

Best-selling author and speaker William Ury helps people get to Yes in all areas of life, from family feuds to boardroom battles.

Below is the full text of William Ury’s TED Talk titled: **The Walk from “No” to “Yes”**.

William Ury - Full TRANSCRIPT

Well, the subject of difficult negotiation reminds me of one of my favorite stories from the Middle East, of a man who left to his three sons, 17 camels.

To the first son, he left half the camels; to the second son, he left a third of the camels; and to the youngest son, he left a ninth of the camels.

The three sons got into a negotiation — 17 doesn’t divide by two. It doesn’t divide by three. It doesn’t divide by nine. Brotherly tempers started to get strained.

Finally, in desperation, they went and they consulted a wise old woman.

The wise old woman thought about their problem for a long time, and finally she came back and said, “Well, I don’t know if I can help you, but at least, if you want, you can have my camel.”

So then, they had 18 camels. The first son took his half — half of 18 is nine. The second son took his third — a third of 18 is six. The youngest son took his ninth — a ninth of 18 is two.

You get 17. They had one camel left over. They gave it back to the wise old woman.

Now, if you think about that story for a moment, I think it resembles a lot of the difficult negotiations we get involved in. They start off like 17 camels, no way to resolve it.

Somehow, what we need to do is step back from those situations, like that wise old woman, look at the situation through fresh eyes and come up with an 18th camel. Finding that 18th camel in the world’s conflicts has been my life passion.

I basically see humanity a bit like those three brothers. We’re all one family. We know that scientifically, thanks to the communications revolution, all the tribes on the planet — all 15,000 tribes — are in touch with each other.

And it’s a big family reunion. And yet, like many family reunions, it’s not all peace and light. There’s a lot of conflict, and the question is: How do we deal with our differences? How do we deal with our deepest differences, given the human propensity for conflict and the human genius at devising weapons of enormous destruction? That’s the question.

As I’ve spent the last better part of three decades, almost four, traveling the world, trying to work, getting involved in conflicts ranging from Yugoslavia to the Middle East to Chechnya to Venezuela — some of the most difficult conflicts on the face of the planet — I’ve been asking myself that question.

And I think I’ve found, in some ways, what is the secret to peace. It’s actually surprisingly simple. It’s not easy, but it’s simple. It’s not even new. It may be one of our most ancient human heritages. The secret to peace is us.

It’s us who act as a surrounding community around any conflict, who can play a constructive role. Let me give you just a story, an example.

About 20 years ago, I was in South Africa, working with the parties in that conflict, and I had an extra month, so I spent some time living with several groups of San Bushmen. I was curious about them, about the way in which they resolve conflict.

Because, after all, within living memory, they were hunters and gatherers, living pretty much like our ancestors lived for maybe 99% of the human story.

And all the men have these poison arrows that they use for hunting — absolutely fatal.

So how do they deal with their differences?

Well, what I learned is, whenever tempers rise in those communities, someone goes and hides the poison arrows out in the bush, and then everyone sits around in a circle like this, and they sit and they talk and they talk.

It may take two days, three days, four days, but they don't rest until they find a resolution or better yet — a reconciliation.

And if tempers are still too high, then they send someone off to visit some relatives, as a cooling-off period. Well, that system is, I think, probably the system that kept us alive to this point, given our human tendencies.

That system, I call “the third side.” Because if you think about it, normally when we think of conflict, when we describe it, there's always two sides — it's Arabs versus Israelis, labor versus management, husband versus wife, Republicans versus Democrats.

But what we don't often see is that there's always a third side, and the third side of the conflict is us, it's the surrounding community, it's the

friends, the allies, the family members, the neighbors. And we can play an incredibly constructive role.

Perhaps the most fundamental way in which the third side can help is to remind the parties of what’s really at stake.

For the sake of the kids, for the sake of the family, for the sake of the community, for the sake of the future, let’s stop fighting for a moment and start talking. Because, the thing is, when we’re involved in conflict, it’s very easy to lose perspective. It’s very easy to react.

Human beings — we’re reaction machines. And as the saying goes, when angry, you will make the best speech you will ever regret.

And so the third side reminds us of that. The third side helps us go to the balcony, which is a metaphor for a place of perspective, where we can keep our eyes on the prize.

Let me tell you a little story from my own negotiating experience. Some years ago, I was involved as a facilitator in some very tough talks between the leaders of Russia and the leaders of Chechnya. There was a war going on, as you know.

And we met in the Hague, in the Peace Palace, in the same room where the Yugoslav war-crimes tribunal was taking place. And the talks got off to a rather rocky start when the vice president of Chechnya began by pointing at the Russians and said, “You should stay right here in your seats, because you’re going to be on trial for war crimes.”

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And then he turned to me and said, “You’re an American. Look at what you Americans are doing in Puerto Rico.”

And my mind started racing, “Puerto Rico? What do I know about Puerto Rico?” I started reacting.

But then, I tried to remember to go to the balcony. And then when he paused and everyone looked at me for a response.

From a balcony perspective, I was able to thank him for his remarks and say, “I appreciate your criticism of my country and I take it as a sign that we’re among friends and can speak candidly to one another. And what we’re here to do is not to talk about Puerto Rico or the past. We’re here to see if we can figure out a way to stop the suffering and the bloodshed in Chechnya.”

The conversation got back on track. That’s the role of the third side, to help the parties go to the balcony.

Now let me take you, for a moment, to what’s widely regarded as the world’s most difficult conflict, or the most impossible conflict, the Middle East.

Question is: where’s the third side there? How could we possibly go to the balcony?

Now, I don’t pretend to have an answer to the Middle East conflict, but I think I’ve got a first step — literally, a first step — something that any one of us could do as third-siders.

Let me just ask you one question first. How many of you in the last years have ever found yourself worrying about the Middle East and wondering what anyone could do? Just out of curiosity, how many of you? OK, so the great majority of us.

And here, it’s so far away. Why do we pay so much attention to this conflict? Is it the number of deaths? There are a hundred times more

people who die in a conflict in Africa than in the Middle East. No, it's because of the story, because we feel personally involved in that story.

Whether we're Christians, Muslims or Jews, religious or non-religious, we feel we have a personal stake in it. Stories matter; as an anthropologist, I know that.

Stories are what we use to transmit knowledge. They give meaning to our lives. That's what we tell here at TED, we tell stories. Stories are the key.

And so my question is — yes, let's try and resolve the politics there in the Middle East, but let's also take a look at the story.

Let's try to get at the root of what it's all about. Let's see if we can apply the third side to it. What would that mean?

What is the story there?

Now, as anthropologists, we know that every culture has an origin story. What's the origin story of the Middle East? In a phrase, it's: Four thousand years ago, a man and his family walked across the Middle East, and the world has never been the same since. That man, of course, was Abraham.

And what he stood for was unity, the unity of the family; he's the father of us all. But it's not just what he stood for, it's what his message was. His basic message was unity too, the interconnectedness of it all, the unity of it all. And his basic value was respect, was kindness toward strangers. That's what he's known for, his hospitality.

So in that sense, he's the symbolic third side of the Middle East. He's the one who reminds us that we're all part of a greater whole.

Now, think about that for a moment. Today, we face the scourge of

terrorism.

What is terrorism?

Terrorism is basically taking an innocent stranger and treating them as an enemy whom you kill in order to create fear.

What’s the opposite of terrorism?

It’s taking an innocent stranger and treating them as a friend whom you welcome into your home, in order to sow and create understanding or respect, or love.

So what if, then, you took the story of Abraham, which is a third-side story, what if that could be — because Abraham stands for hospitality — what if that could be an antidote to terrorism? What if that could be a vaccine against religious intolerance?

How would you bring that story to life? Now, it’s not enough just to tell a story. That’s powerful, but people need to experience the story. They need to be able to live the story. How would you do that? And that was my thinking of how would you do that.

And that’s what comes to the first step here. Because the simple way to do that is: you go for a walk. You go for a walk in the footsteps of Abraham. You retrace the footsteps of Abraham. Because walking has a real power.

You know, as an anthropologist, walking is what made us human. It’s funny — when you walk, you walk side-by-side, in the same common direction.

Now if I were to come to you face-to-face and come this close to you, you would feel threatened. But if I walk shoulder-to-shoulder, even touching shoulders, it’s no problem. Who fights while they walk? That’s why in

negotiations, often, when things get tough, people go for walks in the woods.

So the idea came to me of, what about inspiring a path, a route — think the Silk Route, think the Appalachian Trail — that followed in the footsteps of Abraham? People said, “That’s crazy. You can’t. You can’t retrace the footsteps of Abraham — it’s too insecure, you’ve got to cross all these borders, it goes across 10 different countries in the Middle East, because it unites them all.”

And so we studied the idea at Harvard. We did our due diligence.

And then a few years ago, a group of us, about 25 of us from 10 different countries, decided to see if we could retrace the footsteps of Abraham, going from his initial birthplace in the city of Urfa in Southern Turkey, Northern Mesopotamia.

And we then took a bus and took some walks and went to Harran, where, in the Bible, he sets off on his journey. Then we crossed the border into Syria, went to Aleppo, which, turns out, is named after Abraham. We went to Damascus, which has a long history associated with Abraham.

We then came to Northern Jordan, to Jerusalem — which is all about Abraham — to Bethlehem, and finally, to the place where he’s buried, in Hebron.

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So effectively, we went from womb to tomb. We showed it could be done. It was an amazing journey. Let me ask you a question. How many of you have had the experience of being in a strange neighborhood or strange land, and a total stranger, perfect stranger, comes up to you and shows you some kindness — maybe invites you into their home, gives you a drink,

gives you a coffee, gives you a meal? How many of you have ever had that experience? That’s the essence of the Abraham Path.

That’s what you discover as you go into these villages in the Middle East where you expect hostility, and you get the most amazing hospitality, all associated with Abraham: “In the name of Father Ibrahim, let me offer you some food.”

So what we discovered is that Abraham is not just a figure out of a book for those people; he’s alive, he’s a living presence.

And to make a long story short, in the last couple of years now, thousands of people have begun to walk parts of the path of Abraham in the Middle East, enjoying the hospitality of the people there. They’ve begun to walk in Israel and Palestine, in Jordan, in Turkey, in Syria. It’s an amazing experience.

Men, women, young people, old people — more women than men, actually, interestingly. For those who can’t walk, who are unable to get there right now, people started to organize walks in cities, in their own communities.

In Cincinnati, for instance, they organized a walk from a church to a mosque to a synagogue and all had an Abrahamic meal together. It was Abraham Path Day. In São Paulo, Brazil, it’s become an annual event for thousands of people to run in a virtual Abraham Path Run, uniting the different communities.

The media love it; they really adore it. They lavish attention on it because it’s visual and it spreads the idea, this idea of Abrahamic hospitality, of kindness towards strangers.

And just a couple weeks ago, there was an NPR story on it .Last month, there was a piece in the Manchester Guardian about it, two whole pages. And they quoted a villager who said, “This walk connects us to the world.”

He said, “It was like a light that went on in our lives — it brought us hope.”

And so that’s what it’s about. But it’s not just about psychology; it’s about economics. Because as people walk, they spend money. And this woman right here, Um Ahmad, is a woman who lives on the path in Northern Jordan. She’s desperately poor. She’s partially blind, her husband can’t work, she’s got seven kids.

But what she can do is cook. And so she’s begun to cook for some groups of walkers who come through the village and have a meal in her home. They sit on the floor — she doesn’t even have a tablecloth.

She makes the most delicious food, that’s fresh from the herbs in the surrounding countryside. And so more and more walkers have come, and lately she’s begun to earn an income to support her family.

And so she told our team there, she said, “You have made me visible in a village where people were once ashamed to look at me.” That’s the potential of the Abraham Path. There are literally hundreds of those kinds of communities across the Middle East, across the path.

The potential is basically to change the game. And to change the game, you have to change the frame, the way we see things — to change the frame from hostility to hospitality, from terrorism to tourism.

And in that sense, the Abraham Path is a game-changer. Let me just show you one thing. I have a little acorn here that I picked up while I was walking on the path earlier this year.

Now, the acorn is associated with the oak tree, of course — grows into an oak tree, which is associated with Abraham. The path right now is like an acorn; it’s still in its early phase.

What would the oak tree look like?

When I think back to my childhood, a good part of which I spent, after being born here in Chicago, I spent in Europe. If you had been in the ruins of, say, London in 1945, or Berlin, and you had said, “Sixty years from now, this is going to be the most peaceful, prosperous part of the planet,” people would have thought you were certifiably insane. But they did it, thanks to a common identity, Europe, and a common economy.

So my question is, if it can be done in Europe, why not in the Middle East? Why not, thanks to a common identity, which is the story of Abraham, and thanks to a common economy that would be based, in good part, on tourism?

So let me conclude, then, by saying that in the last 35 years, as I’ve worked in some of the most dangerous, difficult and intractable conflicts around the planet, I have yet to see one conflict that I felt could not be transformed. It’s not easy, of course. But it’s possible. It was done in South Africa. It was done in Northern Ireland.

It could be done anywhere. It simply depends on us. It depends on us taking the third side.

So let me invite you to consider taking the third side, even as a very small step. We’re about to take a break in a moment.

Just go up to someone who’s from a different culture, a different country, a different ethnicity — some difference — and engage them in a conversation. Listen to them. That’s a third-side act. That’s walking Abraham’s Path.

After a TED Talk, why not a TED Walk? So let me just leave you with three things.

One is, the secret to peace is the third side. The third side is us. Each of us, with a single step, can take the world, can bring the world a step closer to peace. There’s an old African proverb that goes: “When spiderwebs unite, they can halt even the lion.” If we’re able to unite our third-side webs of peace, we can even halt the lion of war.

Thank you very much.

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