

ASHLEY: How do we get people who disagree, who feel very strongly about their stands on issues, into the same room? Not only that, how can they build bridges together and seek consensus? The answer may not be about compromise. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Kelly Johnston and Rob Fersh first met more than 25 years ago as political opponents. Today, they still disagree on politics but are good friends who work together to try and build consensus.

ASHLEY: Kelly is a committed Republican who voted for Donald Trump. He's a former Secretary of the U.S. Senate and worked on more than 30 Republican congressional campaigns. Later in his career, Kelly was a senior executive in the food industry.

RICHARD: Rob Fersh worked as a Democratic staff member on three congressional committees before founding Convergence Center for Policy Resolution. In our interview, we'll learn more about how Convergence builds trust among people on both sides of the political divide.

ASHLEY: Rob Fersh, Kelly Johnston, you say that you agree on almost nothing except how to solve problems across the political divide. How did you start working together? Kelly, maybe you can kick off.

KELLY: Sure. Well, it actually goes back to 1995. I was in a role then as the Staff Director for the Senate Republican Policy Committee just after the '94 elections, which, of course, the Republicans gained control of the House for the first time in 40 years, and they'd regained control of the Senate after a few years. I had a call one day in the spring of that year. Of course, this was also... The Newt Gingrich Contract with American agenda was being pushed through the House. It wasn't entirely embraced by Senate Republicans. So there's a tiny bit of friction.

But one day I get a call from my counterpart, Staff Director for the House Republican Conference. He called me up and said, "Kelly, I need a big favor. I'm supposed to debate this guy named Rob Fersh next week at the Student Policy Conference in Washington. I can't go. Can you go for me? I'm calling in a favor. Could you do this?"

Then, between then and the time I was going to speak at the Student Policy Conference with Rob, there was a little magazine that used to... The inserts, I think you can still get with some newspapers on a Sunday, the Parade Magazine. And here was Rob Fersh, who was, at the time, the head of the Food Resource Action Network, the nation's leading anti-hunger advocate. And I thought, "Oh, my gosh. I'm going into a lion's den, and I am not going to come out of there very well."

So I was expecting a very hostile environment, a hostile audience. This was going to be a challenge. And what turned out was a very thoughtful, open, introspective discussion about this. There was genuineness on Rob's part to understand the House Republican

position, which I was able to at least, I think, clumsily thumb through, if you will. But it really resulted in a great discussion, not assuming anything bad or evil or in opposition. It was designed to try to come to an understanding about: how can we really resolve the issue of improving access to nutrition here in the United States?

I left there just like, "Wow, that was fantastic. Why can't we have more of these discussions where people aren't vilified, they're treated with respect, there's a genuine curiosity about positions, and that we're all trying to at least resolve the same thing in different ways?" That began a longstanding friendship and partnership on these issues.

RICHARD: So you knew nothing about food?

KELLY: I liked it. That's about it. No, I was not by any means, at that time, an expert on food policy.

RICHARD: So, Rob, this right-winger from the Senate walks in, and you meet for the first time. What's your impression of how you both met, given that you were a food policy activist acting on behalf of consumers and something of a Liberal?

ROB: Well, first, Kelly's a little too generous. The proposal Kelly had to defend, which actually hurt Republicans politically, was specifically a proposal to block grant the school lunch program. I was certainly open to hearing whatever Kelly had to say because that's just the way I operate. Usually, I try to listen, but I was pretty adamantly opposed to that idea. But in Kelly, I saw a guy of decency, a guy I could talk to, a guy I liked right away. Then, for reasons I don't fully remember, we just stayed in touch.

Kelly eventually moved to a trade association in food, and when I began to think about changing my career from advocacy to bridge-building, I really wanted Kelly to be a partner to bellwether how I could do that in a way that was genuinely open to all different points of view. Kelly has been a rock to me and a great bellwether and a great friend to try to build out a capacity that everybody could trust to be fair-minded in how we bring people together who disagree on issues but actually agree there are problems. They just disagree on how to solve them.

ASHLEY: I know you're great friends, but you did vote differently in the 2020 election, right?

KELLY: Yeah, we did. One of the things I'll say, my career now is to be a bridge builder, so my personal views, I don't tend to get into in any setting I'm in these days. But I think part of why we wanted to put out the op-ed we did was to say that people who come from different orientations can be friends, can work together even on tough issues.

ROB: I did not favor the reelection of President Trump, and it wasn't even as much because I come from a liberal background. It was more I've been such a messenger for

collaboration, tolerance, people talking to each other, understanding each other, giving people the benefit of the doubt. And I didn't think he modeled that very well.

RICHARD: Let's talk about that op-ed, that article in The Hill. This is a publication mostly for people who are interested in what's going on in Congress, in Washington. Both of you have some interesting proposals about how rivals can help solve problems together. Kelly, what's step one?

KELLY: Well, that's a great question, and I would go back to our experience at Convergence. Where I worked in the food industry and was very frustrated over the constant attacks we were getting from consumer advocates in the food area, I think there was a lot of animosity and a lot of very negative views of food companies, that we were only in it for the money, didn't care about people's lives and their health.

On the other hand, we felt there were people in the consumer world that just didn't care about what we did, with no appreciation for what we were trying to do and a lack of understanding that if consumers wanted healthier foods, we will make them. That's the way companies work. They want to make things that people will buy and consume and come back and do it again. If it's healthier food, great. So Rob began that very challenging process at Convergence to bring us together, and it resulted in some really transformed relationships and some results that I'm really proud of.

ASHLEY: So, Rob, you were President of Convergence. Your job was to bring both sides on a contentious issue together in the same room. Kelly came to you and asked for help. What progress was made when consumer groups and food executives met?

ROB: I think the most important thing, just to begin with, is that we had a level of conversation where people literally understood each other's constraints and their needs and their aspirations. And that, I think, was transformative and, as Kelly says, has continuously yielded results. They got in the room, and one food industry person after another, Kelly was one of them but there was many others, explained that they were upset about the levels of obesity and diabetes and the health effects. They talked about their children, the health of their children. They talked about the health care costs at their companies going up because of diet-related disease. Some even talked very movingly of people who lost limbs or had other issues that just moved them.

They then looked at their counterparts in the public health arena and said, "We cannot unilaterally disarm our products. We have to answer to shareholders. But if you could help us create market demand," as Kelly just said, "for healthier foods, then we can move together on something to try to create more demand for healthier products and create a virtuous circle of demand for healthier products, which would then mean that companies would invest in healthier products and more of them come on the market. And maybe consumer tastes would change. But that's questionable. People have addictions to a lot of unhealthy foods, and we don't know."

And the consumer groups said, "Great. We love that. You're not just selfish people out to only make money at the expense of everyone's health. It's nice to hear. But by the way, if you," and we had Burger King at the table, "come in and advertise the Neighborhood Triple Bacon Cheeseburgers when we're trying to do public health information, it's working across purposes. So you have to take some responsibility with us."

RICHARD: So you had a greater understanding in the room, and that led to some long-term changes in the retail food industry. What was the impact on stores?

ROB: We had a breakthrough with convenience stores. You might even go into a gas station on the road... began to move healthier products more prominently and give it more attention and found that they were able to, as I recall, through the pilot tests, that their revenues stayed pretty much the same. I haven't followed it in a number of years, but at least some momentum was created for greater dialogue over time and initiatives, and a lowering of the distrust. People now talk to each other differently and try to work together in ways they didn't before this particular dialogue we set up.

ASHLEY: That's really interesting. What strikes me about that is that when you get these groups together as actual people, as individuals, then you can get somewhere because so often, the corporation is talked of as if it's just a thing, a blob, whereas actually real people with lives and problems work in it.

ROB: Ashley, I think you just hit the heart of what... If there's any message to this podcast, it's that it's all in human relationships. There was a woman in the room from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and they are the leading funders of work to improve the health in the country. She had been working on these issues a decade or more. She said to me afterward, "Do you understand what happened in that room today?"

I said, "I think I did, but why don't you tell me."

And this woman who'd spent her career on this issue said, "Rob, this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The hair on my arms literally rose up during that dialogue. I've never seen a level of communication at this point, and I'm very optimistic that something good will happen. I'm going to look for ways to support your efforts."

Now, I don't want to overstate it. We didn't change the American diet overnight. But I think we began to make the steps that are necessary to build bridges and then have followup actions that can make a difference. It has to start with people developing some trust, understanding that underneath it all people aren't as different as they think, and they should give each other the benefit of the doubt.

RICHARD: Speaking of building bridges, during his inaugural address, President Biden spoke about the need for unity. "We have much to repair, much to restore, much to

build, much to heal, and much to gain," he said. Kelly, what can Biden do in a divided Congress, for example?

KELLY: He said many of the right things during his speech. I'm not sure people on my side of the aisle feel like he lived up to that just yet, and certainly he's been very focused on talking about two or three dozen executive orders, many of which are strongly opposed or will even offend many people on the Conservative aisle. But I do know that former congressman, Cedric Richmond, who is on President Biden's White House staff, is trying to reach across the aisle in Congress quietly to see where they can cooperate on some of the agenda items they feel they need Congress's help to achieve.

That's good. That's the kind of discussions you need to have there. Conversely, I think there are probably two or three issues that they should try to focus on that Republicans would want to be a part of to try to see if there's resolution. I know many people on the Republican side are still very concerned about election integrity. Democrats are very concerned about voter access versus voter suppression. I think that's one area, and it has been tried before, not successfully in my view, but I think there's one area that would be very helpful to try to bring resolution to this last election for a lot of people on the Conservative side of the aisle.

For example, Senator Tim Scott, Republican of South Carolina, has a proposal for an election commission to really dig into and investigate what did go wrong. Was there really evidence there of not corruption but fraud or mismanagement or election law violations that we have to address in some fashion? Now, I think if they were to say, "You know what? As part of that commission, we need to have Convergence-style dialogue and really air that out, and let's look and see what really transpired," it would probably help confirm the fact that Joe Biden won, but it would also help Conservatives understand and have some resolution for the election. I think he's got a real opportunity.

ASHLEY: Rob, what's your answer for that? What should Biden do to encourage unity?

ROB: I think he could do a number of things, but if he's going to do it, he has to do it authentically. He can't do it like, "I'm going to invite a bunch of consensus Republicans in and put a gloss over it as if we're going to heal that way." One of the things Convergence does is we try to include the widest possible array of people from across the spectrum who are willing to participate. The other thing is I've studied a little bit the truth and reconciliation approaches of South Africa. This is not to be a counterpoint to Kelly but just to underscore the difficulty, that you can have reconciliation when there is truth. So that commission, which I think generally is a good idea, whether it's an official commission or however it's done, there has to be an adherence to people being truthful. Again, who judges who's being truthful? That's a tougher issue. Bridges get formed when you learn new things and you look at facts objectively. If people are so ideological that they cannot open their eyes to what seem to be pretty clear facts one

way or another, then you have a dilemma, and there are limits to what our process can achieve.

ASHLEY: What about at the individual level? What can the current administration do to encourage individuals to actually talk to each other and come to some kind of understanding of where the other comes from?

KELLY: I think they can model it, and I think you're seeing a little bit of that now, but I think clearly action speaks louder than words. It's not something you can legislate or mandate or anything else. I think members of Congress have to start modeling that, as well, and I think that would have more of an impact than even the White House doing something. I also think that the real answer... I'm a real believer in grassroots action. Really, a lot of change happens and starts most effectively at the local level. Start small. Don't try to look big, but start at the local level and look for ways to address problems there.

ROB: There are a burgeoning number, an amazing proliferation of groups in the last few years. Especially since the election of 2016, local groups and some national groups like Braver Angels, also a lot of local groups, who are developing skills on how to get people to talk to each other. I think Joe Biden could say, "Folks, you need to talk to each other. You need to know each other. You need to see each other's humanity, if nothing, I think to replace true, honest relationships across people, and even if you end up disagreeing."

I've seen it done in the field of abortion where people feel so strongly that they literally can't abide each other views until they get to know each other. Then they see each other as human beings who are decent. So I think there's a groundswell of activity that could occur around the country. Biden can be a cheerleader for that. The government doesn't need to do it all. But there are all these groups that want to help that have skillsets and who have developed ways to get people to talk to each other the way that they can actually, at least, build trust and respect for each other, even if they don't get to agreement.

ASHLEY: Rob Fersh and Kelly Johnston on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. Our podcast is a production of Common Ground Committee. As Rob was saying, we're part of a burgeoning number of groups and communities that are pushing back against deep partisan divides that are putting barriers in the way of progress. We're discussing practical and creative ways to repair the tear in our political fabric.

ASHLEY: Find out more about what we do at commongroundcommittee.org and also on Facebook. Richard, you and I post and answer questions about our podcast in the Facebook group. Let us know who and what you'd like to hear about next.

RICHARD: The Facebook group is where we share ideas, stories, and common ground events that are coming up.

ASHLEY: And one more thing. We're excited to be joining Democracy Group, a podcast network with shows about reforming and improving our democracy. We'll have more about this in future episodes. Now back to our interview with Kelly Johnston and Rob Fersh.

RICHARD: Rob, you've said that bridge-building work is not easy, but there are proven successful methods. What did you learn at Convergence, the group you founded?

ROB: I think there's this general impression that those of us in this field are people who come around with guitars and get everyone to sing kumbaya.

RICHARD: I like that imagery.

ROB: But we've evolved a methodology, and it's now backed by a lot of social science and even neuroscience about why this works. But the basic steps, Richard, just to give you a clue, are that you have to understand what problem you're going to address, and you have to make it bigger than a breadbox but not boil the ocean. You have to frame the issue in a way that's inviting so people from different points of view feel they're being heard. If you frame the police issue about, "How do we defund the police?" people aren't going to feel like it's an open conversation.

You have to build trust with people like us at Convergence that were truly neutral. We don't have some agenda. And then you have to go through a trust-building process. A lot of that's just by open dialogue. You start by not debating positions. For god's sake, you don't debate positions. You talk about underlying interests and your values and your concerns. When people hear that, they see the humanity, and usually they see their concerns are the same, but they disagree on how to get there. And that begins to open you up to a conversation of: what are possible solutions? And when you have ground rules about not hogging the microphone, about being truthful, about relying on evidence, then people push each other's thinking.

ASHLEY: I don't need to tell you two this, but we're in this time of incredible division and passionate feelings about politics. Have you two found that it is harder to do your work over the last several years?

KELLY: Let me go first. I realize my role here is someone who voted for Trump, longtime Conservative, Republican combatant, but even people like me get accused of being soft and squishy by my peers on the Right when it comes to issues like election reform, who won the election, even on some of the issues. So it is hard, and there's definitely a very strong let's-go-fight base inside my party. I think it's true on the Left, as well. So that's challenging, definitely very strong, very rock-ribbed elements on both

extremes. There is a good middle there that we can work with, and I do think that I'm starting to see much more of a hunger for: how do we, as Rob says, bridge-build?

ROB: Ashley, that was a great question. I actually think it is more difficult now, and the recent events, I think, have put a charge in it. But I want to make a different point, which is that not everything has to be government action. I came from a Liberal side where everyone thought, "All answers are government." But we did a project on kindergarten through 12 education and decided not to do public policy. We brought together teachers unions and charter schools, who are normally at each other's throats, and administrators and companies like Lego and Disney and people who care only about putting computers in classrooms and people who only care about social and emotional learning.

And what emerged is now a new nonprofit called Education Reimagined where these people are working together on a shared vision. They're doing a grassroots op. They're not relying on public policy, and they are formerly people who couldn't even sit in a room together. In fact, the first day that that group met, in the history of Convergence, was the tensest day I've ever experienced. I wasn't sure there'd be a second day. Fortunately, there was a year and a half of meetings that came up with a vision statement that people on the Left and Right loved about how to create a learner-centered system that could apply in charter schools or public schools or private schools, a variety of settings. They all got excited to work with each other. So there may be room for citizens to work with each other, where you don't have to deal with members of Congress.

RICHARD: Kelly, you described yourself a few moments ago as a fighter on the Right. Before we did this interview, we did a quick search of your name on news sites, and what came up pretty quickly was one unfortunate incidence on Twitter when you tweeted that George Soros's foundation—Soros is a well-known Liberal—was assisting a caravan of migrants bound for the United States. That caused a real flurry. Do you want to comment on that?

KELLY: Yeah, I'll be brief about it. I have a blog that I wrote that talked about that to some degree, as well. But I think that the whole episode of one example of, one, intemperance on social media, and I'm guilty of that every so often. I'm constantly in recovery, trying to be better about it mulling it better. But I think the reaction to it was also disconcerting, where there was clearly an organized mob, if you will, that really came after me, tried to silence, discredit, and destroy me for what I did.

It was not successful, obviously, but that is happening all over. In fact, just this week, we've seen at least two or three other incidences where people are being canceled or being fired or being let go for some intemperate tweet or comment. And by the way, it's not just the Left doing it to the Right. The Right's doing it to itself, too, now. But I think the lesson here is that cancel culture is real, and it is incredibly destructive to trying to build dialogue and bridge build and get to objective truth and have honest discussion.

RICHARD: That tweet of yours about George Soros and immigrants heading for the southern border was intemperate. But do you think that, at times, people are defined by their intemperate moments rather than by their years of hard work?

KELLY: Yes. It is much easier to tear something down than it is to build something up, and companies know this. Being in the food industry for 22 years, I've learned that it takes years, decades, even a century to build a brand and that it only takes one bad incident to destroy it. And it's very true in social media, as well.

ASHLEY: Yeah, and the reason we ask you about it, Kelly, was just because you're a common grounder, and it wasn't a very common-ground-y tweet.

KELLY: Yeah. Rob will know, and he and I have talked about this before, I began as a journalist and moved to Capitol Hill. Then I did campaign work, 35 campaigns in 25 states. That's combat. So my instincts and my experience and my work was all about doing battle. Then, when I got into the private sector about two decades ago, Rob actually inspired me to look at bridge-building as a much more productive activity, and I realized that I was part of the problem because I was busy tearing other people down and fighting on issues, and I was accomplishing really nothing to advance the ball.

And I realized, "You know what? I would like to really solve some of these problems." Do I fall off the wagon on occasion? Yes, guilty as charged, but I try to get back on, which is important. You make mistakes. You want to incentivize people to stay involved, stay engaged, and to really help be part of the solution.

ASHLEY: Rob, what's your view of this?

ROB: Look, I think this is a fundamental issue that's really important, and there may be lines that get crossed from time to time where you just feel you can't deal with somebody or just the morality's been compromised or you've been burned so often you can't deal with somebody. But we have to think really hard about what's a final line that you can't abide by, and can you give people the benefit of the doubt? Or, if you disagree on some things, including important things, can you work on other things? I think about someone like Mandela, who was jailed for 28 years or whatever it was.

RICHARD: Nelson Mandela in South Africa.

ROB: And that he kept a heart open to people who literally put him in jail and silenced him. But he kept an open heart and eventually won people over to see things another way. I like to leave that door open, but I think people are getting... As Kelly's saying, they're too quick to cancel and too quick to think poorly of others without actually understanding them. They don't know each other. So I think that's really an important lesson for us to all think about in terms of: what kind of society do we want to have? How do we want to treat each other?

ASHLEY: Common Ground Committee and Convergence are both part of the growing movement to encourage dialogue between people who do not agree on the issues. But it's often seen as made up of polite liberals and moderates. So how can this campaign be broadened to include people who are skeptical of its goals?

KELLY: I will tell you, and Rob knows this, but I've had a huge challenge on my side of the aisle trying to get people to enlist in this process. In a prior iteration of Convergence, we actually tried to build something through Congress to be, much like states had done, where we're going to establish this process by which people can work out their differences and come back to us with a real good proposal. And I found there was a lot of opposition on my side of the aisle because Republicans and Conservatives in particular have felt a long time that these are nothing more than "third-way efforts" that force us into compromise.

There's a lot of view that we're always compromising away a lot of our principles and it all keeps moving in the wrong direction. I think we have to realize that, no, that's not what's going on here. Compromise is a part of a lot of discussion, but I think it's the wrong word to use. I think new and creative solutions and new ways of approaching things is the answer of that.

ROB: I think my answer has to be owning experience. Personal experience is what makes converts of people, and I think the only right way to do this is through story, through documentaries, through personal relationships, and for people like Kelly, who out of courage, who out of his own personal values have found this to valuable, and his willingness to go out on a limb and say to people, "There's something different that can happen here, and it's not about you getting compromised. It's about you engaging consistent with your own personal, religious value to treat each other well." The more that people experience this, the more they're going to want that because, frankly, they get relief. Most people really don't want to hate each other. It's a great relief not to walk around hating everybody.

ASHLEY: In your personal lives, do you get grief from some members of your family or close friends who are like, "Why are you talking to them?"

KELLY: Yes, I do. But you know what, though? I consider those teaching opportunities. I say, "Well, here's what dialogue that we're actually having. I think, ultimately, one of the ways I try to tell people or encourage people to consider this approach is, "Consider the consequences if we don't because ultimately we're going to see more of what we saw on January 6th if we don't try to resolve it, or we'll see more of the violent incidences in some 200 cities over the summer or what happened with the tragic George Floyd situation." So we're starting to see the fruit of that very poisonous tree with the violence that's been on the increase across the United States over the past 12 months.

RICHARD: Rob?

ROB: Yeah, I do take heat. One of my personal friends, one person said to me, "How can you write an op-ed with Kelly Johnston?" How could he write this op-ed and support President Trump? They couldn't put that together. But, actually, I thought you were going to ask something different, which is also we're not perfect models of this in our personal lives. But I was going to say, even in my own life, I have four kids. Every once in a while, if I lose my temper, one of my kids will say, "Oh, there goes the world-famous mediator modeling the behavior he wants to see in the world." We can't be perfect. We're never going to be perfect, but, again, it's more: what's the overall direction, and how do you bring people back to a norm that's different than being antagonistic or intolerant? And I think we can create that.

RICHARD: Rob, I have been humiliated a number of times by my kids. What have you both learned from each other about finding common ground?

KELLY: Well, it goes back to what I learned about Rob from day one, was that's a different way of communicating with people who don't share necessarily your worldview or your background or your points of view on issues. And I think the most important thing for me, as someone who has spent a lifetime, really, in politics, going back to my college years a few centuries ago, is that not everything is political. We've over-politicized everything, and it really helped prevent the kind of bridge-building that Rob and I are committed to.

ROB: I'd say this. I can't begin to describe what an important bellwether and grounding Kelly represents for me. To be honest, when I read some of the things he has written, I wince, and I can't imagine how he could think that way. People in my office say, "You can't believe what Kelly wrote today." I then just have to remember, "This is my friend, Kelly, a guy I know who's decent, who's honest, has integrity, is caring, shares so many values I share." And because it's Kelly, it allows me to open to things that I don't instinctively open to. So that's the lesson, is that it's just not about consensus people talking to each other. This only works if we can be tested by the diversity of our differences. I often say it's not just what you fight for but who you are as you do it. And I think that's what all the major faiths try to teach us, is: what kind of persons are we as we pursue the goals in life that are important to us?

ASHLEY: Thank you so much for talking to us.

KELLY: Thank you.

ROB: Thank you for having us.

RICHARD: In their article for The Hill, Rob and Kelly write about working to construct a virtuous cycle of renewing our civic culture and restoring faith in the resilience of American democracy.

ASHLEY: We have a link to their op-ed on our podcast website, and we also have about five minutes of bonus material with Rob. He gives examples of how the Convergence approach works.

RICHARD: You'll find that audio on commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts.

ASHLEY: We'll have another episode in two weeks. Subscribe and look for more Let's Find Common Ground wherever you listen to podcasts. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

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