

In the Footsteps of Abraham: The Transformative Power of Walking a Path

An Interview with William Ury

**By Renee Levi
Powers of Place Initiative
2008**



Yarmouk Walk: Students Walking www.abrahampath.org

William Ury has spent nearly thirty years of his professional life bringing people together to solve difficult problems and heal old wounds. As co-founder of the Harvard Negotiation Project, he has worked in a variety of settings and in this interview, shares what he has observed about the influence of place, space and environment on conflict resolution and social transformation.

- *Walking side-by-side produces a different kind of conversation*
- *Different countries walking together has a magical effect*
- *Learning the history of a place shifts consciousness for difficult conversations*

- *Symbolism and inspiration from neutral places*
- *Water calms the human heart; mountains elevate it*
- *Stories work beyond reason to speak to the heart and subconscious*
- *Walking a place acknowledges it and calls forth its ancient energy*
- *Clearing away obstacles to an emerging future*

RL: Bill, you have done so much work bringing people together to solve problems and create innovative solutions. I'd like to know what role you think the place – the physical surroundings in which the conversations take place – has on getting to yes.

Walking Side-by-Side

BU: My sense is that place makes an enormous difference. There is a completely different experience when we are in a hotel basement or in a gorgeous natural setting. This is especially true with a new project I'm working on called the Abraham Path Initiative. It has everything to do with the power of place. The Abraham Path is a route of cultural tourism that follows the footsteps of Abraham through the Middle East and we are encouraging individuals and groups to walk parts of the path together to foster communication, understanding, and peace. I have been there many times and taken groups there.

The place exerts a certain magic on you. The power of the place is married together with something that brings you even more into a sense of

place, walking side by side on the land. There is something about side-by-side walking that produces a different kind of conversation than when we're face-to-face in a pair or group. I don't know whether it's the physical activity, the engagement with nature, the beauty of being connected to a great story of the place, or that you are focused on a common horizon when walking side by side. Walking dialogue is different than sitting dialogue.

RL: What kinds of people and groups are walking the path together?

Magical Effect of Different Countries Walking Together

BU: We're bringing youth from different places, like England and Jordan, who are going to work together on the path and then walk it together. In Turkey in November 2007, we had a conference on the Abraham Path that included about 160 people from close to 20 different countries. We held it in a hotel in Urfa, which is one of the places believed to be the birthplace of Abraham. We had a daylong conference there, but the next day we got out and took a walk along an initial stretch of the Abraham Path. We had 100 people walking side by side in the Turkish countryside. That region is thought to be one of the archaeological possibilities for the Garden of Eden. So you're walking through these villages, and you come to the ancient ruins of Harran, where Abraham is believed to have begun his journey with his

family 4000 years ago. You're in the cradle of civilization. You feel such inspiration. People from all these different countries walking together, it definitely had a magical effect.

RL: So the history of a place has a significant effect on the current experience...

Learning the History of a Place

BU: Oh yes. Another example is a retreat center called Gold Lake in Colorado.

It's a place that my colleagues and I have used to have important conversations when there exists a great degree of political polarization among participants. The history of that area is that it had been a place of encounter for Native American tribes. It was a summer gathering place that was considered sacred, where tribes who were otherwise at war would come together to do sacred rituals together. It was a zone of truce. That story was told to the participants of a conference we had there. It wasn't forced on them, it was lightly told, and it brought a certain consciousness to the difficult conversation we were hosting there.

The first time we met at Gold Lake, we were caught in a snowstorm up there. We were snowed into the lodge for four days. There was no going out and people who might have had second thoughts about being in the same room with other people there were fellow hostages of the weather. It reminds you of your common humanity. It also puts your common humanity in a larger context, in this case, nature. There were some invocations of a larger spirit that bonds us all. If you had held that meeting in a hotel room in Washington, DC, where most of the participants were from, this would not have happened. Nature wouldn't have had a chance to play such a big role.

RL: I imagine that through your work with negotiation and mediation you've had breakthroughs in all kind of settings. Is that true?

BU: Well, you can work in all kinds of contexts. The place is not determinative, but it is influential.

RL: Bill, you've mentioned a few aspects of the role place plays in exceptional group experiences, like nature, and the history of the place relative to the intention for the group, like at Gold Lake and on the Abraham

Path, where the purpose was to bring people together. You also mentioned the power of walking paths where physical movement toward a common horizon seems to make a difference. What else do you notice or look for?

Symbolism and Inspiration from Neutral Places

BU: Neutrality. We're often working with groups from countries in conflict. I did some work with Russian and Chechen leaders and we met in the Peace Palace in The Hague. You look for places that are evocative. I also worked with Turks and Kurds where we chose Switzerland and Belgium, countries that have constructively managed strong ethnic tensions. It's evocative. It reminds people of what is possible.

In September 2007 we had a day and a half meeting under the auspices of an organization called Reuniting America. It was on Iran-US relationships and the possibility that these countries might end up in a war. We got people together across the political spectrum from Right to Left. They were all from Washington, DC. We met at the Wye Plantation, a retreat center about 90 minutes outside of DC, in Maryland. It's a natural setting. It's also the place where President Clinton brought the Israelis and Palestinians for negotiations in 2000. It's a beautiful natural setting and we only had a day and a half. We had a kind of a breakthrough at that meeting

and a very different perspective emerged. Everyone was out of their normal context, they were out of the city, in a natural setting of great beauty. It could be that we would have achieved the same results if we were in Washington DC and people had come straight from their homes, but I very much doubt it. There is a kind of temporary community that gets established when you're away together. A natural setting calms people. It brings out the better angels of our nature. I find nature has that effect. It grounds and centers people.

RL: There are people who believe there is an energy in nature that affects human vibrational frequencies.

BU: I have no objective, tangible evidence of that, but I have felt something like that personally. I went on a family holiday to India recently and we were at the headwaters of the Ganges where sages had been meditating for millennia. People say there is a collective energy field. There is the extraordinary natural beauty of the Ganges and the Himalayas and it can only help perhaps that people with an expanded sense of awareness have been praying there for ages.

RL: Of the many meetings you've hosted, Bill, is there one that stands out in your mind as truly transformative for you and the participants?

BU: That's a hard question. I can think of several, I don't know if I can narrow it down to one. I've been at this for about 30 years, you know, and there have been a whole number of occasions where I felt an energetic shift in the room as a facilitator.

I can think of a time with the Turks and Kurds. I'm sure that place definitely played a role in this experience. This was a really tense and conflictual context with high stress. But we brought them together. They ate together. They sat together. They listened to things that they didn't want to listen to. And at some point one of the Turkish participants, a former admiral, apologized for the suffering that the Kurdish villages had experienced at the hands of the military and you could feel something shift in the room. You could hear a pin drop. At Gold Lake too, at an event with leading policy makers about energy and climate, we were out under a tent-like structure right beside this gorgeous alpine lake with the white-capped mountains surrounding us. There was a quality of listening and respect for each other, a kind of hush, an awe that people feel in the presence of something like that. It somehow makes them act or speak or listen more

kindly to their fellow human beings, with whom they have the deepest of disagreements.

RL: Where was the meeting between the Turks and Kurds?

Water Calms, Mountains Elevate

BU: They met in different places, but the one I was mentioning was in Lugano, Switzerland. It was, again, on a lake. Water has a certain effect, it's a calming effect. After all, we're mostly water ourselves, more than 60%, aren't we? The conflict you're there to talk about is often filled with deep, deep emotion - negative and destructive emotion. Fear and anger, deep seated. To me, water - the sounds and smells and view of it - is calming to the human heart. And in Lugano we had the lake and also mountains. Mountains are elevating. Having them together is very powerful for groups and we had them both in Lugano and in Gold Lake.

RL: Thank you for that. I'd like to return to the Abraham Path Initiative you are so involved with now. You've had a long and illustrious career, Bill. Why is this particular project, with all its challenges, so important to you at this stage of your life?

Stories Work Beyond Reason

BU: Thirty years ago I started my professional life, my career, working on Middle East conflicts. I worked in Jerusalem with Israelis and the Palestinians in the late 1970's. I've gone back from time to time. The Middle East, for those of us working in the field of conflict resolution, is like an icon of impossibility. If a difference could be made there, an energetic shift from despair towards hope could occur that is much needed in the world today. One of the central fault lines of misunderstanding today runs between the West and the Muslim world. It's for that reason I'm spending so much time on the Abraham Path Initiative.

Also, it's a project that is very different from anything I've done before. It's not working on a specific conflict, not about bringing political players together in a dialogue, like I've done so often. It's much more tied in with story. There is an old Jewish saying that some conflicts are so difficult that only a story can heal them. There is something about the way in which story works beyond reason to speak to the heart or the subconscious. Human beings are creatures of story, we are driven by symbols. Some people, like Mahatma Gandhi, were masters at the use of strategic symbolism to move masses of people.

To me the Middle East conflict is so difficult that we need to bring other measures to bear than just reasoning with people. The Abraham Path Initiative brings the power of Abraham's story to our work. Abraham is the anthropological origin story for half of humanity. His story reminds us that we are all one human family and that whatever divides us, what unites us is greater still. Then you add the power of place to the story and actually tie it to the cultural and physical land. You marry the power of story to the power of place and link it with walking.

I've been an aficionado of walking for a long time. That side-by-side movement, rather than just face-to-face conversation, marries all those together and it can create a container that is capable of serving as a third side for the conflict of the story. Abraham, in some ways, is a symbolic third side of the Middle East. He's the reminder of the surrounding community. He's before Judaism. He's before Islam. He's before Christianity. It's so rich. The project has many aspects: economic, community building, tourism, travel, people to people connections.

Recognizing a Place and Its Ancient Energy

The other thing that appealed to me was that most things are projects, there's a conference and then that's it. In this case, we're recognizing a path,

something that is already there. It's been there for 4,000 years. We're not creating it, we're recognizing it. We're dusting off a few footsteps. The places are already there.

The memory, the social and cultural memory, is embedded in people. Ah yes, Abraham. It's in people's hearts. When people welcome you into their homes as you travel the path and you sit down for a meal in the name of father Abraham, it's a living energy. The path is an energetic line.

Some of the qualities of Abraham were compassion, human kindness, and respect. In some ways, by simply recognizing what is already there and by traveling it, you're calling back the ancient energy of that land of welcome, hospitality, and compassion. It's done gently, with every footstep.

When you travel on foot, you're much more humble. There is a vulnerability involved with traveling by foot. It's very different than going by car or bus. There is a different pacing to it. Once it gets restarted, it can go on for generation after generation. People can be traveling the Abraham Path 1,000 years from now. Some conflicts are so deep they need something like the waves of an ocean – gentle, but consistent and powerful.

RL: It's something that you can pass along to the next generation.

BU: Yes, it's recognizing what is and has been...and what can yet be. You're not making something new, or rather, you're creating something new but it's in a very different form. I feel that with the Abraham Path Initiative. In what is perceived to be the most difficult conflict on the planet, we could bring to bear new tools. They are actually old tools – such as telling stories - but new because we're using modern media. Modern media is so important now in the shaping of collective consciousness.

How do you spark the human imagination, the moral or spiritual imagination with images of respect? Right now the images that come out of the Middle East are almost always uniformly of violence and despair. What if other images started to come out? Images such as hospitality and a million conversations between people – both local and from around the world - traveling the path over the years? You don't know what they will create. It becomes a platform for all kinds of new possibilities.

Clearing Away Obstacles to an Emerging Future

One thing about the path that we've noticed is that it's something that is emergent. We're trying to approach it with emergent principles rather than with the idea that we're here expecting something specific that needs to happen. The question we ask ourselves is: What is wanting to happen?

We're trying to have different strategic principles. It's amazing to see the energy and people that show up to assist, both in the region and around the world. What if we're not *making* this happen, but rather that we're just recognizing that we're the first of many; just clearing a bit of the way. Clearing a few obstacles to allow the natural flow that wants to happen down this path, to bring back this ancient memory of togetherness?

RL: What you just said is so beautiful. I am very touched by your words. And inspired. The Abraham Path Initiative is not just a gathering influenced by a particular place, it is an effort to enable a place, or places, to shift contemporary consciousness thorough direct physical, emotional, and spiritual engagement with them.

BU: Thank you. Yes, you're reminding me that when we started this a few years ago, we set aside for the moment the reflective component of the initiative, but we envision creating something eventually like the Abraham Path Papers. These would be a set of meditations on all the different aspects of the path – historical, landscape, political, human, and sociologic. Mixing all of this. There is something about the principle of geography. A Palestinian poet said that geography sometimes trumps history. The land is

there and has its own energy, Mother Earth. It would be wonderful to have a paper or reflection, or maybe even a conference at some point, on the power of place along the Abraham Path. To bring people together to reflect on that, to look at the power of place and its transforming influence on people who visit. We already have some real life examples. One of the many things that has been stimulated, even in these early years, is the effort of two members of Congress, both women, one Democrat and the other Republican, who have reached across the aisle and decided to walk the Abraham Path together and bring some of their colleagues.

RL: That is really wonderful, Bill. I want to thank you for this interview and for all the work you've done on behalf of peace in the world. *Getting to Yes* was one of the books that had a profound effect on my worldview when I first read it in graduate school many years ago, and now your insights today again inspire me. Your words here will inform and guide many people through the Powers of Place Initiative. My deep appreciation and gratitude.

This interview was conducted by Renee Levi as part of her research for the Powers of Place Initiative. The full report, [*The Powers of Place: An Inquiry Into the Influence of Place, Space, and Environment on Collective Transformation*](#) (2008) can be found at

the Powers of Place Initiative [website](#). For the study, eight in-depth interviews were conducted and analyzed to discern underlying themes and patterns about qualities of transformative meeting places and spaces.

To give the reader a fuller picture of what was shared in the interviews themselves, we present the full text from the conversations. We see these interviews as a resource, part of a growing database and source of information for further research and individual learning. Any one interview can be seen for its unique set of ideas and as part of a whole.

Dr. William Ury

William Ury is co-founder of the Harvard Negotiation Project. He is co-author of the global bestseller *Getting to YES* and author of *The Power of a Positive No*.

Over the last thirty years, Ury has mediated between quarreling corporate divisions, battling unions and management, and warring ethnic groups around the world. He has also served as a negotiation consultant to governments and dozens of multinational companies.

Ury is co-founder of the e-Parliament (www.e-parl.net), a joint problem-solving forum for effective legislation, connecting members of congress and parliament around the world.

Ury's most recent project is the Abraham Path Initiative (www.abrahampath.org), which seeks to connect cultures step by step through a route of cross-cultural tourism in the Middle East that retraces the footsteps of Abraham, the unifying figure of monotheism.

Trained as a social anthropologist, Ury holds a B.A. from Yale University with a M.A. and a Ph.D. from Harvard University.

