

Exemples of reconciliation techniques

by Pat Patfoort

It happens so often that two or more parties (individuals, groups of people or populationgroups) have been living in a situation in which at least one of them did suffer, has felt put in a minor-position (see fig 1), in one way or another: war, maltreatment, neglect, oppression, persecution, exclusion, humiliation, and so much more.

And when afterwards those parties have to live again together or to deal with one another in some way, what should happen so that this can work in a humanly dignified and respectful way, thus in an as efficient as possible way?

We surely cannot change the past, we cannot make what happened did not. But what we can change is that the people who did feel put in a minor-position – and still feel in this minor-position -, can get out of this position. We can make a transition from the Major-minor model to the Equivalent model (see fig 2). And we can do this from the individual level to the levels where many people are involved.

Often people tell to others who suffered and still feel in a minor-position that they should forget, that they just should put those pains in the past, that they should turn over a new leaf with the ones who did make them suffer. But as long as the minor-position is still there, this is not really possible. Out of this will come the mechanisms of escalation (revenge) or chain (taking it out on someone else) or internalization (bottling it up), with all the painfull consequences for oneself and the environment.

What is reconciliation?

Reconciliation is a way to really get people out of their minor-position. It can happen in many different ways, depending of the situation, the capacities and strengths of the parties involved, the support from the environment.

Let us call Y the person – or group – who felt put in a minor-position (who often is called the victim), and X the one who did put Y in a minor-position and so who did put him or herself in a Major-position (who often is called the agressor). I don't want to use the terms victim and agressor, because in this way we put them automatically into the Major-minor model. In the Equivalent model, we consider them as two human beings, who did act with one another in such a way that they did or were put in those positions.

A reconciliation process can happen just with X and Y together. This is possible. But often there is a need for a mediator in Equivalency – or a team of mediators in Equivalency – to help the reconciliation process work, because of the amount and

intensity of emotions involved, or because of the lack of knowledge, techniques and experience in reconciliation of X and/or Y.

Important steps in the process of reconciliation are:

1) The person Y should be able to express his or her feelings and emotions, and should feel listened to, heard and respected in those. Very important is that this communication happens with foundations (the tools of the Equivalent model) and not with arguments (the tools of the Major-minor model). Otherwise it will be much more difficult to be listened to, especially if it's person X who is the listener.

And it's just the best if the person who receives the communication of person Y is person X him- or herself.

2) The person X so should listen in an open, respectful and active way to the feelings and emotions of person Y, expressed with foundations. This means the person X listens to what were the effects in person Y of his or her acts. As foundations and not arguments are used, X doesn't feel attacked personally or judged. But of course this still doesn't mean this is easy to do for X: facing him or herself with the consequences of his or her acts. Especially if X was not conscious these acts were hurting Y, and even more difficult: if X acted with good intentions.

3) After X has listened in this way, X can react, but without trying to justify or defend him- or herself. X can explain why he or she did act like this, how he or she did come to behave like this. And now Y listens in an open and respectful way. Y also can ask questions.

4) For Y, it can help a lot if X says sorry for what he or she did. Sorry that Y was hurt, and that he or she contributed to that. And this should not only happen with one simple word, but in a way that makes feel Y that X is really sorry, does regret Y suffered. This doesn't mean X is or was a bad one. It means that X acknowledges that Y suffered as a consequence of his or her acts.

5) On basis of these exchanges, a potential compensation can be considered, depending on the situation.

Reconciliation between parents and adult children

In education, even with parents who have the best intentions with their children, it happens that parents put their children in a minor-position. Some of those situations will not be reminded by the children, but some others will be, still when they are adults. And some of those minor-positions can be very heavy for the young adults. Therefore it's important to use reconciliation to lighten or even get rid of these burdens, to be released.

Exemple of Alicia and her father.

The story: During her whole childhood, Alicia has been afraid of her father. However he is a good man, having good intentions with his children, loving them, doing a lot for them. And it's not that he is beating his children. But the fact he can become very angry in an unexpected way, he can look in such a terrifying way and shout at the same time, makes that Alicia is sometimes very afraid of him, and in fact always, because she never knows and understands when he will become angry.

Now Alicia is in her late twenties, she is married and has a young child. One day, when she is visiting her father, he behaves in such a way that she becomes again afraid of him, like when she was a child. At some point she even fears that he is going to box her ears. Because of his way of behaving and talking loud.

She then thinks she doesn't want to continue in this way, she wants to work on the relationship with her father. She invites him to have some times together just him and her. She explains she needs to talk about some important items with him. He agrees. So they decide to go together to a quite restaurant.

Her first question to him is: "I would like to know more about your education, how it was for you when you were a child."

He starts to tell, she asks more questions, she learns things about him she didn't know, things that surprise her. So they get to talk more and more first about him, then also about her childhood. In this way, along their regular times together, she gets to tell him she always has been afraid of him. He is very surprised. He never would have thought like that.

Progressively Alicia can tell him everything she needs to tell him, and far the most important, she feels very well listened to and accepted by her father. At some point, when he still is open to continue to talk in this way, she says she doesn't need more, she got everything she needed. And for him it's also O.K. not to continue to talk together in this way.

Afterwards, she feels what a huge gift she got from him through these conversations: she feels so much stronger, an enormous burden has fallen down from her shoulders, she feels released.

Discussion: Alicia was lucky: her father still was alive, and in good health. So she could have these conversations with him. He also was open for this process and strong enough to listen well and not to need to counter what Alicia was telling him. On the other hand Alicia started this early enough, she didn't wait until he had become too old. She also introduced the conversation in a not aggressive way, in an open way towards her father. She also talked with foundations, not with arguments.

For instance she didn't say: "You were aggressive, you were shouting against us,..." (you-messages), but instead she used I-messages, like "I didn't understand why you were angry, I was afraid because I didn't expect it, I was afraid because it was so loud,..." She also took care of the tone and the volume of her voice.

If we want to do this, like Alicia did, and we are afraid our parent will refuse to do it, then we should very carefully prepare ourselves how we shall explain to our parent what the process looks like, so that he or she wouldn't feel threatened. We also have to prepare ourselves very well, to introduce and to make the process concrete in the best possible way. Or perhaps we need a third party, a mediator in Equivalency, to support the process.

Sometimes people cannot do this anymore because their parent has passed away. Then it still can happen, in front of someone else, who can play the role of the parent in some way. Or they go to a therapist.

In the other direction, if we are the parent and we have adult children, it's so beautiful, it's one of the most precious gifts we can give them – especially for after we shall be gone –, at some point to ask them if there are things they want to tell us about situations where they did feel put in a minor-position by us. If they still remember when they are adults, that means they really felt in a deep minor-position. And so it will be so good if they can express their feelings and emotions about these situations, and feel heard and respected by us in them, and we don't try to justify or defend ourselves. We just listen and accept that's how they feel and felt.

Reconciliation between former spouses or life partners

When spouses or life partners decide to separate, it's usually after a long escalation, composed of many sub-escalations. That means they did put one another in quite a lot of minor-positions. The pain of these minor-positions often remains very present, even after many years. And they cause reactions of revenge (further escalation), often at the expense of the children (the mechanism of the chain, see fig 1). Or there is a lot of bitterness (the mechanism of internalization).

Even if they cannot change all what happened and has been said and done, they can change the fact they still feel in minor-positions. They can have sessions together in which they talk in following way:

"I think I did hurt you when I did say ... " or "... when I did do ...". And then let the other one talk about this pain, without interrupting. Just listening. No justification. And be together in the sorrow. "I regret you were hurt when I did that. And I understand..."

“Are there still things you would like me to know, you would like to tell?” And then again just listen, with openness and respect. Or even repeat, so the other one is sure to have been understood well: “So you mean that you...”

“Are there things you would like me to say that would help you?”

And they talk only with foundations, not arguments.

In this way each feels heard and accepted with his and her feelings, emotions, pain, suffering. And this by the person who was causing the pain. There is no comparison of who did suffer the most. It's impossible to compare pain.

In this way each is feeling gotten out of his/her minor-position. This will help a lot to continue in life, to rebuild life.

They even can do more: they can give positive affirmation to one another. There are always many positive things to say about someone. If we have the feeling there are none, then we should look better, and we'll see them. Sometimes we have to learn to see positive things in people, especially people we have (had) a difficult time with.

The transition from the daily/personal level to the higher/criminal level

Often we only think of reconciliation on the level of populations or nations (after a war, a genocide) or in the field of criminality (between a killer, a rapist, a violent person and his or her victim).

I think it's very important to also try out reconciliation on those more daily and personal levels so that we can experience ourselves what reconciliation is, that we should be aware what this means, how difficult it is to do. Otherwise we can have a wrong idea of what it is, and not appreciate when for instance a 'criminal' goes into a process of reconciliation with his victim. We could think this is too easy compared with spending time in prison. If we try out reconciliation ourselves, we'll see how hard it is to do, how it touches us and changes us in depth.

Reconciliation on the level of populations

There have been several processes of reconciliation on a large scale. Probably the most famous one is the one set up and supported by the 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' in South Africa. This was very original, renewing and revolutionary. This could happen thanks to the personalities of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, and also thanks to the unbedded mentality of forgiveness in Africa (Ubuntu). As a matter of fact, when we look at recordings of this process we can observe how, in general, it's more difficult for white people to listen in a respectful way to the other side and to forgive than for black people.

There have been many other processes and commissions of reconciliation on a large scale, or at least attempts, like in Rwanda, Chile, Colombia, and many other countries.

To get an idea of how reconciliation can work on a larger scale, let us look at a concrete case: the situation between Palestinians and Israeli.

It can start with any set of two contradictory points of view they have, for instance the Palestinians: “We want Palestinian refugees to come back” and Israeli: “ We don’t want Palestinian refugees to come back”.

Then they have to talk with foundations, not with arguments.¹ They have to take the necessary time and space to listen to the foundations of one another, with openness and respect, without judging. And they shouldn’t yet, during this communication, be thinking of a solution/solutions. Creating a solution or solutions can be a next step. Anyway it’s not part of this phase of communication, it shouldn’t interfere, disturb in this phase.

The foundations could be following:

Palestinians: We want Palestinian refugees to come back

1. We feel we belong there (refugees)
2. We were born there (refugees)
3. We need to be re-united with our families and relatives and friends
4. We feel insecure living in other countries (refugees)
5. We find it difficult to make a living in other countries (refugees)
6. We feel excluded from the society of the other countries (refugees)
7. We miss our families
8. We feel helpless
9. We feel sad that we are not able to practice our religion in the Holy Land (refugees)
10. We are afraid our nation is breaking apart
11. We are worrying about our brothers and sisters who are refugees
12. We feel frustrated and sad spending the holidays without our family members
13. We feel humiliated seeing our family

Israeli: We don’t want Palestinian refugees to come back

1. We are afraid of Palestinians
2. We are afraid to loose our houses
3. We are afraid to loose our Holy places
4. We feel threatened to our national identity
5. We feel invaded
6. We are afraid of being crushed by millions of Palestinians
7. In the past we have been hunted as Jews so many times
8. We are terrified to be in this situation again
9. We have no other place to go
10. We are afraid not to have enough water for all people
11. We have the feeling that Jews would disappear as a nation
12. We fear becoming the minority if Palestinian refugees return
13. We fear anger and disease from returning refugees
14. We fear giving in to terrorism/invite more

¹ Foundations are completely different from arguments. They just are answers to the question why someone has his or her point of view. With foundations people don’t try to be right and the other one wrong, they don’t try to convince. There is no use of ‘We have the right ...’ or ‘According to International Law ...’ They cannot be argued against or judged, they are neither good nor bad. They just are. For more information about foundations, see www.patpatfoort.be.

members being treated as refugees in other countries

14. I would feel so happy if my children would know their grand-parents and they could spend time together

15. I am afraid not to see my parents anymore before they die

16. I would feel so happy to have the chance to get to know my relatives, who I never met in my life

15. We fear our country's economy will crash

16. We fear losing support from the US

This is a non-provocative, non-aggressive, non-competitive way of communication. It's not accusative and not concentrating on the other's fault. It's using empathy, it's self-analysing and making us think. It can be a good start for a constructive approach.

The link between the level between populations and the personal level

To close this short contribution on reconciliation, I would like to present a touching case that shows us/reminds us how situations on a larger scale and personal situations can be linked, can influence one another.

Here is the case of Aisha and Judith, who were friends before the war in Gaza (2008-2009). Friends of them made this exercise (of the two parallel lists of foundations) in January 2009, to try to help them.

Aisha: I don't want to be friends with you right now Judith: I want to be friends with you right now

1. I am afraid to betray my country.

2. I am confused about Judith's political attitude.

3. I am upset/indignated about this war.

4. I am so sorry for all those who have been killed.

5. I like Judith as human being, but right now it is very difficult for me to have positive feelings for her.

6. I don't know what Judith is feeling right now.

7. I am sad when Judith is defending this war.

8. I do not feel understood (by Judith).

9. I feel offended by her.

10. I am afraid to be manipulated.

11. I feel helpless as I don't know where I am : friend vs political opponent.

12. I feel abused as an alibi, a 'model-Palestinian'.

13. I have a problem with the fact she doesn't talk about her feelings, what I feel as being closed.

now

1. I feel lonely.

2. I need and wish to have a good friend.

3. I feel excluded/singled out.

4. I don't feel acknowledged in my political attitude/point of view.

5. I am afraid for my country, my family.

6. I love my country and feel desperate that everybody is criticizing my country.

7. It's important for me to be part of the good friendship between Aisha and her girl friend.

8. I feel bad that a war threatens this friendship.

9. I am jealous of Aisha's former (Jewish) good friend in Jerusalem, I have the feeling I am not less than her.

10. I like Aisha very much.

11. I appreciate Aisha and also our personal and political discussions.

12. I need her recognition, because I feel that she is so important for my personal development.

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| 14. I have the feeling she's questioning me the whole time. | 13. I admire her strength and her openness. |
| 15. Now I need support and no questioning. | 14. I need the friction with her, between us. |
| 16. I feel attacked/accused and obliged to justify myself. | 15. I need this friendship in order to work on my inner conflicts. |
| 17. I am desperate about a friend justifying all the killing of my people. | 16. I'm looking for getting stability from her. |
| 18. I need clarity and no ambiguity on what is happening inside of her head. | 17. I have a bad conscience and find relief in the friendship with Aisha. |
| 19. I need a friend who goes together with me, in the same direction as me (a buddy). | 18. I feel torn apart and can lean myself against her. |
| 20. I need to have a 'heart-friend'. | 19. I am ashamed because of my country and I am not able to admit it. |
| 21. At this moment I can't stand the tension in our friendship with Aisha helps me keeping my relationship. | 20. I am ashamed because of my country and the face/not losing my face. |
| 22. At this moment I need space/distance. | 21. I need Aisha to balance my values. |

Communicating in this way with one another could help them to better understand themselves and the other, and not to judge. Important during that communication is not to expect any precise outcome or solution, but just to be careful of using foundations and no arguments, and to listen very carefully and to accept the other one as she is, with the feelings, emotions, needs, fears she has. No arguing in any way against what the other one is saying, not immediately come up with solutions when she says a foundation of her.

If as many people as possible could put in practice this kind of reconciliation process on a personal level, this would make it more and more easy and realistic to do this on larger scales, and in this way to work in a very solid way towards peace.
