

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

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Ep. 193: The Keys To Ending Conflict, From A Negotiator Who Knows

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Lynn Thoman: Conflict is present everywhere. It's out in the world where we see it in our politics and our wars, but it's also at home at the family dinner table. It affects everything from the happiness of our families to our survival as a species.

I'm going to start this podcast with the two questions with which my guest William Ury starts his book, Possible. How can we deal with our deepest differences without destroying all that we hold dear? How can we find a way to live and work together even with inevitable conflicts?

Hi, everyone. I'm Lynn Thoman, and this is 3 Takeaways. On 3 Takeaways, I talk with some of the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, newsmakers, and scientists. Each episode ends with 3 key takeaways to help us understand the world, and maybe even ourselves a little better.

Today, I'm excited to be with William Ury and excited to find out how we can better deal with our deepest differences and find a better way to live and work together. William Ury is one of the world's leading experts on negotiation and mediation.

As the co-founder of Harvard's Program on Negotiation, he's a driving force behind the scenes of many negotiations around the world. William has served as a negotiation advisor and mediator in conflicts ranging from the Cold War to ethnic and civil wars in the Middle East, Chechnya, Yugoslavia, and Colombia, where he served as an advisor to President Juan Manuel Santos. If you're interested in [how former President of Colombia Juan Manuel Santos ended Colombia's 50-year civil war](#), President Santos shares how he ended this civil war, in which millions of people died, on 3 Takeaways in [episode 93](#).

In addition to being an advisor on conflicts, William Ury is the founder of the Abraham Path Initiative, which brings people together across cultures by opening a long-distance walking route in the Middle East that retraces the footsteps of Abraham and his family. William is also the co-author of the wonderful book Getting to Yes, a 15 million copy bestseller that's been translated into more than 35 languages. His new book is Possible.

Welcome, William, and thanks so much for joining 3 Takeaways today.

William Ury: It's my great pleasure, Lynn.

LT: It is really my pleasure.

WU: Thank you.

LT: Can you tell us about the phone call that changed your life?

WU: Yes. I was 23. I was a graduate student in social anthropology at Harvard.

I was living on the top floor of a little attic room, a rental room, and it was a cold January freezing night and I was grading exams for the sophomore tutorial that I was teaching and I was also writing my own exams. And I got a call at 10 o'clock at night. And in those days, you never got a call from a professor.

But in this case, the phone said, this is Professor Roger Fisher. I've just read your paper taking an anthropological perspective of the Middle East peace negotiations, and I took the central chart and took the liberty of sending it to the Assistant Secretary of State for the Middle East because he's working on Middle East peace negotiations, and I thought he might be interested.

LT: Wow.

WU: Yeah, that's exactly what I said. I was speechless. I was stunned. And when Roger said, would you work with me?

Of course, and my life has never been the same ever since. I've spent the last 45 years really wandering around the planet, working in some of the world's toughest disputes, whether it's at home on boardroom battles, or labor strikes in the coal mines, or whether it's around the world in the Middle East or the Cold War. But asking this question of how can we deal with our deepest differences and looking to see if there's some creative ideas that could help us just as we bring creative ideas to coming up with all kinds of new technologies.

Why not come up with creative ideas to come up with the human technologies to deal more creatively and constructively and effectively with our differences?

LT: We certainly need that. One of your insights that I found fascinating, which I had never quite realized, is that negotiations sound differently, the ones that are going badly from the ones that are going well. Can you talk about how they sound differently?

WU: Well, actually, that was what I was trying to do in that original paper that Roger read. I like to do thought experiments. And the thought experiment I conducted when I was a graduate student was, what if I was an anthropological fly on the wall of a Middle East peace negotiation? How would I know it was going well or poorly?

And it was things like, well, if it's going poorly, people are focused just on the past. They're engaged in a blame game. The question [they're focusing on] is who's right, who's wrong.

And if it's going well, people are focused on the future, like what are we going to do tomorrow morning to ameliorate the situation? How are we going to create an opening in this seemingly difficult conflict? So those kinds of things would be immediate indicators of whether a negotiation was closing down possibilities or opening up possibilities even in the most difficult situations.

LT: That's actually really critical to understand because it means that you immediately need to pivot the conversation from the past and from blame.

WU: That's it. The blame game is like the oldest thing, but as we all know, I think it was Gandhi who famously said, an eye for an eye and we all go blind.

LT: Yes. Yes, exactly. Most people think that we need less conflict. Why do you believe the world actually needs more conflict?

WU: As an anthropologist, I've learned that, conflict is natural. It's part of human life. In its healthy form, it's essential.

I mean, the best decisions arrive when you surface divergent perspectives and you engage it. Healthy democracy is really engaged conflict. Even an economic marketplace is competition.

In fact, you could argue that conflict is the foundation of human growth. It's how we grow. It's how we learn.

It's how we engage. And in that sense, actually in a world today where so many changes need to be made, there are so many injustices. We're actually paradoxically going to need more conflict, not less.

And the choice is not to end the conflict, but to find a different way to deal with it. Psychologists will tell you that the secret to a healthy marriage isn't avoiding conflict. It's actually engaging your differences in a healthy, constructive way that actually makes for a vibrant, healthy, robust relationship.

LT: How do we get there? How do we deal with our differences constructively?

WU: Well, we tend to fall into what I call the three A trap, which is we, you know, we don't like conflict, so we avoid it. Or we accommodate and we just give in. Or we attack.

And none of those three are particularly satisfying. So, we've got to find a way to get out of that three A trap, which is paradoxically to lean into the conflict, the opposite of avoiding. Embrace the conflict with curiosity and then transform it with collaboration.

And those three qualities, curiosity, creativity, and collaboration are our innate human potentials. We apply them to science, for example. Why not apply them to conflict? And it's about unlocking our innate human potential.

LT: Can you expand on each one of those three?

WU: The secret I've found of successful negotiation is to start with yourself, realize that the person over whom we have most influences ourselves here, and to be able to go to the balcony. And I use that metaphor, which I actually got from a Harvard colleague, Ron Heifetz, many, many years ago. It's a metaphor for imagining that you're negotiating on a stage.

And then part of you goes to a mental and emotional balcony overlooking that stage. It's a place of calm. It's a place of perspective.

It's a place where you can keep your eyes on the prize and where you can see the larger picture. And guess what? The more silence, the more cooperative, the more beneficial the outcome.

So, the silence may be the ultimate power move. Curiosity. So, from the balcony, in that moment between a stimulus and a response, lies that space.

And you can be curious first about yourself. Say, wow, what am I feeling right now? What am I thinking?

What's going on? And I'm getting this twinge in my stomach that the person is deceiving me or lying to me or whatever. Listen to yourself.

In listening to yourself, you kind of calm your nervous system. You kind of create some space so that you can then be curious about the other side. Because the key in negotiation is you're trying to influence someone.

You're trying to change their mind. How can we possibly change someone's mind if we don't know where their mind is? So, you have to be curious and listen, putting yourself in their shoes.

“How is it that you see it that way?” Let me try and understand your point of view. “What's your real concern here? What's your real fear? What's your desire? What's your aspiration?”

That's curiosity. Be curious about yourself and then be curious about the other.

LT: And then your second strategy for a constructive negotiation is creativity.

WU: Right, creativity. With a balcony, you realize that it turns out negotiation is an inside game. It starts from inside.

It's an inside out process. You've maybe found out a little bit of what they want, what they need, what their concerns are, what's actually going on for them. Now, you have a chance to be creative, which is an innate human potential.

Just take a simple situation like in business where an employee comes to you and they ask you for a raise. And you say, okay, they must need more money. You look at the budget.

There's no money. So, you say, I'm sorry. Thank them.

No raise. They walk out. And then you're scratching your head afterwards because you're worried maybe the employee is going to go look for a job elsewhere.

They're going to be demoralized and so on. So, you're meeting with a few of your friends at lunch and you ask them, so what other interests besides money might the employee have for wanting that raise? Because we assume it's just money, right?

But no, maybe it's recognition. Maybe it's career development. You come up with a whole list of interests.

Then you can be creative and say, okay, could we give them an award? Could we put them in front of the board? Could we give them a new assignment?

Could we give them a career plan? So, creativity, I call that the art of building a golden bridge, an attractive way forward for both sides.

LT: So interesting. And the third element?

WU: The third element is it's hard in these tough times with all these conflicts roiling around us. It's hard to go to the balcony. We're so reactive.

You got all the social media going on and everything. It's hard for us to build a golden bridge. Things seem so polarized.

We're going to need some help. And one of the biggest mistakes we make in negotiation is we reduce every conflict to two sides. It's labor versus management. It's sales versus manufacturing. It's husband versus wife.

It's always like two sides. And then you're always being asked to join one side or the other. As an anthropologist, I noticed that there's always a third side.

And the third side actually is the larger community of which the parties are part. I mean, it could be the family, could be the work team, the work organization, the community, the society, the world. It's the third side.

And that third side, the others around us in the conflict, is an untapped potential that we can tap to actually help the parties, our friends, our neighbors, our colleagues, our trusted mentors, whatever it is, who can help us go to the balcony, help the parties calm down, and can help us construct that golden bridge. So, particularly where there's asymmetries of power and so on, the third side can level the playing field so you can have a fair and equitable negotiation. So, mobilizing, engaging that third side together with going to the balcony and building the bridge are the three.

If you think about it, the balcony unlocks the potential within us, the bridge unlocks the potential between us, and the third side unlocks the potential around us. The essential quality of balcony is curiosity, the essential quality of bridge is creativity, and the essential quality of the third side is collaboration.

LT: So, William, is the objective reaching agreements? Or if it's not reaching agreements, what is it?

WU: In many cases, it's to reach agreements, of course. But no, the real objective of negotiation is to satisfy your interests. What do you really most care about?

What is most important to you? It's to satisfy those interests. Ideally, you might be able to do that with negotiating by reaching agreement.

In some cases, one of the most useful concepts we have in negotiation when you're on the balcony is you ask yourself, well, what if I'm not able to reach an agreement? How can I satisfy my interests? If I don't reach agreement, what's my plan B?

That's what we call in negotiation your BATNA. It's an acronym standing for your best alternative to a negotiated agreement. If you can't get this job, is there another job that you can get?

If you can't reach agreement with this client, maybe there's another client. Knowing your BATNA, because every negotiation takes place within the constraints of what each side sees as their best alternative. And so, the purpose of negotiation is not to reach agreement, it's to satisfy your interests.

And you're exploring through negotiation whether agreement can actually do that better for you than by resorting to your BATNA.

LT: It's actually larger than reaching agreement. What you're talking about is transforming the way we deal with one another and with our differences. It's essentially transforming our relationships while agreements are more finite and often transactional.

WU: That's it. To me, the new yes actually is not just an agreement, it's the transformation of our relationship. Because the truth is we may or may not be able to reach agreement.

We can agree to disagree. But what we can transform is the way we deal with our differences. And as you're saying, that actually transforms the way we relate to each other.

In this country, we may not be able to agree on everything. We don't have to agree on everything. We just have to maybe perhaps agree on a few things, but then transform the relationship.

And if we can deal with our differences, instead of dealing with them with destructive strife, in which everybody ends up losing, and particularly the next generation, if we can deal with it with constructive negotiation by going to the balcony, by building those bridges and by engaging the third side, then there's probably no problem on earth that we cannot address. Because we have the technology, we have the inventiveness, we have the science, we have everything like that. The only thing that's blocking us is that sometimes we're unable to work together.

LT: Before I ask for the 3 takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today, is there anything else you'd like to mention that you haven't already talked about?

WU: After 45 years of dealing with some of the toughest conflicts in the world, people often ask me, am I an optimist or am I a pessimist? And I like to answer now, I don't have a crystal ball, but I'll tell you what I am. I'm a possibilist.

In other words, I believe in human possibilities, human possibilities to transform our relationships, to transform our conflicts. Why? Because I've seen it happen with my own eyes in so many impossible seeming situations, whether it's Blacks and Whites trying to end apartheid in South Africa, Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, guerrillas and government in Columbia, and in boardroom battles and labor strikes.

I've seen how conflict can not only just bring out the worst in us, it can also bring out the best. And if you're listening to this podcast, I believe you're a possibilist. As possibilists, we can take our own innate human potential for curiosity, creativity, and collaboration, and apply it to our conflicts.

We can transform our conflicts, we can transform our lives, and we can transform this world.

LT: I love that word, possibilist. What are the 3 takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

WU: So, Lynn, the 3 takeaways are, if we're going to transform our conflicts, which is the huge opportunity that we face that would allow us to solve the problems that we face, we're going to have to do three things. The first, and this is the first takeaway, is instead of reacting, acting out of fear, out of anger, go to the balcony, a place of calm, perspective, self-control, a place where we can keep our eyes on the prize, see the larger picture, ask ourselves what we really want here. Best way to start the negotiation is to stop.

The second takeaway is having gone to the balcony, now, how do you deal with a very difficult situation on the other side? They may be pushing, they may be threatening, they may be digging into their position. Instead of just pushing, which then causes them to push back, do the opposite, which is attract them.

Instead of making it harder for them, make it easier for them to make the decision you want them to make. That's the art of building a golden bridge. So, the third takeaway is to realize that it's hard for people in the difficult conflicts that we find today to go to the balcony.

It's hard for people to build that bridge. And what we do in negotiations and conflicts is we tend to reduce everything, there's just two sides here. And we fail to realize that actually there's always a third side, which is the community around the conflict.

Those people, if we engage them, can help the parties go to the balcony, can help the parties build the golden bridge, activate all three potentials, and you have your best chance to transform conflicts which can transform our lives.

LT: William, thank you so much. Thank you for taking the time to join 3 Takeaways today. I really enjoyed your book, Possible.

WU: It's my great pleasure, Lynn.

LT: If you enjoyed today's conversation, you might enjoy our [3 Takeaways episode with former President of Colombia and Nobel Peace Prize winner Juan Manuel Santos](#) on how he ended Colombia's 50-year civil war. He describes the almost impossible challenges he faced ending a civil war with millions of victims, and he delves into how he was ultimately able to broker peace. He led the war as a war hero and negotiated peace as president.

That's [episode 93](#). You might also enjoy our episode with Yale professor Zoe Chance, who teaches Yale's wildly popular course, Mastering Influence and Persuasion. The [3 Takeaways](#)

[episode with Zoe Chance, in which she reveals smart, simple ways to influence people to get what you want, is episode 156.](#)

Another related episode is [Ask for More, Two Questions to Negotiate Almost Anything, with the director of Columbia Law School's Mediation Clinic, Alex Carter. That's episode 106.](#) If you're interested, you can sign up for the 3 Takeaways newsletter at 3takeaways.com, where you can also listen to previous episodes. You can also follow us on [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#), [X](#), and [Facebook](#). And if you're enjoying the podcast, and I really hope you are, please review us on [Apple Podcasts](#) or wherever you get your podcasts. It really helps get the word out. I'm Lynn Thoman, and thanks for listening.

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