

*BRANCACCIO: For those who suspect that politics is a cesspool of self-serving intrigue and corruption, well, our stories in this hour may just convince you that you're absolutely right.*

*In the face of this you have two choices: stay home and play solitaire or find a way to channel the head of steam that built up among voters to make the world a better place. Democracy is more than politics; it's also about doing what you can close to home.*

*I got a lesson on that from Angela Glover Blackwell and Manuel Pastor. Blackwell runs a group called Policy Link that pushes for economic and social equality. Manuel Pastor teaches Latin American and Latino Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where he is also Director of the Center for Justice, Tolerance and Community. They've written a book called **SEARCHING FOR THE UNCOMMON COMMON GROUND**. Some uncommon ground may be needed, at a time when the number of people living in poverty is on the rise in America. My guests had suggestions about how to get cracking.*

BLACKWELL: I think this conversation begins from the community level. At the community level, people are more concerned about their neighbors, they're more concerned about the cities and towns and areas where they happen to live. And even though people at the national level who are often engaged in campaigns live in communities, too, I don't think that they're remembering the lessons of community. And so, by starting at the local level, we can begin to build relationships and test out strategies.

In the San Diego region, there are communities called the diamond neighborhoods, it's a very low income area in San Diego. And a few years back, the Jacobs Family Foundation started off by interviewing people who live in the neighborhood to ask what they would want. What people wanted was a grocery store. The residents, the foundation, community based organizations came together and they were able to create a destination near a transit stop where a grocery store, Food For Less, actually is actually the anchor. But there are other small community businesses also in that location. This did several things. It created a community that turned out to be a place where people would choose to live. Not just where they were forced to live.

BRANCACCIO: Now, Manuel, you've also written about this very idea of place being a crucial part of this conversation about social justice in America.

PASTOR: Place matters tremendously. There really is a geography of opportunity in the regional landscapes in which we live. And one finds that if you're in particular neighborhoods, you are disconnected from employment possibilities, you're disconnected from transportation. You may find yourself with some of the worst environmental disamenities as well.

And one of the things that's really striking, for example, is the whole question of environmental justice in the United States, and the fact that hazards tend to be disproportionately in low income and minority neighborhoods. I remember when I first

started working on this issue, I told my aunt, Tia Dalia, I said, "Tia, Tia, this is really exciting. I'm going to start to work on this question of environmental racism." And she said, "Oh my gosh, that's wonderful that you're working on that. What is it?"

And I said, "Well, that's the fact that hazards are disproportionately in minority and low income neighborhoods." She looked at me very sadly and she said, "Well, everyone knows that, Manuelito." So there's really, you know, people know this in their bones, that place matters. If they didn't know that places matters, they wouldn't be so desperate to move to the suburbs, where they think there are better schools, more opportunities, et cetera.

BRANCACCIO: Listening to you, it occurs to me that one way to address that is mass transit, public transit. But also, what? Affordable housing in suburbs.

BLACKWELL: Yes. We need affordable housing in suburbs. It absolutely is essential that we provide housing opportunities for people to be able to move to opportunity. And it just doesn't exist. What we have right now, lots of people moving out of low income inner city communities.

And they're moving to the only places they can afford, which turn out to be older suburban communities that are themselves in decline. Because we've actually seen that this isn't just a few places. But from the 1980s to 2000, there was 121 percent increase in the numbers of people living in suburban communities of concentrated poverty. A real problem. Concentrating poverty is a very bad thing. It's bad to be poor. And we all know what it means just not to have enough money to do what you need to do. But when you are poor in a community in which almost everybody else is poor, your life chances are greatly diminished.

Because what that means is that all of the children who go to your school are likely to also be poor and have many needs beyond the usual needs of trying to make sure that you educate children. So it places a huge burden on the school system. It means that you're isolated from natural job networks. And that's how people get jobs: through natural job networks. You know somebody. Say, "Come on down to this place. I know they're hiring."

Or, "There's a good job over there."

BRANCACCIO: Because as you try to break down these barriers, what really stands in the way?

BLACKWELL: We need to push those in power to respond to the important issues of the country. So I am not for just waiting four years and trying again. Education, housing, transportation, health continue to be important issues. And we need to hold the current administration accountable for responding to those.

Privately, people want a more inclusive society and polling has shown that again and again. If you ask people should we provide education for everyone? They will say yes. Should we discriminate in the workplace? People will say no.

Ought we to allow people to be able to live wherever they want? People will say yes. They will say that. But when you then ask them what about busing to deal with education? People recoil. If you say what about affordable housing in your neighborhood? People will recoil. And if you use affirmative action directly to talk about the workplace, people will begin to reject it. What we have failed to do is create a policy narrative that catches the American people where they are.

PASTOR: In the same year that President Bush finally won Florida in a convincing way, the voters in Florida voted for a significant increase in the minimum wage that had been pushed forward by Acorn, an organization of community groups. Which was pressing for economic equity.

BRANCACCIO: Voters in Nevada did the same thing at the time that the state went to George Bush, too, this time around.

PASTOR: And I think there is a reservoir of good will about dealing with these issues. I think that we can't wait four years. We need to point to these local increases in the minimum wage and in the living wage.

We need to point to these examples in communities where communities have come together and secured a community benefits agreement and have been able to get good hiring and good affordable housing out of it. We need to point to the inner ring suburbs that have begun to redesign themselves so that they can capture some of the benefits of regional economic growth.

We need to combine our moral vision with a pragmatic sense that this can be done. In fact, it can be done. One of the reasons why people are so reluctant sometimes to put additional dollars into education is they feel like, gosh, the educational system doesn't work. Additional dollars aren't really going to do it.

There are so many examples where hard-working teachers and parents and principals make schools work even with scarce dollars. We need to lift those up. And we need to, again, replace this bigotry of soft expectations the president talks about with also talking about a bigotry of soft funding. When you don't put the dollars where the needs are, you're not gonna see the needle move on poverty.

BRANCACCIO: But it's dollars. But it's also in every single one of the examples from both of you, it's people participating in the process. It's actually pretty hard in modern America where you might have one, two parents working very hard, working long hours. Sometimes for not much money. And then you expect them also to have this well-rounded civic life in which they're taking on problems against all odds. Are you not asking too much?

PASTOR: I think the participation in the election showed us the yearning that people have for democracy. And I think what we need to do is to build on it to move from elections to actual democratic practice. That engagement on a daily level with the schools that your kids go to, with the city councils, with the local county governments to begin to engage in real democratic practice. The other thing I think that leaders can really help us with is democratic conversation. And what I...

BRANCACCIO: Democratic conversation?

PASTOR: Yes. And what I mean by that is that we're a highly polarized society. And the last election didn't really help in terms of trying to reduce the level of polarization. And the problem with that is that the way that we're gonna get to this uncommon common ground is by being involved in democratic conversation with one another.

Actually not painting the other as some completely separate red or blue person who you could never have a discourse with. I was struck with what Obama said in his speech to the Democratic Convention about how we worship an awesome God in the blue states. And we have gay and lesbian relatives in the red states.

This world is actually very complex. There's actually a lot of goodwill out there. And we need to move beyond the polarized stereotypes to begin to get people engaged in deep conversation with one another

BRANCACCIO: Does this polarization drive you crazy?

BLACKWELL: The talk about it drives me crazy.

BRANCACCIO: And here we've just done it again.

BLACKWELL: I don't think that we're as polarized as we're presenting the American people as being. To think about it, in the last election, 60 percent of people who lived in cities voted for Senator Kerry. That means 40 percent of people who lived in cities voted for President Bush. That in the last election in the small town, small cities, 49 percent voted for President Bush, 49 percent voted for Senator Kerry.

That in each time that you bring, if you take the data and you tear it apart, you'll see that a number of people felt the other way in all instances. Which says that there's a lot of complexity in everything that we're talking about.

And if you look at polling around the attitudes of people around these issues of inclusion, they're much closer together than you would think.

BRANCACCIO: So that's a magic word? When we keep talking about reframing and a new vocabulary? Inclusiveness? Do you think that would have the widest appeal that could help you build the coalition that you seek?

BLACKWELL: I like inclusiveness. I think that that's a word that a lot of people can get behind. But I tell you what I like better. I like creating a society in which all can participate and all can prosper. I think that notion of participation really gets at our belief in democracy.

It sparks us to think about how do we get out there and with whom are we going to join? And prosper is a very good term. Prosper is not definitive in terms of how much I'm gonna prosper and how much you're gonna prosper. But we know that we want a prosperous society. And we want for everybody to be able to gain as we move there. How do we create a society that allows everybody to participate and everybody to prosper? That is an inclusive society.

BRANCACCIO: What sustains you in all this? These are, some fear, intractable problems. And I hear from you that you don't feel they're intractable. But what really motivates you to push forward on this stuff?

PASTOR: When I see people coming together to move forward at a local level, it tremendously sustains me. When I think about my academic achievements and I think about I have a PhD and I've got books and all that stuff. When I think about really the proudest academic achievement is when I give a talk in a community and someone comes up afterwards and says to me, "I saw myself in your numbers, in your statistics, in the story that you're telling. And I found a place for my story in a larger story of social change." Boy, that really sustains me.

That gives me hope. That keeps me going. And that's the reason for my fundamental optimism despite what we perhaps just saw at the national level.

BRANCACCIO: All right. The book is called **SEARCHING FOR THE UNCOMMON COMMON GROUND: NEW DIMENSIONS ON RACE IN AMERICA**. Angela Glover Blackwell, Manuel Pastor, thank you very much.

BLACKWELL AND PASTOR: Thank you.