

Vincent Munoz:

I think what we need to do is explain how our principles of free speech, free inquiry will help serve the cause of justice.

Betty Friedan:

The First Amendment, the constitutional freedom of speech and freedom of conscience that is the bulwark of our democracy.

Bettina Aptheker:

There was a passion in what was being said, affirming what people considered a sacred constitutional right, freedom of speech and freedom of association.

Michelle Deutchman:

From the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement, this is SpeechMatters, a podcast about expression, engagement, and democratic learning in higher education. I'm Michelle Deutchman, the Center's executive director and your host. Welcome to episode 11. With reports of increased hate speech on Twitter since Elon Musk took the helm, the results of the midterms, and the trial of the Oath Keepers' founder Stewart Rhodes for seditious conspiracy, there was a lot to talk about around the Thanksgiving table.

By the time students get ready to head home for the holidays, there will be even more to discuss and disagree about. But how do we do that in a way that doesn't ruffle too many feathers or make things too awkward during these family get togethers? That's what we're going to focus on today, how to dialogue across political difference. We'll be joined by two experts, Dr. Tania Israel, a professor of counseling psychology at UC Santa Barbara and author of *Beyond Your Bubble, How to Connect Across the Political Divide*, *Skills and Strategies for Conversations That Work*. And Manu Meel, Chief Executive Officer of the youth-led 501(c)(3) nonprofit BridgeUSA.

They will give us tips on how to approach these challenging and sensitive conversations. But first, class notes, a look at what's making headlines. "Positively dystopian", these were the words used by US District Court Judge Mark Walker, to describe Florida's Individual Freedom Act, also known as the Stop Woke Act. Ruling that the law violates student and faculty First Amendment rights to free speech as well as the 14th amendment's guarantee of due process, Walker enjoined the sections of the law that limit how colleges and universities can teach about racism, sexism, and other concepts.

While an important victory for academic freedom and university autonomy, the fight is not over. The DeSantis administration plans to appeal the ruling. As the largest strike in the history of US higher education continues into its fourth week, all eyes remain on the University of California system. 48,000 graduate workers, academic researchers, and post-doctoral scholars from across the 10 campus system are exercising their speech, assembly, and petition rights as they strike for living wages, childcare support, and commuting subsidies. The strike has resulted in canceled classes and closed labs as final exams and the end of the semester fast approach. Although post-doctoral scholars and academic researchers have reached a tentative labor agreement with UC, they remain on strike in solidarity with thousands of graduate student workers.

In less contentious news, a recent study published in the *Journal of Higher Education* by Professors Tara Hudson, Alyssa Rockenbach, and Matthew Mayhew shows that friendships can heal campus divisions and lead toward a more positive engaged campus culture. Importantly, their research determined that college administrators play a crucial role in fostering these cross identity friendships. Whether through

campus spaces, policies or programs, the study highlighted that administrators have the ability to unite their student bodies during such a divisive moment for our country.

Now to today's topic, talking across the political divide. In a moment, when the US is rife with polarization, confirmation bias, and othering based on people's political perspectives, and when many of us will be thrust into uncomfortable conversations over the upcoming holidays, I have invited two experts to share skills and tools that we can all use. Tania and Manu, welcome to SpeechMatters.

Tania Israel:

So happy to be here.

Manu Meel:

Thanks for having us. And Dr. Israel, great to share the stage with you.

Michelle Deutchman:

So I always enjoy hearing people's stories. But before I turn to your personal journeys, I think we should do a little bit of table setting about terminology, which is that the words dialogue and discourse are often used, sometimes interchangeably to describe the exchange of ideas. And I'm curious if either of you prefer one over the other. And then of course you have the word civil, that's often modifying these words and I'd love to get your thoughts on that term as well. And Tania, why don't you start?

Tania Israel:

Absolutely. And in my book, *Beyond Your Bubble*, I do use some different words and lay out what the meanings are. So I talk about diatribe, which is just people venting their opinions, as well as debate, which is really when people are trying to craft an argument with support from evidence and convincing stories. But that's really about trying to win. That's our debate format. So when we think about discourse, often that's really an exchange of ideas, and that can have a lot of different kinds of goals. But I think about dialogue as something slightly different from that. Because dialogue I think about as a conversation to promote connection and understanding. So it's not just about expressing your views, but you're really trying to create a connection and understand the other person.

Manu Meel:

Yeah, you know, and with BridgeUSA, which works primarily with young people in colleges and high schools, I think one of the things that Dr. Israel said at the end that discourse and dialogue are really meant to help folks understand that it's about connection. You know, Michelle, I live in two worlds. One is, how do you make something mass marketable and scalable, something that is interesting and appealing to people as a political and social project? So that's one hat. And the other hat is, how do you make it so that the words that we use evoke proper understanding and effective engagement?

And I think when it comes to specifically discourse and dialogue, and civil, if you're a younger person, and this is specifically from a Gen Z perspective, oftentimes our politics are laced with mistrust and a lack of engagement with politics or a feeling of criticism towards our current institutions. And saying words like civil oftentimes makes it seem like we're going to create some sort of kumbaya circle. And our objective is just not that. And as Dr. Israel pointed, it's really about an exchange of concepts. And so we'll often use things like constructive engagement or common understanding or just debate itself.

The only other thing I would add here is that the importance of whatever word we use is that the experiences that we're trying to help people engage in truly help them inculcate a new skillset of

empathy and understanding and engagement. And the key is how do you get people to the room? How do you get people to your dialogue? So I think it's critical to have that conversation.

Michelle Deutchman:

No, that is really helpful. And I really resonate with that as someone who does work in speech and expression every day. Oftentimes, people talk at cross purposes, if only because they don't have a mutual understanding of what the subject is or about what the definitions are. So I think that's a really helpful place to start. And now I'm going to jump a little bit to each of your personal stories because I'm curious, as I imagine the listeners are, to learn more about what inspired each of you to dedicate yourselves to helping people basically through uncomfortable conversations. And like Manu said, to get to the table.

And as I mentioned at the top, Manu is the CEO and co-founder of BridgeUSA. And I think it's also key to share that Manu is a CAL graduate, go Bears, we share that in common. And someone whose work has inspired me since I began working at the Center in 2018. He's been a supporter of the Center and I've always appreciated our partnership. So Manu, tell us, how did you get to be CEO of BridgeUSA?

Manu Meel:

Michelle, let me first, again, thank you so much for having us here. You've been both an inspiration of this work, but also stalwart in trying to understand and navigate free speech at a time of very difficult politics. And so I want to appreciate you and again, Dr. Israel, it's a true honor and privilege to be here in a conversation with you. Michelle, what's interesting for me, as you know, and for anybody else that's listening, I have no interest in politics. I actually have less of an interest in politics working in it for the past four or five years.

I started off as a pre-med student at Berkeley in 2016. And in 2017, our freshman year, we had in February, these massive protests because this speaker by the name of Milo Yiannopoulos came to campus. And for those of you that might not know, Milo was this conservative provocateur. And I remember vividly walking past protests. Now, Berkeley protests everything. We protest big things, small things. To me, it didn't really hit me that apparent, until I remember we walked past this café and the window was smashed in and inside it said CNN: UC Berkeley students protest free speech.

And I remember looking next to me, and that was where the camera crew was standing. And instantly, for me that was the breaking of that fourth wall. And the next day it turned out that those protests were actually the largest protests in Berkeley's history since the 60's free speech and anti-war protests. And I remember when we were walking around campus the next day, me and some random folks, who are now some of my best friends thought the campus community's hurting. People are looking for an opportunity to just resolve our differences. Let's just have a space for conversation.

At that time, we called it talk therapy. And a bunch of people showed up and you could see that shockingly people want to talk to people in spaces that permit constructive conversations. So we kept holding that space. And that turned into BridgeBerkeley, which turned into BridgeUSA. And the two things that drive me are one, that I made some of my best friends out of this work, who are still to this day committed to this project. But secondarily, is we believe one very simple thing. And that is that you don't have a democracy if you can't talk to each other. It is that simple, especially in our moment today. So my job is to mobilize and give voice to young people across the country so that we can engage politics in an even more effective and constructive way.

Michelle Deutchman:

Thank you for sharing that story. Isn't it interesting how life can be so strange. If that hadn't happened in 2017, who knows what the journey would've been like. And now I want to turn to Dr. Tania Israel, who holds a PhD in counseling and psychology, a master's degree in human sexuality education, as well as a BA in Psychology and women's studies. Her scholarship focuses on interventions to support the mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals and communities. Tania, how did you find your way to this book and to focusing on connecting across political divides?

Tania Israel:

Thank you so much for asking. And I also just want to say, Manu, I love hearing your story and this idea that we can't have a democracy when we can't talk to each other. I think that's really essential. And what brought me to all of this, was about 25 years ago. So when I was closer to Manu's age. Back in the 1990s, I started a group to bring together pro-choice and pro-life people to have dialogue with each other. I had been doing work on the pro-choice side and I was honestly just tired of being angry at the other side. And I wanted to try something different.

And I heard a piece on the radio about this group in St. Louis that was bringing together pro-choice and pro-life people. And so I found them. They sent me materials and I started this in the town where I was living. It was an absolutely transformational experience for me, because it didn't change anything about how I felt about reproductive rights. But it changed so much about how I felt about people who disagreed with me about it. And just being able to really understand things from their perspective rather than from rhetoric, from bumper stickers, it was so essential to hear somebody lay out their views within the context of their own values and experiences.

So unlike Manu, I did not then start an entire national organization based on my experience, but I did take it with me. And it's really influenced me over the last several decades. So that as I have been doing my work, which has primarily been on psychological interventions to support LGBTQ folks, that's brought me into experiences where I've been in contact with folks who aren't on the same page that I'm on around sexual orientation, around gender identity and expression. And so it's given me opportunities to be able to engage in dialogue across different views and values.

So then the 2016 election happened, it was so clear to myself and really everybody that we were having trouble connecting across this divide in our country. And so I wanted to start creating resources, and having taught listening skills for decades, and having had this experience, I thought, "Well really I might have something that I can offer." And that's what really brought me to this work currently.

Michelle Deutchman:

Thank you for sharing that. Both fascinating stories. And I think we're really hitting on some of the key issues right off the bat, which is the feelings of anger and then also the connection to democracy. And we're recording today as the last senate seat is being decided, and as we think back on the midterms and look forward to the 2024 election, and I think all of these issues are just at the forefront.

One of my favorite parts of your book, Tania, is something that's called the "Flow Chart That Will Resolve All The Political Conflict in the Country." And it's two pages and I think it's brilliant. And the first question in the chart is, "Do you want to have a conversation with someone who holds political views different from your own?" And I kind of wanted to ask you, why did you start there?

Tania Israel:

So, I will talk about why I started there in terms of the flow chart, and then why I started the flow chart where I did. So that was the first resource I created. And I thought, "Well, okay, I want to help people to

have more intentional conversations." Really thinking about do I even want to be in this conversation? And if I do, what are my goals, and how is it that I can achieve those goals? So I laid that out and it actually is started in a one-pager and it takes people through thinking about how they're having those conversations. But the first question is really, "Do you even want to have that conversation?" And if you don't, then the answer is move along, this chart is not for you.

I always think about dialogue as an opportunity, not a mandate. So you absolutely do not have to do this, but if you're going to do it, it's best to go in with an understanding of what you're trying to accomplish and what is it that you can do that's going to help you to get to your goal.

Michelle Deutchman:

And Manu, I want to take a minute to just ask you, because I think it piggybacks on what Tania was saying, which is that how do you go about finding the people who want to have the dialogue? Because that seems like a key aspect of BridgeUSA, is that we're not mandating or compelling people to do it. It's voluntary. So how has that worked and do you find that the appetite is significant for this kind of exchange?

Manu Meel:

What's interesting about this conversation is that it reflects how we all play a different role in this puzzle that is trying to have better political discourse. I think Dr. Israel has done excellent scholarship and how you actually have these conversations. My job, interestingly, is actually as you pointed out, to find those people. And unfortunately at this moment, especially with respect to young people, but in general, I just came off this six week tour and so we went to college campuses and fundraisers and speaking events. And the two things that I found, was that a lot of people are hyper engaged, hyperactive in our politics. And then there's a whole lot of people that are ready to disengage that are just tired of it.

And the problem that presents for our democracy is that if people are disengaging in wide swaths, this is especially the risk with my generation, Gen Z, my job is to figure out how we can get folks to participate. And yes, many people are not interested in discourse and I think that's important. But what matters in this moment is articulating and helping people understand that the fundamental unit of our democracy's people, and if people can't communicate, we can't have any sort of realization of the ambitions that people aspire to, whether it is having a better job, or better tax policy, or climate, or whatever issue it is that you care about.

And the only thing that I would add here is that with respect to dialogue and discourse, we have to start thinking about articulating it in ways that makes people associate it, the process itself with agency. That if you actually participate in conversations with people that are different than you, not only are you putting yourself through an intellectually challenging task that'll sometimes trouble your opinions, but importantly what it does, as Dr. Israel pointed out in her story of getting involved, is that it helps you be a better participant. It helps you be a better person. It helps you understand.

And when you can understand and empathize with people that are different than you, that changes the game. That changes the game. It turns the conversation from a mutually exclusive zero sum game into something that is truly a building block for helping to realize that future. So dialogue and discourse are important and we've got to ensure that more and more people are participating because if we don't have that, then we don't have a democracy.

Michelle Deutchman:

Well, and we certainly don't need more reasons why we may not have a democracy. It's so interesting. As both of you speak, I see more and more how your work kind of goes hand in hand, like you were saying, Manu. And Tania, I want to go back to you and ask you if people, they say yes to your initial question, they do want to have a conversation with someone who holds different political views. What are some of the most common obstacles have you found to doing so?

Tania Israel:

So, one of the things that happens is that our perceptions of who we're going to be having those conversations with sometimes keep us from actually wanting to engage. We tend to have an idea that people who are on the other side of the political spectrum are extreme, they are misinformed or uninformed, they're irrational, and they're morals are not very strong, or they're kind of morally bankrupt or even hateful people. And those ideas of who those people are get formed by things like media, what we see on social media, but also our own minds contribute to that, because we have cognitive biases that really distort our perceptions of other people.

So just this idea of who you're going to be having the conversation with, really people back off from that. Also, expectations about what that conversation might look like. So people might think it's going to look like a yelling match that they've seen on TV, or they're going to think it looks like a really heated conversation that maybe they've had with somebody or an exchange that they've had with somebody on social media where everyone's just putting out their own ideas. So all of those things can really inhibit people.

And then finally, the thing that gets in the way, I think, is not having the skills to really engage in the conversation in a way that's going to be effective. So I always emphasize the importance of listening, of how we deal with our emotions when our buttons get pushed, and also how we share our own views in a way that can be best heard by somebody else.

Michelle Deutchman:

Well, you're definitely singing my song with the not having skills, because I'm often telling people when I go and speak to universities, and administrators, and students, and others that we spend a lot of time teaching people mathematic equations and foreign languages and how to write the five paragraph essay, but we somehow just assume that people are going to show up on a college campus and know how to engage with people across very challenging and difficult issues. And that's not the case. And I think one of the questions I have for both of you is from your various perspectives as sort of someone engaged in the field and as a scholar, what do you think universities can and should be doing to help build those skills? Or maybe you want to say that they don't have a responsibility. I didn't mean to have that assumption, I just-

Manu Meel:

No, no. From my perspective, I think they do have a very solemn responsibility and here's why. I was at this conference in southern California a couple of weeks ago and this interesting point was brought up, which is that the university is the second oldest institution in western society after the church, which was fascinating to me. And I think that especially in our political moment today where things are hyper-technical and moving so quickly, we forget that these institutions that we have are the backbone of progress, of the enlightenment, of moving humanity as a whole generally forward, even though there's a lot of setbacks along the way.

And given that the university's the second oldest institution in western society, we have to think about is that asking that question reverse, what if universities are not the place for dialogue and discussion and intellectual advancement? Then what is? Right now, given how isolated everybody is, and given the fact that our lives are even more virtual, there are very few places left in our society where people of different backgrounds are naturally in engagement with each other. The only two places I can think of is education, the classroom, and the workspace. And even the workplace now is becoming substituted for the virtual world.

So if you start off with the assumption that democracy requires people and those people have to be able to engage and coexist and fundamentally deliberate, and yet there are fewer and fewer opportunities for people to meet people, then by definition I think the university, and by default, the university not only has that responsibility, but is one of the few places where that responsibility can be carried out in our contemporary moment.

Michelle Deutchman:

Tania, do you have anything you want to add to that before I go back to some of the barriers you mentioned and what we might do about them?

Tania Israel:

I'm just so struck by the university being the second oldest institution after the church. Thank you for that. That's marvelous to know. Universities offer a fantastic opportunity, because you have people coming from different backgrounds and being exposed to different kinds of people, different kinds of ideas, and different kinds of methods of generating knowledge or integrating knowledge than they've been exposed to before. So there's definitely an opportunity there.

We teach lots of different kinds of skills within disciplines, and how to write across disciplines, and all kinds of things at the university. Teaching people to engage with ideas and people who are different from them is a really important way of helping people understand how to learn. And if a university's not a place for people to understand how to learn, I don't know where is. And so I do think that there's both an opportunity but also an obligation and ideally a commitment for college campuses to do that.

I do see that happening within student affairs, in particular. I feel like that there is effort put into bringing students together, helping them to figure out how to resolve conflicts and how to do things. I would love to see even a more intentional approach to doing that both on the academic and the non-academic side of the campus.

Michelle Deutchman:

That sounds good to me. So I realize we're jumping around a little bit. I'm just so excited by all of the different things that you both are talking about. So Tania had a couple minutes to describe some of the obstacles that she thinks people face when they're just beginning this process. And Manu, I don't know if you want to maybe mention some of the obstacles that you've encountered working with the largely 18 to 22 set. And in particular, if either of you has thoughts about this idea of sort of changing the paradigm from like, I'm right, you're wrong, or I'm going to try to convince you or I'm going to win, to more of this idea of just seeking an understanding of alternative viewpoints. And have you found that that framework has been met with success or with hesitancy or reluctance or all of the above maybe?

Manu Meel:

I want to actually, Michelle, defer to Tania on this one first, because Tania occupies a very unique space in this conversation, given her background, but also given sort of their focus on producing intellectual sort of fire power around this work. So Tania, I want to first defer to you, and maybe it's the student in me coming out, but I want to go to you on this first and then I'll come to it.

Tania Israel:

Absolutely. So in terms of how we actually get people past the barriers, the first thing I always do is I say, what is it that draws you to this workshop, this book, this work in some way of bridging the divide, and reliably, here are the answers that people give me. They say, "There's someone in my life who I want to stay connected with, but we're having trouble doing this because of our differences." Other people say, "I'd like to persuade or convince someone to see things the way I do." Some people will say, "I want to heal the divide or find common ground." And then finally, some people say, "I simply cannot understand how people can think or act or vote as they do." And they want to gain some insight.

So as I lay those out for people, the thing that will help someone to achieve any of those goals is dialogue, is a connection that promotes understanding. Because, if you're trying to convince someone, the best way of doing that is not by laying out stats and slogans to support your side. That's actually not going to persuade them. If you're trying to find common ground, you need to know where they're coming from. So for any of these things, this is the direction to go with it. And so I think people realizing that in order to achieve the goals that they have, then there is something that they can do.

And the other great thing is that the skills that I'm talking about are teachable and have a strong base of evidence that they will work. So I think that giving people some optimism and some hope that this is an approach that will be valuable and will help them to achieve their goals. I do have to add in one caveat because one of the things that I learned from doing this work is that people actually sometimes have more than one simultaneous goal. They want to maintain a connection, but they also want to express their views freely with as much emotion as they have behind them. Sometimes people want to find common ground, but they also want to feel validated in their own perspective.

So that's one of the challenges and that's where I think it's really important for people to be intentional and self-aware, so that they know what they're trying to achieve and what goal are they going to prioritize in this conversation.

Manu Meel:

I think Tania did a really good job there of outlining the importance of goal setting and how to actually have that conversation. What I spend most of my time thinking about, what keeps me awake, is why aren't people jumping out of the wood works trying to see common ground? Why is it that young people are so versed at discourse on college campuses? Or why does it seem like we have this knee-jerk reaction to dialogue? When I talk to folks about dialogue and discourse, it sounds like a life sucking experience. People aren't like, "Well, I'm going to think about having a conversation with someone that's different than me and that's going to not only spiritually fulfill me, but it's going to be very exciting."

And so my thinking is oftentimes around that. And with respect to Bridge, I try to think about our generation's experience. Someone my age, is 23 let's say, we were born around 9/11, we went to middle school around the great recession. We graduated high school during the 2016 Trump election, and then we graduated college in the year that was 2020, which was the pandemic and the capital riots and the Black Lives Matter protests. Now that's not a great sample size of democracy by any measure. And every

generation has its tests, but I think those sort of four to five formative experiences have made my generation uniquely skeptical.

It's made our generation uniquely frustrated about the prospect of democracy. It's made, as according to a recent Harvard IOP poll, our generation uniquely apathetic towards the prospect of achieving change through democracy. I think only 46% of young people indicated that they believe democracy as a system can lead to progress. And the problem with that is that presents a really systemic root cause challenge to the notion of actually having speech and discourse. Because definitionally, the reason why you believe in discourse and dialogue is, as Tania was saying, is because you believe that it not only makes you a better person, but we can achieve some common goals.

But if you are enchanted with democracies as an institution, then all of a sudden the causes for having that discourse get thrown out the window. And so I want to highlight something that Tania said in their comment, which was that we have to make it so that there's hope in this process, that when you engage a conversation that not only does it again make you more interesting, fascinating, better advocate for your ideas, but that it's a life giving experience.

And fundamentally, when you think about Bridge, Michelle, when we graduated college, we had like five chapters, and then we got into 25, now we have 50 in colleges and 20 in high schools. The goal by 2025 is to get to around 250. What that tells me is that there's an appetite for this work, that many people actually do want discourse, but we have to start thinking about how to make it not only an exciting and interesting process, but that actually it is to your social incentive as a participant in society to seek out these conversations, to follow the flow chart that Tania talks about. Because if we don't have that, then again, this is fundamentally an activity left to the people that are seeking it out. And at this moment, unfortunately a lot of people are not seeking it out.

Tania Israel:

Manu, I have to say, I love that framing of a generation and those influences. I think that that's so telling. The other thing that strikes me that has changed in my lifetime that's probably always been present in yours is the 24-hour news cycle. So what we're being exposed to in terms of the news and how the emotions that are presented get amplified in order to try to keep people attending to something that's going on. And also social media, which didn't use to exist in my lifetime. And the ways that people's interactions with each other are really abbreviated and disembodied.

So I also think that often when people are thinking about engaging with other people, it's in these ways that are not fully connected to another human being. And that's one of the places where I think that this is some really beautiful opportunity to cultivate that. And especially having had several years of pandemic when we haven't had all of those opportunities, being able to really connect with other people is such a great thing to be able to do. And if we can do it around different values and different views, then that helps to strengthen our democracy.

Michelle Deutchman:

I mean, I think one of the things that both of you are touching on is what a nuanced, and in many ways, complicated issue this is, with Tania talking about how people can have more than one goal. And it strikes me that one of the challenges seems that you're trying to pull back layers of something and get people to dig a little deeper in a moment, like you said, Tania, where abbreviated, short numbers of characters and being loud or snarky is what gets people's attention. And that just seems very hard.

Like Tania, I can remember college and I did not go to college with the internet. I think my senior year I was going to some computer lab where you could log in, if you wanted to wait 45 minutes for one of the

computers. And it's really even hard for me to imagine what it must be like to have this constant barrage of information and feelings about issues, constantly.

And so I think as we sort of approach the end of our time together, I want to pick up on this idea of hope because I think that right now with so many of these issues and so many of the issues that the Center deals with, I think there is a lot of dismay, and sort of paralysis, and people feeling overwhelmed. And so I'd like to give each of you a chance to talk to us a little bit about either some moments of joy, or a moment of surprise, or an experience that showcased progress that's made you feel hopeful about discourse and dialogue, not just in higher ED but in society at large.

Manu Meel:

I would say that, and I'm sure this resonates with Tania, that some of the best and most hopeful experiences come at the most micro level, when you're just facilitating a one-on-one dialogue in this classroom after dark at 6:00 PM on a campus in, let's say, Alabama. And the two students, again, as Tania was saying, sometimes the goal can be very simple, that we're just trying to understand the other argument and it's profound. But I want to challenge this frame of pessimism a little bit. So we had our summit, Michelle, our student summit in April of this year. It was our first summit after the pandemic, which is super exciting for all of our young people.

And we had, I think about two or three students from every chapter there. We had about 120 students. And I mean these students, like many of us at Bridge, had very strong passionate opinions. I mean, some of them were super conservative from Texas, and we had folks from different identity groups from Georgia, and we had really liberal students from New York, and very techy people like me from Palo Alto and San Francisco. And we had folks all over the place. These weren't ideological centrist or milk toast people. That is oftentimes the impression that folks think about in our media environment when we think about common ground dialogue

These were hard-nosed, passionate young people with a desire to create change in a certain ideological direction. And so the question became, why were they there? And the answer to that question gave me a lot of hope, because what all of them said to an extent, reliably, in one sense or the other, was that "We're not here for any one ideology. We're here showing up for a certain temperament, a mindset. A mindset that values open-mindedness as opposed to close-mindedness, a temperament that believes in empathy as opposed to exclusion, a way of showing up that brings people in, as opposed to pushing people out. We're here for a temperament."

And to me, I think this is beyond just my generation, I think the battle that we're fighting is not a battle of ideology, it's a battle of temperament. It's a battle of mindsets. There are so many folks in our politics, as Tania said, and I think there's something very profound in the comment that in social media, your incentive is to divide. Right now people win on division, whether it is that you want to make the most friends or gain the most popularity in college campus, or you want to win an election, or you want to be a community leader, people win through division.

And our job is how do you articulate this moment and this work in a frame that inspires people to think about this work as a way of not only winning for their specific ideological moment, but reframing the fight not to be some sort of ideological centrism, but a fight to fundamentally preserve the core tentative democracy. Because again, all of this falls apart if you lose the ability to communicate. It's that simple. So that's what gives me hope is that I think the paddle is actually far simpler than many of us frame it to be. And that was particularly evident at our student summit.

Michelle Deutchman:

I love that and I love that you're challenging me and I'm happy to be challenged to see things through a more optimistic lens. Tania, how about you? Something hopeful.

Tania Israel:

I can just listen to Manu describe these experiences all day, because they give me so much hope. And I feel like the things that have most made a difference to me in terms of optimism are first of all, people who have read my book or come to a workshop, and then they tell me how they used the skills and they say, "Oh yes, I then reached out to this person and we had a conversation." Or even, "I wasn't feeling comfortable doing this, but now I've made a plan to talk to my cousin when we get together at the holidays."

So when people are actually using the materials and it is actually helping them to take action, that is so encouraging to me. The other things that's encouraging frankly, is the connection that I've developed with so many organizations and other individuals who are doing this bridge-building work like Manu. And so seeing all of the ways that this is happening, there's really a movement in our country to bridge the divide. And so much of it is really about strengthening democracy through doing that, as well as strengthening our communities and our relationships and our families.

And seeing all of that happening, and I will tell you, it is not being covered by the media enough. What we're seeing mostly in the media is still that divisiveness. And so it's really taken doing this work for me to have more of a bird's eye view into what's going on in this movement. And it is so encouraging and there's so many people who want to engage, who want to connect, and who want to really listen and learn.

Michelle Deutchman:

And I'm going to pose sort of a challenge to our listeners that as they listen to this interview and move forward in their own lives, that they think about how they might do some of this work. And then I hope that they'll reach out either to me or one or both of you to share how that happened. Because I think you're right. We need to build the repository of hopeful and productive experiences.

I always end the discussions with the same question, which is about leaving listeners with something very specific to do to make an impact. And I think you've given people many things they can do, but if there's just one thing you want to pick that someone could do sort of today or this week in order to advance expression and civic engagement or dialogue, what would that be? And I'll let you start, Tania.

Tania Israel:

The thing that I hope that people will do is to recognize that it is empowering to be able to understand a perspective other than their own. And to really set an intention to seek to broaden their perspectives beyond simply what they believe and what they agree with.

Michelle Deutchman:

That's beautiful. Thank you. Manu.

Manu Meel:

So Michelle, I'm going to be that annoying person in class and answer two things. There's two things and I want to just build on what Tania was saying there. I think the first is that we think that this stuff is so complex that you got to be engaged in politics to have a conversation. Literally, the most insightful and important thing that you can just do right now is open your door and go and knock on your neighbor's

door and just strike up a dialogue. That's it. This stuff is not that complicated. Again, we forget in this hyper-technical, hyper-advanced society, we lose fact of the notion that we as people have so much individual agency.

The second thing, and this is something that I think has been a theme through this podcast as we're listening, and thinking about this, is that we believe and we need to figure out how to articulate dialogue as a real project that is important in our moment. So what I want people to do when they're listening is start thinking about reframing the moment that America is going through. There's one narrative that is that we're incredibly problematic, that we're in a moment of deep societal hurt, that there's a lot of pessimism. The other way to think about this is that we are one of the most ambitious, not worse, not greatest, most ambitious experiment in the history of humanity.

By 2045, the United States is going to be the most diverse country that the world has ever seen. By 2050, the United States is going to have the most technological progress that society's ever seen. By 2060, we'll have a geopolitical order that looks different than it ever has. You have the opportunity to build something magnificent, that all the turmoil that we're going through right now is expected. It makes sense, because what we're trying to build as a societal project in our communities, everywhere from our preschools to our institutions, that trouble and hurt is normal.

And when you start to think about this moment as expected, then we suddenly move from this frame that we're on the back foot to the fact that we're actually pioneering something. So two things. Open your door and have a conversation with someone that's different than you. And the second thing is, let's start reframing this moment and see dialogue as a important and necessity for our political project.

Michelle Deutchman:

That was beautiful. I'm so moved by the conversation the three of us are having. Tania, I think you get the last word.

Tania Israel:

I just want to thank you for the work that you're doing, Michelle, and thank Manu for the work that you're doing. And I want to thank all of the listeners for your interest in this. The fact that you are here says that you're really somebody who can make a difference in this by contributing your own listening, your own desire to understand, and that is going to help to strengthen our democracy.

Michelle Deutchman:

I mean, I think it's a mutual admiration society, and I am grateful to both of you for taking time out of your schedules and out of the essential work that you're doing day-to-day to talk with me and talk with our listeners. And I feel, actually, fuller then when I jumped on to talk with you both. And so I'm grateful for that. Well, we will make sure that we have links to BridgeUSA and of course to Tania's amazing book. And that you can have access to learning how to get Beyond Your Bubble with this episode. And with that, I want to thank both of you again and wish you a wonderful holiday season that hopefully includes many interesting and thoughtful conversations with people that may not see things the same way as you.

Manu Meel:

Thank you, Michelle.

Tania Israel:

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Thank you so much.

Michelle Deutchman:

And that's a wrap for season one of SpeechMatters. Please join us in January for season two. I look forward to diving into and discussing the new issues that arise in the coming year. Mark your calendars for our annual SpeechMatters conference, which will take place virtually on March 23rd. Until then, happy New Year, may it be healthy and joyous. Talk to you in 2023.