the right way to respond to this hatred, this fear?

DARYL: Don't address the hatred. Don't address the fear. Go to the source. When you find out you have bone cancer in your arm, say, you don't put a topical cream on top of your arm or a band-aid. You've got to go down to the bone where the cancer is. We have to go to the source of the racism, which is ignorance, and there is a cure for ignorance. That cure is education, education and exposure.

RICHARD: We're doing this interview in the weeks after the outcry over the Ahmaud Arbery killing in Georgia. Didn't you feel a sense of anger, of even fury when you first saw what had happened to this man?

DARYL: Of course, absolutely, but what is putting anger out going to do? I'm not saying blow it off by any means. It has to be addressed. But let's take that energy, that anger, and convert it towards something positive that can come out of it. And that's focusing on

curing the cause: ignorance. Had these people got to know one another, perhaps that would not have happened. Had these people learned a little bit more about humanity, educate them, maybe that would not have happened. So let's focus on those things.

ASHLEY: Your work as an educator and teacher, you haven't just done it here in the U.S., have you? You've worked in other countries. Can you talk about that?

DARYL: Sure. I've spoken in Israel. I've spoken in Belgium, Germany, Slovakia, and India, and each place has different issues, unlike us. With us, it's a Black and white issue. In India, it's the caste system, the lighter-skinned as opposed to the darker-skinned people, and in Israel, of course, it's the Palestinians and the Jewish people, and they are a people. Places like Lebanon, it's the Christians and the Muslims. In Ireland, it's the Catholics and the Protestants. But, again, at the end of the day, it's ignorance. It's coming together, finding that common ground, and having those conversations.

My favorite quote of all time is by the American author Mark Twain: "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime." Had I not had all that exposure as a child, would I be doing this today? Maybe not.

RICHARD: What do you do in your work? Do you go to colleges, to schools? Are you asked to speak at different events, and who asks you?

DARYL: Well, I never thought about that I would ever be a lecturer or something like that, traveling around the country talking about this. I had just done this for my own knowledge and my own satisfaction of finding: how can you hate me when you don't even know me? and putting it in a book. My book became the first book written by a Black author on the Klan. But who do I speak to, my audiences? Predominantly colleges and universities, and I also do corporations for diversity training, companies. I do civic organizations. I speak at a lot of churches and synagogues, sometimes police departments. I give anywhere from 60 to maybe 80 lectures a year all over the world, a lot around this country.

ASHLEY: I'm curious. Just talking of family, over the years, what have your own family and friends said to you about your work? What do they think?

DARYL: Well, my friends...

RICHARD: Yeah, do they think you're crazy?

DARYL: Well, they know it. So they understand me, but the people who don't know me and have not had the opportunity like you all to interview or talk with me or hear this interview, some of them jump to conclusions and jump to the wrong conclusion. I get it.

They see a picture of a Black man shaking hands with somebody in a robe and hood. If I saw that, I'd have a visceral reaction, but me, I would say, "What's going on here?" And I would read the backstory. Some people don't read the backstory, and they draw their own narrative, and it's wrong.

RICHARD: You've done this work for many years. Have you convinced others to do this work alongside you?

DARYL: Yes. There have been some who want to do this work. I get emails all the time from people who say, "Hey, how can I do this?" Some follow up on it. Some don't. Then, of course, there are those who you call "formers." They were former members of these organizations. Some of them come out with me and educate people. Usually, they feel that they need to repair the damage that they did when they were in those organizations.

ASHLEY: What I see a lot in my professional groups that I'm in is younger people of color, so say 20s to mid-30s, the Millennial generation, they have had it with accommodating white people, right? They're like, "Why should I go out on a limb and do this emotional work of explaining to a white person what my experience of the world is like? They should be meeting me where I am."

DARYL: I get that. I get that question all the time, "It's not my job to teach them how to behave." Well, you know what? If they don't learn, then we're just going to enable and continue the cycle. It's all our jobs to educate one another. We need to get rid of this attitude. I understand the frustration. I understand the impatience, like, "How much longer do we have to put up with this?" Well, you know what? The Civil War ended in 1865, and we're still going through this stuff. We're still being held down. So how long is it going to take? Well, maybe if we change our approach because whatever it is we were doing for the last 150 years has not worked. Maybe we need to spend the time educating one another. Let's get rid of this concept: I'm not my brother's keeper. Let's become our brother's keeper, and maybe we all can be happy.

RICHARD: What about all of us? No matter what the color of our skin or the place that we come from, what can we do?

DARYL: Our society, our country can only become one of two things. One, it can become that which we sit back and let it become, or two, it can become that which we stand up and make it. So we have to ask ourselves the question, "Do I want to sit back and see what my country becomes, or do I want to stand up and make my country become what I want to see?" And I've chosen the latter. So you have to get into the thick of it, and you cannot get this stuff out of a textbook. You've got to go there and be in the thick of it. You have to understand empathy and understand where a lot of this is coming from and be willing to rise above all the negativity, all the insults, all the b.s. If

you spend five minutes, just five minutes with your worst enemy, you will find something in common. If you spend 10 minutes, you'll find even more.

This is why this is so important. We have to learn how to have civil discourse. Again, yes, we are going to debate things because we're not going to agree on everything, but let's not frame it as a debate. Let's frame it as a conversation because when you say the word "debate," people get their wall up. They're ready to, "Bring it on," kind of thing. When you say, "Hey, let's just talk about it. How do you feel about this?" and then you listen. Then you tell how you feel. That's a conversation. You're challenging one another, but when you use the word "debate," it has a little more of an aggressive tone to it than just having a conversation on different points of view.

RICHARD: That's a great way to end. Daryl Davis, thanks very much for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

DARYL: Well, thank you both very much for having me. I really, really appreciate it, and I hope we found some common ground between the three of us.

RICHARD: Yeah, I hope we do it again.

ASHLEY: Yeah, it's going to be a great podcast.

DARYL: Okay. We will consider this part one. I'll be looking for part two.

RICHARD: Daryl Davis.

ASHLEY: Our podcasts are a production of Common Ground Committee. Find out more about our work at CommonGroundCommittee.org. Subscribe to Let's Find Common Ground wherever you listen to podcasts. Reviews and downloads help many more people find us.

RICHARD: Thanks for listening.