

# **Making Transformation towards Nonviolent Conflict Management concrete :** **The Power of Each of Us**

by Pat Patfoort

Many violent conflicts and wars in the world occur in situations where two or more groups with different ethnical and cultural backgrounds are confronted with one another. But not only on that level, also on the individual level, people, every time again, get in trouble, quarrels, fights, when they are faced with different points of view, or interests, or habits, or values, or feelings. This happens in the family, on the workplace, in meetings, in the neighborhood, in the street. It looks like it's generally difficult to find ways to deal with differences of other people, which don't produce stress, anger, violence, pain and sorrow.

There are several ways to deal with differences between people. In a broad way we can make the distinction between on the one hand the destructive or violent way, and on the other the constructive or nonviolent way. Most people never learned about the existence of this distinction, and even less about how to make concrete the constructive or nonviolent way. Too often people only get interested in knowing more about it when they are in the middle of a crisis, as well on the personal as on the societal level. Even if it's still possible even then to learn about and to make Conflict Transformation concrete, it's as a matter of course much harder in a middle of a crisis.

## **The destructive way to deal with differences**

The start situation -as well for the destructive as for the constructive way- is one of (at least) two different points: the two different points are different characteristics, or behaviors, or points of view of two people or two groups of people. This start situation by itself doesn't contain any problem.

The ordinary way to go on with those two different points is the one based on **the Major-minor model or M-m model**: each tries to present its own characteristic or behavior as better than the one of the other. Each tries to be right, to dominate, to win. Each tries to put oneself in the M-position, and the other person or group in the m-position.

The consequences of this are **the three mechanisms of violence**:

- violence against the person who first did put him- or herself into the Major-position, or, the escalation of violence;
- violence against a third party, or, the chain of violence;
- violence against oneself, or, internalizing the violence/the aggression.

The M-m model is at the basis of violence. It is **the root of violence** (see fig.1).

## Is aggression inherent to human beings?

Behaving following the M-m model is so usual, seems so normal, that people often have the impression this is the only possible way. Most of the time people even think that this fits with the natural impulses of the human being, with the human instincts.

Now, what is inherent to the human being, is indeed at the basis of the transition from the start situation of two different points to the M-m model. It is **the instinct of self-preservation or survival instinct** that brings us to want to get out of the m-position. The need to protect and to defend oneself is indeed inherent to human beings. But to do this following the M-m model is absolutely not inherent to the human being. This way is only one of the possible ways to achieve this. It is the way that on first sight seems to be the most easy one, and (probably therefore) also the one that in most human societies is taught from childhood on, and that afterwards continues to be built up and fed in all possible ways.

Another way to go on with the start situation of two different points, is **the Equivalency-model or E-model** (see fig.2). This model is at **the basis of Nonviolence**. This model responds also to the instinct of self-preservation of the human being. The E-model, the nonviolence, indeed also permits us to get out of the m-position, to defend and to protect ourselves, but not at another's expense, not against someone, not attacking, as it is the case with the M-m model.

So not the aggression is inherent to human beings, but what's at the basis of it : the self-preservation instinct.

## The constructive way to deal with differences and conflicts

Now we shall discuss situations where the two different points of the start situation are points of view. Two (or more) parties have different points of view, they disagree. When the M-m model is used, that situation is known as 'conflict'.

To understand how to develop the Equivalency model, we look at what the instruments for it are, and compare them with what instruments are used in the Major-minor system.

In the M-m model **arguments** are used. They **are put forward to try to be right, to win**.

Three important kinds of arguments are :

- 1) **the positive arguments**: one presents positive aspects of one's point of view, to move oneself up toward the M-position;
- 2) **the negative arguments**: one mentions negative aspects of the point of view of the other person, to push down the other person toward the m-position;
- 3) **the destructive arguments**: one cites negative aspects of the other person, to push the other person even more down to the m-position. Among these devices are racist, ageist and sexist remarks. A way in which another differs -skin color, youth or age, gender- will be presented as negative and used to devalue the other's point of view, a view usually unrelated to the attribute

referred to.

**Using arguments** is a **superficial** feeding of the situation. They stimulate an escalation of the conflict, feed the fire so to speak. Both parties use whatever they can find to make their own point of view stronger in opposition to the one of the other and to surmount it. One simply expands the conflict from above, feeding fuel to the fire.

By contrast, the Equivalency model works with **foundations**, not arguments. As the word indicates, foundations are the underlying factors of both points of view. They are **the reasons** why both parties have the points of view they do : the motivations, needs, feelings, interests, objectives, values. These elements can be either intellectual-rational or emotional. They are revealed through "Why" questions. "Why do I have this point of view?". "Why does this other have his or hers?". Through exploring foundations in the E-model, one gains an opportunity to understand the conflict **in depth** rather than simply to be stuck in the M-m model pattern of feeding it at the surface. Foundations of different points of view are often not expressed. People may not be conscious of them. Nevertheless, they are present, and identifying them is essential.

## **Resolving a conflict**

Disagreement is handled in totally different ways by the M-m and E models of resolving conflict.

With the M-m model, there are only two possibilities. Either I am right or you are. We are in a two-dimensional system and each solution proposed or reached stimulates the same kind of reaction : "You see? I was right!" or "Who did win finally?". But often the M-m model doesn't offer any out way at all : every time we defend ourselves we do this in an attacking way, by which another person is provoked to defend him or herself, again in an attacking way, again provoking us or another person. And so it goes on.

By contrast, the E model leads us to innumerable solutions, which emerge from a way of thinking which transcends the two-dimensional restriction. They are created by understanding all of the foundations of both parties involved in the conflict.

While with the M-m model finding a solution is predominant, with the E-model the process by which one finds it is most important. The people in conflict enter that process by revealing the foundations of both sides, acknowledging and respecting those of the opponent as much as one's own, then following a series of steps toward solution (see fig.3) (<sup>1</sup>).

## **Transformation toward Nonviolent Conflict Management : a case on the personal level, a base for another kind of society**

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<sup>1</sup> : For further reading : see Patfoort, Pat. *Uprooting Violence. Building Nonviolence*. Freeport, Maine: Cobblesmith Pub., 1995, and Patfoort, Pat. *I want, you don't want. Nonviolence Education*. Freeport, Maine: Cobblesmith Pub, 2001.

Two neighbors have a problem about animals : Sidi keeps animals in his yard, but Tom doesn't want him to have them.

Sidi thinks and says to his neighbor, or about him to other people:

- 1) "Is there anything more beautiful than having animals?", "You get more love from an animal than from a man", "It's important children learn to deal with animals", "When you compare his children with ours, you can see the good effect these animals had on ours", "It's important to be a complete human being to have animals around you", "It gives such a good feeling to produce your own milk and eggs" (positive arguments)
- 2) "Life without animals around you is no life", "If there wouldn't be animals, he wouldn't have anything to eat", "It would be awfully silent without animals. It just would be like a cemetery here" (negative arguments)
- 3) "He is not human", "He always is so strange", "He has no feelings", "He is so selfish, only thinks of himself", "He can't dare any little disturbance around him : look how he behaves with his children! The poor ones..." (destructive arguments).

Tom on the other hand thinks and talks to his neighbor, or about him to others in the following way:

- 1) "It's so nice to have quietness around a house", "You at least then can hear your own music!", "It's much more easy to keep things clean without animals" (positive arguments)
- 2) "These animals are so dirty. They smell awfully!", "They bring sicknesses. They are dangerous.", "They make so much noise : they disturb the whole neighborhood.", "Animals are not made to live around houses of people, but must stay far from houses, anyhow not in this neighborhood" (negative arguments)
- 3) "He doesn't care about us not being able to sleep. He only thinks about what he wants!", "He says he loves his animals, but look how he treats them : he hits them, he hurts them!", "He doesn't know how to deal with animals", "He uses his animals to get rid of his frustrations", "He is so dirty himself, I wonder if he ever takes a shower or a bath" (destructive arguments).

Sidi and Tom not only put one another in minor-positions with words, but also in all kinds of nonverbal ways (glances, gestures, attitudes, smiles). And progressively they also do more and more things to put the other one in a minor-position. They get more and more into an escalation. This is war between neighbors.

To transform the relationship from the Major-minor model toward the Equivalency, Sidi and Tom should not think and speak anymore with arguments, but with foundations. How could those foundations look like <sup>(2)</sup>?

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<sup>2</sup> : *To bring about and to formulate foundations, some particular instructions need to be observed.*

## **Sidi : I want to have animals**

### Foundations :

- 1.I always was used to live with animals
- 2.Without animals around me I would miss a lot, I would feel lost
- 3.I love to give our own milk to our children
- 4.I need some more income
- 5.I feel good when I have animals around me
- 6.I feel happy giving manure to the farmers
- 7.I love to see my children playing with the animals
- 8.I feel so good giving an animal as a present when there are family ceremonies
- 9.I feel so much appreciated then
- 9.I'm afraid to be rejected by my community if I don't have animals
- 10.It would be terrible for me if my children wouldn't be used to live and to deal with animals
- 11.I was raised with the taught that people not keeping animals are inferior

## **Tom : I don't want you to have animals**

### Foundations :

- 1.I'm afraid they will destroy my plants
- 2.I never was used to live with animals
- 3.I feel good with lots of green around me
- 4.I feel disturbed by the cries of animals
- 5.I feel bad with the smell of animals
- 6.I have a difficult feeling when I see an animal destroy a plant
- 7.I'm afraid the animals will hurt my children
- 8.I'm afraid my children will get used to animals
- 9.I was raised with a feeling of fear for people keeping animals

We see those two ways of thinking and talking are completely different : there is a transfer from negative criticism and judgment of the other person and his viewpoint toward openness, understanding and acceptance of the other person and oneself. The relationship becomes totally different.

How can Sidi and Tom work on such a transformation? Essentially by becoming aware of the consequences of the Major-minor way of thinking and behaving, and by learning HOW to put the Equivalency model in practice.

How will solutions for this conflict look like? In the Equivalency model there usually are many possible solutions. And a solution is often not just ONE piece, but a compound of several pieces, which all together satisfy all the foundations of the different parties involved. In this case THE solution, that means the different pieces of the compound of the solution, could be:

- 1) The animals are put inside of a fence, at the opposite side of the house of Sidi;
- 2) and Tom helps Sidi to build the fence;
- 3) and, if the fence of Sidi is broken or a plant of Tom is destroyed, the other one expresses his regrets to him and even helps him to repair;
- 4) and each expresses his appreciation for what the other one is doing for him, and how he does it;
- 5) and, by communicating in a different way, they progressively learn to know each other better, and start looking at one another in a different way, and feel better with their neighbor in a general way.

All over the world there are many conflicts, and particularly armed conflicts, between populations of breeders/shepherds on the one hand and populations of farmers on the other. They are in Major- and minor-positions towards one another, so in the Major-minor model, out of which escalations develop.

Foundations similar to the ones of Sidi and Tom are present in these situations.

If people like Sidi and Tom would be working on transforming their conflict from the Major-minor system toward the Equivalency system, it is clear that this would be the base of a transformation of the society in which they are living. And the more people do this, the more we all work on transforming our conflicts from the Major-minor system toward the Equivalency system, the more we shall transform our societies and the world from negative judgment and prejudice toward respect and tolerance, from violence and war toward harmony and peace.

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