

New Approaches to Healing Collective Conflict and Trauma: Our Responsibility as Global Citizens*

by William Ury and Thomas Hübl

Thomas Hübl: William, in all your work in conflict areas, what do you see as the symptoms of trauma? And do you see that there's a kind of recycling of trauma as a part of the conflict you work with?

William Ury: Thomas, it's a pleasure to be speaking with you. I was trained originally as an anthropologist and was always keen to study human beings and how we related. The passionate question that's been guiding my work is, "How can we human beings get along with each other in the midst of our very, very deep differences?" That's led me into hot zones around the world, conflicts where you see some of the darkest and most destructive human impulses revealed. What are the symptoms? Perhaps the most salient symptom is violence and killing. I've been working in Colombia where there have been 220,000 deaths. You can imagine for every single one of those deaths how many people are wounded and traumatized. There are an estimated 8 million victims in Colombia out of a population of about 50 million.

In the area of negotiations, I've been working as a senior advisor to the President of Colombia in the peace process with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which is in some ways removed from the actual fighting on the ground. But I can tell you that trauma takes the form of broken lives, of people who can't move on with their lives, people who are mourning and grieving. There's so much disruption.

Trauma can also sometimes lead to a desire for vengeance. Interestingly, however, in the popular vote to ratify the peace agreement to end 52 years of civil war, the areas that were most traumatized by the conflict voted 'Yes' for peace whereas many of the areas who hadn't directly felt the effects of the conflict in ten or fifteen years were the ones that more freely voted in opposition to the agreement.

I just came back from Oslo where the Nobel Peace Prize was given to President Santos. There were a number of victims present at the ceremony—very touching and very moving. In a violent exchange between the FARC and the paramilitaries whom they were fighting, a FARC bomb had fallen on a church in which the villagers were huddled together to take refuge. One man's father, mother, and three siblings perished in the church. Yet he found it in his heart to be able to forgive, and he came to Oslo to

announce his forgiveness. That's not just an isolated incident. What's so revealing is that in the town where he came from, 120 died in that incident, yet they voted overwhelmingly in favor of the peace agreement.

Trauma is an extremely important part of all of the conflicts I've been involved in. We're in the infancy of figuring out how to deal with collective trauma so that conflicts do not get repeated. In Colombia, for example, conflict has been repeated for 52 years. Before that there was another period they called 'La Violencia' where another 200,000 to 400,000 people died. There's hardly a person alive in Colombia who actually knows what it's like to live in a society that is at peace.



We can negotiate agreements, but those agreements are only sustainable if there's an acceptance and integration of them by the people. In Colombia, the agreement is about to be implemented. The agreement is only the mid-point of the whole process, which in the end will take the collaboration of millions of people. A great number—maybe a majority of them—are people who have suffered trauma. The question is, how does peace actually get implemented, not just agreed at a negotiating table in Havana?

Hübl: What are your experiences negotiating with parties that are often severely traumatized, and how do you see the trauma being played out in negotiations versus mediating conflicts that are not based on heavy trauma?

Ury: There's a deeper emotional layer in conflicts with a lot of collective trauma. Negotiations in the Colombia peace process were taking place in Cuba, removed from the struggle. One innovation that has never taken place before in a peace process, to my knowledge, was the idea of inviting groups of victims to come to Havana to testify to the negotiators on both sides about their experiences and to be heard by the media and Colombian society. The victims were selected carefully by the UN and national universities to reflect the diversity, including victims of the FARC, of the government, of the paramilitaries. The majority of victims, as I recall, were women.

The victims made statements saying that we need an end to this conflict and we are prepared even to forgive—not to forget. There's a big difference between forgetting and forgiving. To



Erika Diettes' photographs are the subject of a recent book, *Memento Mori: Testament to Life*, that comprises imagery from three bodies of work: Río Abajo, images of clothing of the disappeared, photographed in water. p8; Sudarios (or Shrouds), portraits of women who have witnessed atrocities; and Relicarios, mementos and personal items of victims embedded in polymer resin.



everyone's surprise, the victims played an enormously constructive role in reminding people of the deep wounds in a way that clarified and advanced the process. There were many well-intentioned people in Colombia demanding to put the FARC leaders in jail, which would have brought negotiations to a complete stop because the FARC had not been defeated. There had never been a peace settlement in which the guerrillas had freely agreed to lay down their weapons and go to jail. The victims were among the strongest voices for a restorative approach to justice, rather than a punitive approach. All of that was based on listening and bringing attention to the trauma, rather than forgetting the past.

Hübl: What I hear is that listening, compassion, and feeling for people's traumas and the atrocities of war have been a way to open up negotiations on a deeper level. Is that what you're saying?

Ury: Absolutely. The stories of the victims touched people's hearts. I would say this was the first victim-centered peace process that I've either experienced or even known about. There was something of that ilk, for example, in the South African peace process with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but that took place well after the agreement. This is

something that was taking place in the midst of the actual negotiation itself.

Hübl: It sounds to me like an amazing approach.

Ury: It's a beginning. We're at a stage where we need innovation dealing with these collective traumas so they don't just keep on repeating themselves as negative repetitions throughout history. In the past year, I've been somewhat involved in the negotiations on the Syrian conflict, where so much trauma is being created, as well as in Myanmar (Burma) where there's been decades of trauma from a war that's been going on for 60 years between 17 different armed groups and the military. How do we heal these wounds so that they don't result in endless cycles of violence?

Hübl: The latest research in epigenetics and genetics show that there is an impact of trauma—it seems that trauma causes DNA damage.¹ Through trauma therapy we're able to restore that to a certain extent. In the Bible, it says that the sins of the father are passed on to the sons and next generations, and it seems that it's actually true. Literally, we pass on atrocities and overwhelming experiences through our bodies. In some way, it is carried on and



William Ury meeting with San Bushmen of the Kalahari. After extensive study of their process for conflict management, William concludes, "the secret of the Bushmen for managing conflicts is the vigilant, active, and constructive involvement of the community."

processed later. That's also my basic understanding of the notion of karma, when we say there's a kind of carry-on baggage from one moment to another. When there's a small disturbance, say, the two of us have an argument and we both think one hour later about our argument, that's a small portion of it. But the Holocaust or the crisis in the Middle East or Colombia, that's much more severe.

I'm very much interested in your perspective on how we actually take care of our life base. Our actions, ethics, and way of living are inherently interwoven with our wellbeing, our health, and the health of the next generation. We have a responsibility to respond somehow to the stored information in the human body, in the tissue of life. How can we take care of what we actually produce as human beings, like how we harm the tissue of life and the scars that are in the big body of life? How can we take care of this without needing to go through the same experiences again?

Ury: Good question! To me the word that comes to mind is 'dignity.' There are moments when people show fundamental human respect to others—respect in the Latin sense of 'to see again'—to see the human being within. That was something that was emphasized from the very beginning of peace talks in Colombia six years ago. Showing respect to individuals has a kind of healing power. Right now, for example, in Colombia we have FARC and government leaders going to the church where the massacre took place and publically apologizing. When that happens, you can hear a pin drop.

Many years ago, I was facilitating (very quietly and confidentially) a conversation between Turkish and Kurdish leaders about a war that had been going on for decades. Thousands of villages had been devastated by this conflict. It was hard for some of the people to even sit in the same room together. A retired Turkish admiral stood up and said, "As a member of the Turkish Armed Forces, I want to acknowledge and apologize for all the suffering that

innocent villagers have experienced as a result of the war and the actions of the armed forces." There was an intense moment of silence. Spontaneously, one person started clapping, and then the whole group started clapping. It was a tiny moment, but there was a psychodynamic shift in the room that allowed us to talk about how both groups could cooperate and produce a more productive dialogue back in Turkey. The power of a human apology from the heart to victims cannot be underestimated. It all comes back to, somehow, *seeing* the other, *acknowledging* the other and their basic human dignity. A lot of these traumas arise from violations of people's dignity that create humiliation. Humiliation is a cause of a lot of violence. So, how can we cleanse the trauma of humiliation if not by showing someone fundamental human respect?

Hübl: That's beautiful. It's also one of the visions of The Pocket Project. What is the work that ends up in the deep need to apologize? I think that it is a natural consequence of a felt sense of the other, where we feel so reconnected to each other that the fabric, the tissue of life, has again a feeling awareness that we are interrelated and not separate. I think we all know this from intimate relationships, from any kind of personal relationship if we are not in war zones; that we can say or receive 'sorry' is a deep acknowledgement and deep healing in itself. That's a beautiful principle. The other thing I sometimes hear is that people might think we can forget and just move on. But to actually heal we need to acknowledge the trauma, give it space, and really hear and receive it. This is a key aspect in restoring our world.

Ury: This is the beginning of what we need, a vocabulary for how we talk about a process that we don't even have words yet to describe—what actually is happening at the biochemical, genetic, psychological, and spiritual levels as the process of peace is being made. I have been in many rooms between archenemies and people who have blood on their hands. When they come together there's often a kind of electricity, a magnetism. It's in those moments when you make progress, when little breakthroughs

happen, acknowledgements of apologies, realizations of ‘ahas!’ Then there’s a moment, as you put it, when Einstein’s famous optical delusion of separation kind of dissolves. There’s a feeling of interconnectedness and that the Other is not different from the Self.

Hübl: What’s your take on the role of the mediator? What’s the consciousness ingredient you bring into a room that you think is vital for two or more parties that do not want to speak with each other? What’s the ‘magic dust’ to make movement towards each other possible?

Ury: Let me go back to the conversation between the Turkish and Kurdish leaders. There was a Turkish leader who’d been a member of a violent group as a student, a group called the White Wolves. He was described to me by his colleagues as someone who would rather kill a Kurd than talk to a Kurd. When he heard the word ‘Kurdistan,’ he immediately rose and left the room, saying, “I can’t stand to even hear a phrase like that!” I had to go out, find him, talk with him, and persuade him to come back to the room and stay for the session. One of the roles of the mediator, a third party, is just to create and hold that container. There’s so much energy in that container and the forces are centrifugal forces. My role was to bring him back into the cauldron in which we’re trying, like ancient alchemists, to turn lead into gold. We have to keep people in that container to allow that to happen. He came back in and stayed, and over the breaks, he began to listen to what our Kurdish participants were actually saying. That night he got no sleep whatsoever. The next morning in the opening session he asked to speak. He said, “I’ve heard things that I’d never known before about the experience of the other. If you’d told me before this meeting that I’d be meeting with Kurds and talking about a thing like Kurdistan, I would have thought I was living in my worst nightmare. But now, having spent the whole night awake, I actually think I’m living in a dream.” By allowing himself to stay in that container, he had gone through an intense transformation. He had been confronted with having to include the experience of the other in his known universe, rather than just his own perspective.

I used to think mediation was mostly about the words. Words are very useful instruments, but it’s much more about your presence, even if you’re totally silent. Interaction between the two parties is very different when there’s a third party witnessing that the parties don’t feel judged by and can trust. Witnesses create a container that can hold things when someone feels like leaving or destroying the container. You’re putting two elements together that have been incredibly opposed. There could be a kind of explosion. The mediator creates the container in which the parties do the magic themselves.

Hübl: That’s beautiful. I hear that you need to hold the presence space and also to be so connected that you can find a way into moments that seem shut down or when a person wants to leave. What is the power of enough of us truly witnessing with a felt sense of awareness and energetic connection so that more and more people will serve like a third party for life’s global stage?

I’m wondering what would happen if more and more of us really turn towards the events that happen instead of joining the majority who do not witness world events. We’re actually part of it if we turn away. I think there’s power in creating global social witnessing as part of our responsibility as global citizens—a kind of witnessing capacity to respect and to ‘see again.’ Where is all the energy of the Holocaust or collective trauma of other past events? How is that energy suppressed in our collective unconscious, and what are the effects on future generations? The other interrelated question is, what is our capacity to witness the atrocities in Syria, Colombia, or in our closest communities or neighbors? I believe being a citizen of the world comes with a witnessing responsibility.

Ury: As an anthropologist, I’ve studied lots of societies, including indigenous peoples, for their methods of resolving conflict. I see them use the power of the community as the Third Side of the conflict in a way that today we do much less. I watched this among the San Bushmen, for example.² Two individuals get into a heated conflict, someone goes and hides the poison arrows out in the desert so it doesn’t escalate into violence, and then men, women, children—everybody in the group—sit down in a circle around the campfire. There’s some pandemonium, but the community takes responsibility for the conflict and responds. It’s very effective because within that circle (the container), the conflict gets transformed. They don’t just arrive at a settlement or solution. The relational fabric needs to be knit back together as well.

The challenge facing us seven billion people plus now is how to recreate that Third Side for today’s conflicts ranging from those with our neighbors to nuclear conflicts. I like to use the metaphor of ‘go to the balcony.’ You go to an emotional, mental, psychological balcony overlooking the stage. It’s a place of perspective, a place of calm, a place of clarity that you know very well, of course. There’s a paradox in that by detaching yourself you’re better able to engage and empathize with the parties. You become One, as it were. I love it when you talk about how by disengaging from the news that we’re actually participating in the process. Can we more mindfully go to that balcony and witness and be present to whatever’s happening, whether it’s the conflict with our neighbor or the conflict in Syria? If we can train the natural human capacities to empathize without judgement with all parties on a collective scale, then we can reframe conflict in terms of the whole. Can we all together as a community move forward, deal with this, and heal the wounds? If we can develop those skills and competencies, which are innate in human beings, more globally, collectively, then I think we have a chance to bring about the world we’d like to live in.

Hübl: I totally agree with you. I wonder how you initiate something like a naturally growing Third Side. What we will come up against are the effects of the collective traumatization of the past. All the atrocities that are not taken care of will limit our capacity to witness, to empathize, to feel. They may even make us turn away more than most. The more people who can really presence in a mindful heart-open way, the fewer atrocities can go by

unwitnessed, making an atrocity harder to commit. If you feel somebody is very present with you, looking through you and feeling you, it's hard to lie. I think that the Third Side is a principle that is a responsibility of global citizenship, like many other things—how we pay our taxes or participate in everything as citizens. We also have to care for our common life space, for the tissue of life.

Ury: I think we're learning and moving in this direction. The question is, how do we accelerate this kind of inclusive global learning for the benefit of the whole? You're right in that the first work begins inside of ourselves. We have to deal with our own traumas, clean our own lenses, if we're going to be able to help others. How do we do this at the requisite scale to deal with the challenges we face today?

The explosion of nuclear weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a signal moment for humanity. Before that, we had conflicts, but we had never had the ability to destroy the entire system of life. After that point, there began a race between our technological capacity to destroy and our moral, cultural, spiritual, emotional, and psychological capacity to find ways to heal our wounds, live together, work together, and deal with our differences in a constructive way. The question for me is, where are the technologies for mass human witnessing and healing at the scale that's required?

I started working in the field of conflict resolution when there was no Internet or social technologies. Imagine we could actually use social media technologies for collective healing, witnessing, and systems understanding, which go to the root of the trauma and aim at prevention, not just cure. Imagine the intersection of a Venn diagram where there are three circles of technology, methodology, and systems. For example, right now we have Airbnb and Uber. Airbnb didn't build a single hotel; Uber didn't build a single taxi. All they did is ask people who are already out there to become potential innkeepers or taxi drivers. What if we do the same thing for conflict and create a platform in which everyone is a potential Thirdsider? Everyone does this in their own families; they just don't recognize that that's what they're doing. If we gave them that recognition and they began to have tools to be able to be a good and productive Thirdsider, then you could initiate a global movement. I don't think we're going to solve our conflicts by having just a few well-trained, highly skilled people like my colleagues. Yes, they're needed, but they are like neurosurgeons. The global situation needs a whole health movement. We need to take the same kind of thinking we're using in social technologies and apply it to the collective healing of trauma, the collective creation of better ways of living together and dealing with our differences and solving our problems together. If we

can do that collectively, then I think we have a chance to win that race.

Hübl: I'm totally with you. Technology is definitely the accelerating factor. It starts with creating campaigns about the simplicity of being a Thirdsider. That's something we can train and almost everyone can be a participant. It's doable and scalable and can be spread through social media. I believe democracy is only going to work if every one of us is a mature citizen. The more regressive I am, the more I externalize my 'stuff' and wait for 'them' to do it instead of me taking responsibility and participating. Global conflicts won't be solved by our governments. They won't be solved by institutions. They'll be solved by all of us. If that truth becomes more clear, then less energy will rest with those governing institutions and less corruption will be possible.

How do we induce global witnessing as a capacity and combine that with the collective trauma work? We see how much life

energy is being invested already in shadow agreements. Many parts of our language are already based on the 'it-ness' of the shadow. Because we talk like that, we've already made a cultural agreement. We have to unlock some of the so-called givens we've been born into and ask why we accept a world in which there are winners and losers, like in an election. After the election, the losing ones feel disengaged, disappointed, and might unplug. I wonder about the gap that happens when we sink back into our chair and disengage. Even if I feel disappointed, sad, angry, whatever, I still stay engaged. I

don't unplug my creativity and pull out. Staying there involves a vital change for many crucial situations.

Ury: Exactly! In terms of choices we face when we have a conflict situation, we can fight and try to win; we can submit and accommodate; we can avoid and disengage; or we can engage. Engaging has the assertiveness of fighting without the aggressiveness; it also has the flexibility of accommodation without submission and the detachment of avoidance without disengagement. What's needed is a kind of mindful, alert, somewhat detached witnessing engagement. If we move in that direction and have high aspirations but no expectations, then we can engage with that phenomenon. We can dance with those shadowy forces that we brand as 'the enemy.'

I've been reading Lao Tse, who has a lot of wisdom applicable today. He says that the greatest misfortune is to underestimate your enemy and treat your enemy as evil, not really seeing the human being. If you do that, you lose the three treasures, which are (1) simplicity—being in accord with the ground of being, being in alignment, being mindful in that sense; (2) patience—



with both friends and enemies, which is again in accord with nature; and (3) compassion—starting with self-compassion, you can help reconcile all beings.

Hübl: I agree with you about staying engaged. It brings up another competence, which is the capacity to feel discomfort. When I feel shame, anger, stuff I don't like to feel, or when situations are tense or I feel very disappointed, how do I host those feelings and stay connected to my environment? Staying present with all of the 360° circle of being a human being is a key element in spiritual practice as well.

This idea brings me to another consideration about working effectively with collective trauma. Collective structures in consciousness are something we've been born into and programmed by. A lot of our interior wiring is through our social and cultural environment. To become aware of, witness, and awaken from our cultural and collective identification is a big thing. If we then think about the stuff that's culturally unconscious, it's even more complex. I believe that spiritual training or practice is key. Deep inner awareness and inner connection serve as your compass in moments when it gets dark and challenging. I'd love to hear how spiritual practice is a key to your work.

Ury: When I first began helping people get to yes, they would say, "OK, I want to get to yes, but what about the difficult adversary, difficult neighbor, difficult spouse, difficult child?" Over the years, it dawned on me that the most difficult person we ever have to deal with, the person who really gets in the way of us getting what we want in a negotiation, is not the person on the other side of the table; it's the person right here. If I can influence myself, then maybe I have a chance to influence the other.

We have these images like those captured in that old Greek fable of the argument between the North Wind and the Sun. They're up in the sky and having a big argument about who is more powerful. They couldn't resolve the argument so they looked down on earth and decided to set a challenge to see who was the most powerful. There was a wandering shepherd boy with his sheep and he was wearing a cloak. They decided that the most powerful one will be the one who can whip that cloak off the shepherd boy's shoulders. The North Wind went first, and he blew and blew. The more he blew, the more the shepherd boy wrapped the cloak around his shoulders. After a time, the North Wind took a pause for a breath and it was the Sun's turn. The Sun took a very different approach. The Sun bathed the boy in warmth and the shepherd boy realized, "you know, it's such a beautiful day that I think I'll lie down and enjoy the sun." And as he reclined, he took the cloak off his shoulders. So, the Sun won! The fable reveals two fundamentally different ways of influence. One is the North Wind approach, which means bringing strength and pressure. But the more pressure you bring to bear, the more you treat the other as an inanimate object, the more that person resists. The Sun took a very different approach, not trying to force the boy. The Sun created an environment in which the boy as a living

being decides of his own free choice that the best thing to do is to take off his cloak.

How do we create the environment in which others naturally do things that contribute to the whole? That work begins by learning to take the Sun approach towards ourselves. Instead of repressing negative emotions—anger, fear, jealousy, hatred, etc.—you show compassion toward yourself. You understand, you listen to yourself, not just to the words, but to the human being there, to the heart. If we haven't listened to ourselves, we're just going to hear a tiny bit of our being. But if we've done that internal spiritual and psychological work, that deep healing work, then we can be more of an empty vessel and we can receive something. We can create that container as a Thirdsider to really serve the whole. A lot of people think that spiritual work means going off to a cave and withdrawing from the world. *For me, spiritual work is actually the most engaged work you can do in the world.*

Hübl: I agree with you and hear that the deep inner clarification work, presencing, and interconnection develops competencies in the world that are deeply engaging, that restore relations and enable us to contribute even more in a sustainable way.

Ury: After 40 years on a quest for the secret of peace, I've come to the conclusion that the secret of peace is us! It's in that deep psychological and spiritual work that allows us to be all of us. It's the community coming together.

It would be a joy to collaborate with you, Thomas, to make use of new technologies and methodologies to really go to the roots of conflicts and traumas into prevention and healing on a global basis at scale. I look forward to our next conversation.

* This is an edited transcription of a dialogue between William Ury and Thomas Hübl on December 17, 2016. Thank you, Ben Levi, for sharing the transcription.

Footnotes

¹ www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25116690

² www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/example/ury7503.htm

Thomas Hübl is a contemporary spiritual teacher who brings the radical fire of the timeless wisdom traditions into a modern context. His work embraces and integrates both the highest levels of consciousness with the most wounded, traumatized levels. He has led large-scale projects on collective trauma, particularly with Germans and Israelis. The Pocket Project is a new initiative to take the work of collective traumas and collective shadows onto a more formal and global platform, to train and enable groups worldwide to work with collective trauma.

William Ury, co-founder of Harvard's Program on Negotiation, serves as a negotiation adviser and mediator in conflicts ranging from Kentucky wildcat coal mine strikes to ethnic wars in the Middle East, the Balkans, and the former Soviet Union. He helped end a civil war in Indonesia and assisted in preventing one in Venezuela. During the 1980s, he helped the US and Soviet governments create nuclear crisis centers designed to avert an accidental nuclear war. William is co-founder of the Climate Parliament, which offers global members of Congress and Parliament an Internet-based forum to address solutions for climate change. He is author of the world's bestselling book on negotiation, *Getting to Yes*.

