

Tension Tamer

Boulderite William Ury unites blacks and whites, Kurds and Turks, and in his spare time retraces the footsteps of Abraham through the deserts of the Middle East.

IN THE 1980S, William Ury lived just a stone's throw from Ralph Waldo Emerson's Concord, Massachusetts, home. Walking the same paths Emerson once walked, Ury was drawn to many of Emerson's ideals, such as the belief that, in any two-sided argument, a third presence can bring out the best in people.

For 30 years, Ury's walked the world as a "third-sider," helping fierce enemies move from acrimony to agreement, and granting him entrée to the hottest conflicts and highest corridors of power.

Trained as an anthropologist at Yale and Harvard, Ury has translated his study of humanity into a life of negotiation. He's moderated talks in war zones and wildcat strikes. He's soothed tensions between Turks and Kurds, and between whites and blacks in South Africa. On behalf of The Carter Center, Ury's gone on peacemaking missions to Sudan, Ethiopia, and Venezuela. Former President Jimmy Carter says of the negotiator's work, "Bill Ury has a

remarkable ability to get to the heart of a dispute and find simple but innovative ways to resolve it."

For almost nine years, Ury has lived in a Boulder neighborhood where homes meet mountains and deer often graze. Somehow this doesn't seem accidental. In many cultures throughout time deer are regarded as carriers of peace. How does Colorado help him carry peace around the world?

"I am in love with the West. There is a kind of positive



THE PEACEMAKER International negotiator William Ury walks the trails of Boulder to get perspective on building trust between warring factions.

spirit, optimism, and potential here. The mountains have become my refuge," says Ury, whose ready smile is reflected in his clear blue-green eyes. Despite an average height and build, Ury has a large presence—magnetic, yet gentle, which helps explain why he inspires confidence in people short on trust.

Ury points out that Colorado has much to offer a conflict-weary world. A growing number of conflict-resolution practitioners like to live and retreat in Colorado, he points out. "Perhaps Colorado could become a kind of Camp David for the world. People could come from other countries, have better dialogues, and sort out their differences in the majesty and splendor of the mountains."

Two years ago, Colorado's beauty inspired Ury to bring people together. Over a dinner at his home in Wonderland Lake, he brainstormed with friends who had recently returned from Israel and Palestine about the problems in the Middle East. "Previous negotiations always got stuck over land and power. We would always steer clear of religion and identity. So I wondered, 'What if we didn't get scared of religious issues, but dove right into them?'"

What if the world's 3.3 billion followers of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism could stop railing against one another and remember their unifying point: the prophet Abraham? "To me, Abraham is the single greatest underutilized symbolic resource for peace in the Middle East. We're all children of Abraham. So why are we killing each other?"

Ury started to envision a route retracing Abraham's footsteps from Turkey through Syria, Jordan, Israel, and Palestine. The 600-mile Abraham Path would be located in "the spiritual home of half of humanity." As a pilgrimage and meeting place, the path would attract millions of people from all faiths and cultures who could walk away from generations of mistrust, one step at a time.

"Abraham represents peace," Ury explains. "He represents justice. He represents unity. He represents respect. So even though there is a struggle over scarce land in that area, there need be no conflict over respect. Respect could be in abundance, and that might create the conditions under which people could live peacefully."

Big thinking? Without a doubt. Like a deer's uncanny ability to sense things hidden from others, Ury has a keen sense for untapped ideas and latent possibilities. *Time* recognized he and colleague Nicholas Dunlop as 2004 *Time* Innovators for conceiving of a cyber town hall. Their e-parliament—www.e-parl.net—allows the world's 25,000 democratically elected national legislators, including members of Congress, to connect and solve global problems.

Ury titled his Ph.D. dissertation "Talk Out or Walk Out"—a philosophy he's woven, along with other conflict-resolution strategies, into his bestselling books. His 1981 blockbuster, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, cowritten by Roger Fisher, has sold more than 2.6 million copies in 21 languages.

Since then, Ury's joined one fractious fray after another. Believing that "sometimes you have to take a calculated risk for peace," he once moderated talks between Chechens and Russians, just hours after the airplane carrying the Chechen delegation was forced down by Russian fighter jets. When he flew into Croatia

to negotiate discussions between the Serbs and Croats, his helicopter was shot at—during a supposed cease-fire.

As tensions become more taut, he stays centered. One of his secrets: "I try to 'go to the balcony,' to a place where you can get some perspective and keep your eyes on the prize.... When people get really angry and fearful and violence is in the air, I try to stay calm. I spend some time in silence, sitting by myself, whatever is needed to stay calm. I try to remember what this is all about and give people a positive message."

Ury makes it look easy, but acknowledges that it's anything but. He's known for reaching people worn out from fighting. When former President Carter asked Ury to meet with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who faces fierce opposition from antigovernment forces, Ury wasn't sure Chavez would even give him much time, much less consider ending the conflict. So Ury spent some time quietly thinking, tapping his intuition.

He sensed that he should mainly listen to Chavez and not give any advice. So when Ury entered Chavez's office, instead of talking politics he talked parenting. He quietly talked about his young daughter and Chavez's daughter. Next, they were talking about how Chavez got into politics. Soon, the meeting stretched into two hours. "In the end, I was able to invite him to consider the possibility of engaging in a dialogue with his most bitter opponents, to which he was initially very resistant."

Ury believes an unprecedented number of people are now accepting the invitation to stop fighting—even if TV images look ominous. "I try to get a little perspective and look at the bigger picture and what's not making it into the media. The number of wars and casualties from wars has gone down steadily the last 15 years. The past 60 years since World War II is the longest stretch in recorded world history with no war between major powers.

"Peace around the world is the rule, not the exception. Ninety-five percent of all nations and ethnic groups get along. And 95 percent of the time people are just going about their lives. It's not a question of going from 0 to 100 percent, but from 95 to 99 percent."

At Ury's home, it's dark and the deer are nowhere in sight. But huge, soft snowflakes are tumbling from the heavens. In this moment, Colorado and its most famous negotiator make peace on earth seem entirely possible. ▲

Susan Skog lives in Fort Collins and is the author of five books.