

RICHARD: In a time of anger, deep divisions, and even political violence, how do we begin to depolarize America? What's our own personal role in finding common ground? Are there practical steps that all of us can take? We seek some answers in this episode. Welcome to Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. The task of bridging divides became much more difficult after the recent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Many of us were appalled and saddened or downright angry, but some Americans viewed the rioters as patriots.

RICHARD: So how do we have difficult conversations with those who see the world through a different lens?

ASHLEY: We speak with Tania Israel, a psychologist. She's held workshops and conducted extensive research into how to connect with those you passionately disagree with. She's a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara and the author of the book *Beyond Your Bubble*. Richard, you get the first question.

RICHARD: The assault or insurrection at the Capitol was a historic event. How do we make sense of what happened?

TANIA: I think that's a great question, and what seems clear is that different people are making sense of it in different ways. Because my focus is on dialogue, I think that's one of the questions that we can ask of each other, not just our hot take on what happened and what should be done about it but: what did that mean to you? What was it like for you on that day when it was unfolding? How did you understand what the events were that were going on, and how have you reacted to the aftermath?

RICHARD: So ask questions rather than make statements?

TANIA: Well, I think ask questions and have a dialogue and, when you do talk about it... I hear people talking about, "Okay, well, police responded differently to this than to Black Lives Matter." I hear people talking about a lot of different angles on what happened. I think it's fine to share those. It's fine to say, "Here's what I observed." I think the thing that's not as helpful to dialogue is to shut other people down with that.

If somebody says, "Well, how is this different from the protestors in Portland who attacked the police?" I think rather than to say, "Well, that's a false equivalent," then to say, "Well, that's a great question. Tell me about it seemed similar to you," and, "Okay. Well, here is how that seemed different to me," or the other way around. So I think using this really is an opportunity to deepen and understand our relationships with other people and their views on things.

ASHLEY: I'm guessing you would say the same for approaching somebody in our midst. It could be a family member, a friend, or a neighbor who we know are

sympathetic to the protestors and who may be a quite devoted follower of Donald Trump.

TANIA: Yes, and one of the things that I've noticed in all of the media and analyses of the polls coming out is people are focusing primarily on Trump supporters who feel like the protestors speak for them, and really that's a very small percentage of people in our country, that more people than that do not feel like the insurgents represent them. So the first thing I want to say is you're much more likely to be having a conversation with somebody who isn't in that position, and that's something I think is important because our perspective on this seems to be really skewed, of thinking that most people are at the extremes. And most people are not extremists.

So we're much more likely to be having a conversation with somebody who is not at the extreme. That's the first thing I want to make sure we are aware of. So, if we do find ourselves talking to somebody who is more at the extreme, the first thing that we want to do is see: is this a conversation that we want to have? Do we feel like this is productive? And sometimes it is. Sometimes people even at the extremes are open to dialogue. But I think that's something that we need to assess in every situation.

RICHARD: You've raised a really interesting point about our media environment. One example, Fox News used the term "pro-Trump protestors" for the people who stormed the Capitol, and The New York Times and Atlantic Magazine used the term "insurrectionists." To what extent should we be aware of how media is polarizing us and maybe firing us up and putting us into subsets or tribes?

TANIA: It's interesting because one of the things we're seeing in the research is that we tend to overestimate this gap between people on the Left and the Right and between Republicans and Democrats. The people who are the least susceptible to overestimating, the people who are least susceptible to that perception gap are people who watch network news rather than cable news that's favored by partisans on either side. So that's something to keep in mind, that there is some news that's a little bit more neutral and that, if we are attending to news sources that aren't as neutral, we should recognize that that might be skewing our perceptions in some ways not just about the events of what have happened but even more so about people who we would consider to be on the other side, that we are going to think that they are farther away from us, that they are more extreme the more we're attending to partisan news.

ASHLEY: And that applies to social media, as well, right? Because I saw a tweet, a very calming tweet that you had put out in recent days around this topic, but it was on Twitter, and there is a fairly a less-nuanced place than Twitter. You just don't get a lot of gray on a social media platform like that.

TANIA: Indeed. Social media is really exacerbating this problem of polarization. Part of it is that people think that they're having conversations on social media, but those are not conversations. Commenting on someone's post or retweeting something is not

actually a conversation. So, in order to really unpack what's going on and to repair ruptures in our relationships, it's important that we actually have conversations, that we have dialogue where we are face to face or at least FaceTime to FaceTime with somebody, or even on the phone.

ASHLEY: You made the very good point that most people are not on the extremes. But I do want to ask because I've just been thinking about this a lot. Is it possible to have a dialogue with somebody who is very dedicated to a particular conspiracy theory, something that you just think is nonsense and is not true? It seems like you're in two different universes.

TANIA: I always go back to: what's your goal? If your goal is to try to turn them around and help them see the truth, that is not likely to happen and certainly not in one conversation. If your goal is really to understand more about how they got there, what was happening for them that opened them up to believing in the conspiracy theories, then you've got a great opportunity to do that. You can ask a lot of questions, and you can listen. So, really, it's thinking about what's your goal and trying to also set realistic goals.

RICHARD: I want to follow up on Ashley's question about speaking with people who believe in conspiracy theories such as QAnon or the election being rigged despite any evidence that these things actually happened. I think it's really hard to have a conversation with someone you may care about but who has some pretty weird views.

TANIA: You are probably not going to, at least not quickly, change their mind. What you can do is try to understand better how they got there, not even necessarily what they believe in. But I think the how they got there, and express your caring and concern for them. If it's somebody who believes in conspiracy theories and actually broke into the Capitol, then probably what you should do is call the FBI tip line. But if it's somebody who you're concerned about because of what their beliefs are and they haven't taken those kinds of actions, then what do you want to get out of that conversation? I think trying to understand them and express your caring and concern is a really reasonable goal.

RICHARD: This show is about finding common ground, which is an especially tall order right now. Have the events of recent weeks changed your approach?

TANIA: I have been trying to attend to the current moment of what's going on in terms of guidance, and probably the thing that I've shifted most is people are so in pain and, in some ways, traumatized by what happened. Some people are. Not everybody is. But I think it's really important that we attend to that and that we pay attention to our emotional reactions and get the support that we need for that. But I think taking care of ourselves is probably the thing that I've added most.

I do want to say one more thing about the common ground piece. Something that's really struck me about everything that's happened is how much it's about people caring about the United States. People have very different ways of thinking about that, and people think that they are rescuing the country in some ways, and other people think that they're tearing it down. But it strikes me that this is a moment to talk about: what does this country mean to you, and what does democracy mean to you? And what are the ways that you think about how our country should be operating and can be held together. I don't know. It just strikes me that a lot of people are feeling patriotic but in a lot of different ways. What an opportunity to have that conversation.

ASHLEY: Tania Israel. We'll have more in a minute. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard. Our podcast is produced for Common Ground Committee. Find out more about our mission and our programs at commongroundcommittee.org.

ASHLEY: We'd like to hear from you about your ideas on how to find common ground at a time of political crisis. Who should we speak with? Join the Common Ground Committee Facebook group where we discuss our plans. You can also find out much more about programs and initiatives.

RICHARD: Yeah, and in his inaugural address, Joe Biden has called for national unity. What do you think about that, and how can progress be made? Join the conversation on that and much more on Common Ground Committee's Facebook group. Now more from our conversation with Tania Israel.

ASHLEY: Tania, how did you get interested in this idea of people talking to each other across political divides? When did that first grab you, that idea?

TANIA: Well, we'll have to go back to the 1990s for this. I had started a group to bring together pro-choice and pro-life people to have dialogue with each other, and part of that was because I was feeling some frustration myself with... I was tired of being angry at the other side. I felt that my anger wasn't helping the women that I cared about and wanted to help. So I decided to try this different approach, and it was really transformational.

I didn't change anything about how I felt about women's reproductive rights, but it changed so much about how I felt about people who disagreed with me about it. Really being able to hear people share not just their conclusions but how they got there and their values and experiences that shaped them made such a difference to me and helped me to realize there are very different perspectives, and viewing things only through my own lens was missing so much.

RICHARD: Did it give you a sense of respect for the people who profoundly disagreed with you and also where they were coming from?

TANIA: Absolutely because I felt like, before that, I had these ideas about, well, what they're saying doesn't make any sense. It's illogical. It's inconsistent with this other view that they have. That was all true if you came at it through my lens. But if you started at the values and experiences that they had, their conclusions made absolute sense. So then I could be much more respectful and interested in where they were coming from.

ASHLEY: We are living at a time of great division right now, mostly over politics. Have you noticed change or a worsening of that divide?

TANIA: Sure. There is a worsening of that divide, and I would say particularly in terms of not even differences of opinion on the issues but views of people on the other side seems to really be where so much of the tension and the vitriol is.

ASHLEY: You mean people just see the other side as un-talk-to-able?

TANIA: Yes. Seeing the other side as not only wrong but actually immoral, unkind, idiotic, that they can't understand, but really the immoral piece stands out to me because I feel like it's very hard to have a conversation with somebody who you view as not having morals. You offer one piece of advice that I found very helpful recently, which is: ask questions from a place of curiosity rather than judgment. Why is that worthwhile?

TANIA: When I was working on the book, I came across the literature on intellectual humility, which is a whole area of research. Basically, it says you can hold very strong opinions, even extreme opinions, but still be respectful of and interested in a different perspective and really want to know about different perspectives and not find that threatening to your own view. Coming from that kind of intellectual humility, that really generates curiosity that makes you want to know where someone else is coming from. And if you have that foundational stance, then it's going to help you to be able to implement these skills.

So, if you're going to listen to somebody, but you really want to know instead of just wanting to counter them with a different view. But I hear so many people say, "I just cannot fathom how people can think or act or vote as they do." So, if you have somebody in front of you who could explain it, wouldn't you actually want to draw that out of them? Wouldn't you actually want to really get where they're coming from?

ASHLEY: What that might involve for the asker, say the curious person, is that they might feel vulnerable putting themselves out there like that. You said in the past that being vulnerable can be seen as a sign of weakness, but in conversation, being

vulnerable is not knowing how the other person will respond and making space for it, anyway, which sounds kind of uncomfortable.

TANIA: Absolutely. Vulnerability, I think, can be felt for everybody in this conversation. Whether you're asking, whether you're trying to share where you come from, that can be really hard if you know that the other person might disagree with you, might have a really different perspective on it. I once said to my therapist, I said, "I don't mind being vulnerable as long as I know that the other person is going to respond with warmth and support and openness." And she said, "That's not vulnerability."

She's absolutely right that being vulnerable is about you just don't know how the other person's going to respond, and you're going to put yourself out there, anyway. And that is some of what we have to do in these situations. I think Brené Brown talks about vulnerability, but she's also been talking about bravery more. So maybe we think about it as being brave.

RICHARD: Yeah. I was thinking that the way to frame vulnerability, I guess, is being brave, being strong in these situations because if you're willing to risk something because you're going down a path that you don't know where it's going to end up, that's a brave thing to do.

TANIA: Yes, absolutely.

ASHLEY: From your workshops, you've trained quite a few people in these techniques. What do you hear back? How does it work out? What do people say about how some of these conversations have done?

TANIA: It turns out that having the skills doesn't mean that it's all going to be so easy, but not having the skills is certainly going to make it a lot harder, and it's actually going to make people not even want to approach dialogue. So what I'm hearing from people is they're trying things out, and they're learning a lot from doing these things. It's not necessarily what they would typically do.

For example, in listening, what I recommend is listening to understand rather than listening to respond. So, when someone's speaking, instead of, in your head, trying to come up with that thing you'll say in contrast to what they're saying, instead you really try to take in what they're saying, and then, when you speak, instead of saying, "Well, this is what I think," you say, "Oh, this is what I heard you say," and you summarize back to them something of what they said. And that is not something that we're used to doing.

RICHARD: You wrote a book with an interesting title called *Beyond Your Bubble: How to Connect Across the Political Divide, Skills and Strategies for Conversations that Work*. You have a chapter in your book about dialogue. What is dialogue?

TANIA: Often what we're seeing when people are talking to each other... Let's say we're watching in the media. We see people from different perspectives talking. What they're doing is not what I would call dialogue. It's often more like debate where they're trying to win an argument. Even more sometimes, it's like diatribe, where they are just venting, and they're saying what they think. They're not actually even trying to communicate with the other person. It's not really any kind of back-and-forth exchange.

Dialogue, on the other hand, is really something where the goal is to promote connection and understanding. So, even if what you want to do is persuade someone, you really are going to want to understand where the other person's coming from so that you can, if you want to make an argument, so you can try to frame it from their perspective and their values instead of your own. That's going to be a lot more effective.

ASHLEY: How do we start a conversation like this, especially if, until now, we've been studiously avoiding the topic because we know we feel differently from this person? We've been a bit intimidated about even talking to them about it. How do we then go about starting the whole thing up?

TANIA: That's such a good question because I feel like there's been so much conflict that people might have had in social media, or they just see someone wearing a T-shirt or a hat that has a slogan on it, and so they're backing off and not even approaching it. Let me address that piece of it first, which is that we often are not even having a clear view of who that other person is, that our perceptions of people who we consider to be on the other side of an issue tend to be distorted. That's the bad news. The good news is, if we know that, we have a better chance of correcting for it. But that plays out in the political arena, too, where we have these really skewed perceptions of people on the other side.

RICHARD: Such as?

TANIA: We think that people in whichever political party we don't belong to, we think that they're mostly extreme, but people in our party are pretty mainstream. Everybody's got this distorted view. So I would say the first thing we have to do is recognize that we have a view that needs to be corrected and that we can correct for that in some ways by having this conversation and understanding someone. And when we have that motivation, then I think it helps us to go into that conversation by inviting someone and saying, even acknowledging, "I know we've kind of gotten into it on social media before, but I really value our relationship, and I'd like to have a different kind of conversation now." So I think that some of it might be acknowledging what's happened in the past and saying, "That's not what I want to do now. I want to have a conversation where I can really try to understand you."

ASHLEY: So, when the conversation gets going, is it just a question of maybe I ask the first question, and then I just shut up and listen?

TANIA: That's a great thing to do. Shutting up and listening is such-

RICHARD: That's so hard for some of us.

TANIA: I know. It's such an underutilized skill. It's one of the things that I heard from people in the workshop. They said, "Well, the thing I've learned most is what an incredibly bad listener I am." That is a great skill to have, just to be able to be quiet and really pay attention to somebody else. Honestly, it's something that we can do in all arenas of our lives, and sometimes it's better to practice that in less volatile or less heated situations. So we can just do that when we're talking to our friends about anything. We can give them our attention. We can reflect back what they're saying, and when we ask questions, we can ask questions that encourage someone to elaborate rather than asking questions that try to trap somebody into a gotcha situation.

RICHARD: That's such a great point and something I could learn. What's another mistake that people often make when they're in a conversation with somebody they really disagree with.

TANIA: The thing I hear so much from people is, "Well, I feel like I just have to say this thing because if I say this thing in this way, it will change everything. They will completely come around. They'll see the error of their ways. That is just not going to happen. I hate to break it to everybody, but just like if someone says something to you, you're not likely to completely shift all of your views and values and perspectives and just say, "Oh, oh, now I see. Now I can come on board with where you're coming from."

We also see that mistake made not only in dialogue but in social media interactions, that people think, "Oh, if I post this thing, someone said something that's wrong, that they don't see things this way. So I'm going to shoot this thing back to them as a comment or a tweet," and there's actually studies done on this that show that, if you provide a contrasting view to someone's perspective, not only are you not going to bring them closer to your view, but you are more likely to actually drive them farther away.

ASHLEY: Tania, just going back, I'm thinking about your past work experience. When you got into this whole realm of finding common ground, you were working with the pro-life movement. Over the years, there has been violence associated with that movement. There have been abortion providers who have been killed, and I was just wondering, and maybe this is far off, but do you see any parallels between what's going on now with some on the extreme Right prepared to be right and your past experience working with the pro-life movement?

TANIA: Absolutely. The same thing that I earlier about most people are not the most extreme is similar in both situations. Most people are not the most extreme, and most people are not violent. So, if we treat everyone as if they are, if we say, "Oh, well, if you don't agree with me, you're as bad as they are," then we're missing a lot of nuance in there. We're missing a lot of the gradations of where people are with their beliefs. I think that the best way to correct our perceptions is to have dialogue and to find out more about where someone's coming from and what they do think. Even more so, what does it mean to them?

RICHARD: Tania, thank you very much.

TANIA: Thank you.

RICHARD: We've been speaking with Tania Israel on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Subscribe to our shows wherever you listen to podcasts. This is our 22nd stimulating episode. Thanks for listening.