

KOSMOS |Welcome to Kosmos Live, William.

URY | It's a pleasure, Rhonda.

KOSMOS |So, William, did your fascination with the world, and its conflicts, begin at a young age?

URY | I would say so. At a young age, around five, I moved from Chicago to Switzerland, and spent a good part of my childhood in Switzerland, in schools where there were children from about 40 or 50 nations, every continent, every faith you could think of, and many different cultures. So, I think, early on, I formed a question of how we, as humanity, could get along with each other, and in addition, somehow as a boy growing up in the shadow of the atomic bomb, I could never quite understand why it is we were prepared to put at risk the fate of humanity on any kind of conflict, be it between the United States and Soviet Union of the time, or any conflict. So, I sort of sat with that question of, how we, as human beings, can deal with our deepest differences in a constructive way, rather than killing each other.

KOSMOS |And, we seem to be, in some ways, on the edge of a similar time, today.

URY | We are. We are. Very much so, in fact. Having worked on the Cold War for about 10 years in the '80s, and then the Berlin one falls, and the Soviet Union transforms, and we get used to a different reality, and yet, now, I must say objectively speaking, there are good reasons to believe that we're at as equal, or greater, risk than we were during the cold war, which is hard to believe. We have to kind of wake up from our sleep about that.

KOSMOS |It is hard to believe. I mean, I wonder why we, as a species, are so insistent on sabotaging our own destiny.

URY | Well, what I've found in my long, over 40, years of roaming the planet as an anthropologist and mediator, really trying to understand how we deal with conflicts that are seemingly intractable, I must say I've asked myself that question many times of, "Where are we in our journey?" We are, in many ways, our own worst enemy. We've met the enemy, and they are us.

KOSMOS |It seems like such a rewarding calling, what you do, and yet it must be very hard at times when people can't resolve, or won't resolve, their differences. How can we learn to deal with our differences in more constructive ways?

URY | Well, I think we can. When I began in this field back in the '70s, the great conflicts of the time that we were working on, and people thought were absolutely intractable, were the Cold War, people thought the Berlin Wall ... All the professors and everyone thought the Berlin Wall was going to be there, and the Cold War was going to go on for generations, and there was Northern Ireland. The Catholics and Protestants. It was a religious matter. It was in people's blood. They were going to fight each other until kingdom come. South Africa. Apartheid was going to go on, there was always going to be a war, and yet I watched, and participated, and visited all those places, and worked in all those places, and watched as conflicts, that we thought were seemingly impossible, gradually gave way to not the end of the conflict, but the transformation of the conflict. That's what's key. Sometimes, we think it's end of the conflict. Well, conflict is part of life, but to change the form of the conflict from a destructive form of war, violence, oppression, to a constructive form of dialogue, negotiation, democracy, nonviolent action, that's the key.

KOSMOS | It seems like conflict today is so much more nuanced, multilayered, and grounded in collective trauma, both personal and collective. I'm wondering, can people really let go of their wounded-ness?

URY | Well, it seems impossible, and there's no question that it makes it extremely difficult. Particularly, when you have deep traumas that tend to have a pattern of repeating themselves. Particularly, if they remain unconscious, or not really looked at. At the same time, all I can say is that ... As an old friend of mine once said, "What exists is possible." I've seen with my own eyes how deep conflicts with deep trauma, like the ones I just mentioned, Northern Ireland, South Africa, but even more recently I've been working in the country of Colombia where, for the last seven years as a senior advisor to the president, and seven years ago when I first met with him, the idea that you could bring an end to that war, which had gone on for 50 years, and there were over 200,000 deaths, 8,000,000 victims, countless kidnappings, torture. You name it.

The trauma was immense in that society, and there was hardly anyone alive who remembered what it was like to live in peace. The majority of Colombians were for peace, but then if you looked at the same polls, the great majority of them thought it was absolutely impossible because it never had existed before in their memory, and yet I watched, and I participated in 25 trips to Colombia over the last seven years, and now that 50 year war has come to an end, and it's messy. The conflict is not over, but the war is over. The guerrillas have laid down their weapons, disbanded. The UN's been in there.

There's a whole process going on, and when I think that that's not just a war in Colombia, that is the last war in Latin America, which there were many such wars back in the '60s, and '70s, and '80s, and '90s, and now that's the last one in the entire western hemisphere. So, it raises the possible question of, if it's possible for war to come to an end in one hemisphere, is it possible for it to come to an end in both hemispheres? So, in the midst of all the gloom and the despair, today, and all the ... I don't mean to take away from that sense of how we're living on the brink, but I believe there's hope.

KOSMOS | That's a really encouraging example. You've experienced moments of deep transformation, I'm sure, in negotiations. What's it like when a breakthrough occurs in the room?

URY | Well, I'll just give you ... I mean, there are many examples, but I'll just give you one that comes to mind right now. It's from some years ago. I was facilitating an off the record, confidential, dialogue between Turkish leaders and Kurdish leaders and, as you know, the Turks and the Kurds have been fighting a terrible war for decades, and they couldn't even meet in Turkey, and it was even dangerous for them to be known that they were meeting together, and even talking with each other. So, we were meeting at an old chateau outside of Paris somewhere and, at one point, one of the Turkish participants had been a general in the army, and a very senior leader of the armed forces, and I remember at one point in our dialogue, he asked for the floor, and we were a group of maybe, I don't know, 15 people sitting around a table, and he said, "I just know that I'm aware that, during this war, the Turkish army has participated, and there have been thousands of villages that have been raised to the ground, and all this suffering, and killing, and as a member and a leader of the Turkish armed forces, I just personally want to say, I'm sorry."

And, you could've heard a pin drop in the room at that moment. It was so unexpected. It was like everyone was holding their breath for a moment, and it was one of those moments where something changed in the atmosphere, something changed in the energy, and out of that meeting came some very practical ways in which these two groups of leaders decided to work together to try to foster dialogue, and back in Turkey, and to begin to heal the wounds, and it just takes that courage of a very simple human apology that starts to make a difference, and there was something so beautiful about it. It was really just one of those moments when ... I don't know. A moment of grace, I would say.

KOSMOS |That's beautiful. I think that the power of the apology cannot be overestimated. It's really important to simply be able to acknowledge that we also cause harm. We cause trauma. We've caused, for instance, tremendous harm to the earth itself. How does self-forgiveness, and compassion come into play in your work, William?

URY | Very much so. There's so much we're all ... We're all victims. We're all perpetrators in this kind of merry-go-round, and self-forgiveness, the ability to forgive yourself ... It's very hard, actually, to forgive others, or if you can't forgive yourself first, and I've watched that interplay, actually, of ... And, forgiveness, because in the end, you can't change the past, but what can change is how we hold the past, how we view the past, how we feel the past, and that's where the role of forgiveness and compassion really ... Deep, deep, deep listening is so key.

You're reminding me, I don't know why, of an old Tibetan prophecy from maybe 1,000 years ago. It's called The Shambhala Prophecy, and it's that at some point in the distant future, there will come a moment when the Earth, itself, is in danger like you're mentioning, and at that moment in that generation, there will come into being a new breed of warriors, or I would call them healing warriors. They call them Shambhala warriors in the Tibetan prophecy, and they're endowed with two weapons, and the first one is insight, the ability to really look inside, and that's where self-forgiveness comes from, and the second is compassion. So, it's those two valuable tools that are so key right now if we're going to begin to heal ourselves, heal our communities, and heal our planet.

You're listening to Kosmos Live, a production of Kosmos Journal, dedicated to transformation of self, communities, institutions and planet – in harmony with all life. You can subscribe at www.kosmosjournal.org. I'm speaking with William Ury. Distinguished Senior Fellow at the Harvard Negotiation Project.

KOSMOS |Thomas Hübl, the spiritual teacher and systems thinker, who I know is a good friend of yours, speaks about *spaciousness*. Creating room within our own minds for insight to emerge, and I think that that's similar to a metaphor that you use of going to the balcony. Can you share what you mean by that?

URY | Yeah. As someone who's been very active as a mediator in negotiations in conflicts around the world, one thing I've noticed is that, as I mentioned earlier, we are our own worst enemies, and as the old saying goes, "When angry, you will make the best speech you will ever regret." We're reaction machines. So, to me, the foundation of successful negotiation, actually, starts with ourselves, and it starts with our ability to go to the balcony, and by that I mean, as a metaphor, it's like imagine that you're negotiating, you're discussing, you're talking, you're listening on a stage with other players, other actors, and part of you goes to a mental and emotional balcony overlooking that stage, which is just a metaphor for a place of perspective, a place of spaciousness, a place of calm, a place where you can keep your eyes on the prize.

What is truly important at that moment? What are we truly trying to achieve here? For me, that metaphor of going to the balcony is something ... In today's world where cellphones are going off, and emails, and texts, and tweets, and all the sheer business, our ability to find ways to go to the balcony, even for a moment just to take a moment of silence, or to breathe, or to meditate, or to go for a walk in nature, or in the park, in the city, just to look at something green. That ability to take a break, even short breaks, to me, is key if we're going to remember what it's all about, and to remember to focus. To be able to focus in a good way on what we're trying to achieve in our daily lives.

KOSMOS | I think that that is such important advice, and so helpful to our listeners. Do you think that anyone can be a mediator, William?

URY | Not only do I think that anyone can be a mediator, but I think if everyone would actually look at their own experience, everyone would realize they are already a mediator. We are all mediators whether we know it or not, whether we go by that title or not, in the sense that if you're a parent, for example, mediating between your kids. You may not think of it, or you're mediating with one of your parents, you're mediating among your friends, or you're mediating among your colleagues. In other words, what does mediate mean? It means to be in the middle, and you have relationships between people, and you watch them get into little collisions, and there are many, many, roles of the mediator, but for me, one of the principle ones is to be a listener. It's really to listen to one's side. To listen to the other. It's simply to listen. That would be enough so that they feel heard, because often times most of us don't feel heard, but it also could mean to help each one understands what the other one is really saying, and it's key. So, we're all mediators. That's the honest truth. It's not that anyone can be a mediator. We are all mediators. We just don't know it.

KOSMOS | Many of our listeners and readers of Kosmos are leaders within their organizations, or in their communities. I'm wondering if you've ever thought of mediation as a sort of civic duty.

URY | I do. How you see the world depends on where you sit. So, the ability to, as leaders for example, to mediate, there are tensions within your group, within your organization, between your organization and others, and the ability to manage those tensions, to lead, to direct them in a positive direction, to help transform them from rigid, oppositional, stalemating, or even lawsuits and all of that, into let's really listen, and talk, and see if we can put ourselves in the other person's shoes, and understand where they're coming from, and see if out of what seems to be a tension, you can create maybe a larger integrative solution-

We have this big struggle all the time between the right and the left. Well, would you like just to have a right hand, or would you like to just have a left hand? No! You want to have both, because both together could do much more than either alone, and that's what we need in this world, is we need the polarities, because each one has a key contribution to make if we can only recognize it.

KOSMOS | Many people believe that this is a profound period of change for humanity, and it's spoken about in terms of these dualities, and I think whenever there's a duality, there's a divide that needs to be bridged there. So, given what we were just saying about mediation as a civic duty, is it also in some ways a spiritual practice in this very challenging time we find ourselves in?

URY | Very, very, much so. I don't think it's any coincidence that the word mediate and the word meditate only have a t. They both come from Latin, which means to be in the middle, to contemplate, to hold the middle, and as you mentioned, to take times of deep polarity, and this is a time of deep polarization around the world. I travel the world. I see it everywhere. Here, in the United States, of course, and in Europe, in the middle east, in the far east. Wherever you look, there's more and more polarization, and that's where our civic duty of being mediators, to me, is key and, to me, that ability to mediate really draws, in a very deep way it's a spiritual calling, but it also draws on our human spirit, and our ability to meditate, our ability which, what is meditation but its ability to mediate among ourselves? Inside of ourselves, really, and really kind of quiet the mind, and listen to all of that dialogue, and just kind of drop down into a deeper, more serene, space that, then, is spacious, and then out of that, actually, we're going to be much more effective in being able to hold the polarities, and the conflicts, in the external world.

KOSMOS | I'm wondering if you'd be willing to share with us some of the basic ground rules of mediation:

URY | One is just simple, basic, human respect. I mean, start from there. That's really what a mediator is doing, is being respectful, and respect comes from the Latin, which means to look again, to see the human being there, and the most common behavioral way in which we show respect is actually to listen, and we're in a world right now, which is all about talking, and everyone's talking, and they're talking past each other, and we have talk shows. We need listen shows...and that's really what a mediator does, is a mediator, if you observe them, they listen far more than they talk. There's a saying that 'God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason, and that's to listen twice as much as we talk', and listening is a fine art. It's not just hearing the words. It's hearing what's behind the words. It's not just hearing what's being said. It's hearing what's not being said. It's listening for the emotions, for the needs, the feelings.

KOSMOS | So, a mediator needs to be a deep listener, and someone who can get at what someone might really want, and not what they say that they want. How do you build that level of trust between two different parties, or more? Isn't someone there going to distrust your own motives, or your reason for being there?

URY | For sure. No. Trust is one of the great enigmas of human existence, and to me, it's one of the defining issues of our time. Right now, we see levels of trust, social trust, trust in our institutions, trust in our governments, trust in businesses, trust in churches, whatever. All those levels tend to be going down and, to me, one of the great challenges is how do we build social trust? How do we build trust in situations where trust has been lost? So, it is absolutely key. The first job of a mediator is to win the trust of both sides.

KOSMOS | I'm sure that everyone listening to this podcast has some conflict in their lives. Perhaps it's a conflict in their own family. Maybe it's been going on for years. It might be a conflict with a client or a coworker. What's a piece of advice that you could offer, right away, to help alleviate some of that suffering?

URY | Well, for one thing, I would say first is prepare. We often rush into these conversations without preparing. We would never give a speech, or make an important presentation, without preparing. Yet, these conflicts are often very important to us, and they're important stakes. Yet, we don't prepare. We kind of rush into it. No. I would prepare. So, your preparation is time on the balcony. Even prepare with a friend, because sometimes a friend will give you some perspective. They can be your balcony as it were, and prepare with a friend, or a coach, or

someone, and just really think about, what is it I really want in this situation? And then see if you can put yourself in the other side's shoes, and see if you can ask yourself, "What do they want? What do they really want?" And then, think about, is there anything, any kind of creative idea where, maybe, they can get what they want and you can get what you want.

You're listening to Kosmos Live, made possible by Kosmos Community, dedicated members who support Kosmos in numerous ways. I'm speaking with master mediator, William Ury. His work has been widely featured in the media including *The New York Times*, the *Financial Times*, CNN and the BBC. He has a popular TED talk, "[The Walk from No to Yes.](#)"

KOSMOS | Is our human capacity to get along something we once possessed, and have lost, or is it something we're figuring out slowly as we evolve?

URY | Well, it's interesting. My doctorate's in anthropology, which is kind of the study of human beings, and I've asked myself that question, but one thing I realized is, first of all just even evolutionarily, we are one of the most cooperative species around. We are designed, we're crafted, for cooperation. We cooperate. That's how we survive. That's how we spread around the planet, is through cooperation. So, no one should underestimate our capacity for cooperation. We also fall into conflict, of course. So, yes. We do have this innate ability to cooperate. What we're talking about right now, the ability to communicate is a tool, it developed as a tool to allow us to cooperate, so that through cooperation we could be more successful in hunting, and gathering, and making our lives in this world, and that's the challenge for us right now, at this particular moment in the human journey and human evolution, and I think it was Einstein who called it, perhaps, best.

At the end of World War II, with the great tragedies of Hiroshima, and Nagasaki, and the advent of the atomic bomb, he said our race has begun, now, between our technological genius to devise weapons like atomic bombs. Our technological genius that could allow us to destroy, for the first time, all life on the planet, and our social, our moral, our emotional, our ethical genius to cooperate, to learn to live with each other, to deal with our differences, and we're in that race right now, and that's why ... And, yes. In exercising that social moral cultural genius, we can draw upon a rich human heritage of this ability to cooperate. To communicate to cooperate.

KOSMOS | Wonderful. We need that message so much, today, given the converging crises that we're facing with the environment, the economy, our political situation.

URY | One thing I would say, Rhonda, about all those crises is, if you look at them all, they seem huge, they seem intractable, they seem impossible. I mean, climate change. All of that. At the same time, the way I look at it is, if we could learn to ... All of those conflicts, all of those issues, are really made by human beings, and they can be solved by human beings. In other words, if we could learn to cooperate, to collaborate, to communicate, if we could learn to get to yes, then none of those problems is actually intractable.

One of my great passions, actually, over the last 10, 15, years, is in the Middle East, which is often held up by people as the example of the impossible conflict, and I've worked in a political level as a mediator, a negotiation advisor, and politics, and various conflicts in the middle east, the Israeli Palestinian conflict, the conflict, now, in terrible war in Syria, and so on, but one of my great passions, too, is walking. Walking is my way of going to the balcony, and I find that when

you walk, side by side, moving in a common direction, you have a different conversation than when you're just face to face.

So, back in the early 2000's, after the tragedy of 9/11, and the attacks there, and the Iraq war, I was wondering if there's any out of the box idea just to get people walking in the middle east, and the thing that unites us, we know, is the power of the stories. So, I looked back at the story of Abraham, who is kind of like, that's the origin story of the middle east. All the great faiths trace their origins back to this journey that was taken by a human being whose name seems to have been Abraham, and his family, who heard a call to go find himself. That's what he heard, and to go find himself, and so I thought, "Well, why not like an Appalachian trail, or for those who know the famous *Santiago de Compostela* in Spain and France? Why not a long-distance walking trail where people could honor this memory?" What Abraham actually stands for is, I looked more into, is the idea that, no matter what divides us, what unites us far greater.

That's what he stands for, and what he stands for, and what he's remembered for, is his spirit of hospitality towards perfect strangers. He had his tent open in all four directions, and so people thought this was the craziest idea. Who's going to go walk in the middle east, and so on, but over the last ten years, my colleagues and I, and various parts of the middle east, in five different countries, in places that you would never expect, like Palestine for example, in the west bank, have begun to knit together walking trails, a whole network of walking trails called The Abraham Path, and they are literally over 1,000 miles now of walking trails, and the world bank is supporting it, and people go there. If you're interested, it's abrahampath.org, and I've been there many, many, many, times, and it's a transgenerational project that brings jobs, brings respect, brings dignity. You stay in people's homes, and it brings hope, is really what it does. It brings hope in a place where you wouldn't expect to find hope, and it builds bridges across cultures, across faiths, and so it's one of my great passions in life, is to nurture The Abraham Path.

KOSMOS | Thank you so much, for sharing that with us. I love this idea of openness, especially to strangers. I think none of us are really strangers, and pilgrimage is such a beautiful metaphor for our journey to completeness.

URY | Well, I'm reminded, Rhonda, there was a dire time in the beginning of the American republic, and George Washington once said, "Let us raise a banner to which the wise and honest can repair." The issue, in other words the outcome, is in the hands of God. So, what we can do ... We don't know what the future brings, but what we can do is raise a banner to which the wise and honest can repair, and I think that's what, maybe, Kosmos is trying to do, too. People ask me if I'm an optimist or a pessimist, and sometimes I say, "Well, I'd like to remember, I think it was Winston Churchill, during the blitz, who said, 'I guess I'm an optimist because I don't see the point in being anything else'" But, actually, in a deeper sense, I think I'm a possible-ist. I believe in human possibility. I really do. I don't know, exactly. I don't have a crystal ball, but I believe, and I've seen so many changes.

I've felt it, and I've felt what human possibility is when we can all come together, and start to heal our wounds, and usher in a better future.

KOSMOS | Lovely. Yes. We do have this tremendous human capacity, and you embody it. Thank you, so much, for your service, and thank you for your kind words about Kosmos Journal, and thank you for being with us, today, on Kosmos Live.

URY | My pleasure, Rhonda. I wish everyone much success in getting to yes, both with ourselves, and with everyone else around us.