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Harriet Fulbright, President, J. William and Harriet Fulbright Center, USA, speaking on the opening evening of the first Forum, with the theme, 'Framing the conversation – Why we are here'.

Early in human civilization, before the invention of weapons using gunpowder, physical strength might possibly have helped communities break the stranglehold of bullies and dictators. Those with more enlightened ideas about governance might have felt justified in resorting to physical conflict to effect change. But the present powerful force of today's weaponry truly discredits that premise. Its destructive power is far too great and lasting to be justifiable for that purpose.

What is peace? Senator Fulbright spent many hours struggling to define it. It is not simply the absence of war. Not a fuzzy feeling when confronted by tensions or disagreements. After a long struggle he realised that peace is not a negative or static concept. It is not a tranquil state of felicity and blessedness. It is a positive method of adjusting the endless conflicts inherent in the nature of restless and energetic human beings. The institution of law, based on justice and adaptable to the ever-changing life of man, has been such a method in the history of mankind.

The maintenance of peace requires much careful listening, real listening, not just waiting for the other party to stop talking so that you can complete your thought without paying any attention to another's point of view. It requires a willingness to honestly consider new moulds of thought and conduct, a real effort to look at an issue from another vantage point. As Senator Fulbright said, 'In our quest for world peace, the alteration of attitudes is no less important, and perhaps more important, than the resolution of issues. It is in the minds of men after all that wars are spawned, and to act upon the human mind, regardless of the issue or occasion for doing so, is to act upon the source of conflict and the potential source of redemption and reconciliation.'

Harriet Fulbright

Harriet Fulbright is the President of the J. William and Harriet Fulbright Center. From 1997 to 2000 she was the Executive Director of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. She served as 'unofficial ambassador' for the 50th anniversary of the Fulbright Program and traveled the world discussing the importance of international education exchange. She was the first Assistant Director of the Congressional Arts Caucus, and was later Executive Secretary of the International Congress of Art Historians at the National Gallery.