

We have the choice

by Pat Patfoort

The infernal gap

It couldn't continue like this. It had to be stopped some day. It was going to be stopped some day. Such a permanently increasing discrepancy between two parties, where the one side is continually overpowering more and more the other one, where the one side is getting continually in a higher "Major"-position towards the other one in his "minor"-position (see fig.1). At some point such a phenomenon is always going to be interrupted.

As we, The North-Westerners, the ones in the "Major"-position, didn't stop this infernal growing gap, THEY did... In a horrifying way. In a way for which there are no words available to express the atrocity, the pain, the sorrow, the suffering.

Such a continually growing discrepancy between someone in a "Major"-position and another one in a "minor"-position, and its reversal afterwards, happen on other levels too.

- *When a father year after year beats his son. In spite of all possible requests and implorments of the son, or insistence to stop it, the father still continues to beat or even beats harder. At some point the son will suddenly turn over the situation, and will beat his father often even harder than he ever was beaten himself. Or he even kills his father.*
- *Or when an employee in a company feels humiliated and put down continually by his/her boss, and for years tries to find ways to change the situation but can't find them, and so continues to suffer. Whenever he/she finds a way to become him/herself the boss of the one who was it before, the former employee is going to be even harder towards the former boss than he/she was treated himself.*
- *Or when someone is tortured. Whenever this person can get out of his or her imprisonment and capture his or her executioner, this person often will even act in a more cruel way towards him than he or she was treated him- or herself.*

The revenge

I don't say this is a good way to get out of one's minor-position...Of course not! This can be terribly awful, painful, destructive. But such reactions are "the ultimate" ones people in the minor-position think of to use to finally get out of their minor-position. These ways are acts of helplessness, powerlessness, despair. They are an ultimate way to try to get out of a long situation of pain, suffering, misery.

Trying to get out of such a situation, trying to get out of one's minor-position, is of course a very healthy act. It happens because all human beings have an instinct of self-conservation, of survival. That's why they are driven so strongly to get out of their minor-position. All human beings -young and old, black and white, rich and poor, manual labourer and intellectual, men and women, Christian and Muslim- have such an instinct. No one wants to stay in a minor-position. And the deeper one feels pushed in it, the stronger the energy to get out of it becomes.

Putting oneself in the Major-position is of course not a constructive, a good way to get out of one's minor-position. It's putting the other one on his/her turn in a minor-position, and making him/her suffer. But it happens in this way not only because the "minor" doesn't know other ways, can't find or develop other ways, but also because the "Major" isn't aware of his/her own Major-position and the miserable minor-position of the other one, doesn't listen (enough) to the one in the minor-position, doesn't take account of the requests, complaints, implorments of the one in the minor-position, doesn't see or recognize or admit how and how much the one in the minor-position is suffering.

How do THEY feel in a minor-position?

I was working in Africa on Sept.11. So the first reactions I heard or read were those of Africans, among which many were Muslim. No, they didn't cheer when they heard about and saw the tragedies. All of them without exception started expressing his or her grief and sympathy with the victims, with the North-Westerners, with me. I know some images have been shown of some Palestinians in refugee-camps expressing their joy after the tragedies in New York and Washington. But these were groups who feel put in an extremely deep minor-position by the US. Still not a "good reason" to cheer with the misfortune of others...But we perhaps can better situate this reaction when we compare it with how some people of the "Allied" countries were satisfied or even joyful when Berlin was bombed at the end of WWII, or when Iraq was bombed in 1991. These are no "good" reactions, but they are unfortunately the logical or "normal" reactions in the Major-minor system. And THEY have those kinds of reactions, but WE have them too...Because WE as well as THEY are thinking and acting in the Major-minor way.

But after their first reaction of expressing their grief and sympathy, most people around me had some additional comments expressing their feelings of minor-position towards the US. Those people are not feeling in an extremely deep minor-position, like the cheering Palestinians in refugee-camps. But they nevertheless do feel in a minor-position.

Some of their reactions :

- *"They thought they were invulnerable! Now they also will know how it feels to be attacked, to suffer, to feel vulnerable".*
- *"How ironic : just when they are preparing the installation of their nuclear shield, the WTC and the Pentagon collapse."*
- *"Here is the proof that no one is sheltered from acts of violence."*
- *"There is a new balance of terror."*
- *"Americans think they are the police of the world. They think they can do everything they want in the whole world, exactly as they want."*
- *"The arrogance of the Americans..."*
- *"It could become a fight between the Judeo-Christian faction which claims itself democratic and the Muslim barbarism... Nothing else than stereotypes created and maintained by the Western media and which hide the profound reasons of the discomfort actually prevailing in the world"*
- *"The US will want to take a revenge bigger than the "humiliation" they got."*
- *"The big America doesn't have the means to win a war against the "barefoot tramps."*
- *"The world leadership the big America did claim and get from a limited community of nations requires the most extreme banality everywhere on the planet."*
- *"The US has to reshape it's foreign policy to put in practice it's constitutional principles of equality and tolerance. Then men, women and children won't be delighted at the calamities of the US anymore, won't burn its flag, as some oppressed people have done and as TV has showed to the whole world."*
- *"Hitting Afghanistan is the most easy solution the US could let themselves go to. The task of the US is somewhere else."*
- *"We often are considered as primitive, barbarous, uncivilized, and they call themselves civilized."*

And let us now be honest with ourselves, and discover and admit each for ourselves in which way we, North-Westerners, are indeed thinking and acting in a way we put ourselves in a Major-position towards people of other cultures : thinking we are better than THEM, our systems are better than THEIRS, our customs are more just, we are more developed, more civilized, we are right and THEY are wrong, we are the good ones and THEY the bad ones. We even might judge the "suicide"-

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commando's are criminals and barbarous, and think the parents of those who do something like that are inhuman, and should be ashamed. But before we make these judgments, let us first remember how North-Westerners also often have sent their young men to war -so to kill people- praising the act of dying for the nation, telling it's better to die for their country than to stay home as a coward, telling them they will be a hero, telling the mothers they could be proud to have given the life of their sons to save the country.

The more I -as a North-Westerner- travel and live in Africa, the more I discover and learn how things and habits there are not worse or less developed or less civilized than ours, but just different.

Who are THEY ?

It could well be Osama Bin Laden is one of them. But he surely couldn't do these attacks without people ready to risk and sacrifice their lives, thus people who are feeling deeply enough in a minor-position towards the US and the whole system the US is part of. With his wealth and power Bin Laden surely is not feeling deeply enough in a minor-position to be ready to sacrifice his life himself. He has too much to lose.

What should we do now ?

Shall we (try to) put THEM once more in a minor-position, deeper than before? Shall we (try to) put ourselves once more in a Major-position? Shall we retaliate? Shall we take revenge? Then we continue to rise in the mechanism of escalation, in which each turn is getting him- or herself out of the minor-position by getting into the Major-position, so pushing the other one again into the minor-position, and thus provoking him or her to tend again to the Major-position, etc. An infernal cycle. Escalations are found everywhere in the world, and on all levels of society: among children, between children or adolescents and adults, among individuals in families, in traffic or in the workplace, inside of groups, between groups, between ethnic groups, between nations. If we put ourselves once more in a Major-position, following the logic of the escalation which is demonstrated everywhere and on all levels, we are making the best guarantee THEY will afterwards put themselves again in a Major-position, retaliate again, do everything they can and find ways to do it. How long do we want to continue to put them again and again in a minor-position? And how terrible will be their ways to put us again and again in a minor-position, to get out of it themselves?

Or are we so pretentious to think WE shall be the last ones to reach a Major-position, we shall reach the very last Major-position for ever?! It makes me think of this group of Palestinians and Israeli I worked with 10 years ago... Their wise, but sad conclusion at the end of our seminar was : "As long as each of us will continue to have the illusion at the end that WE will reach the very last Major-position of the escalation, so long each will continue to fight." That's 10 years ago...

Or shall we now finally listen to the requests, the complaints, the supplications, the needs of the ones in front of us which are in the minor-position? Shall we finally "see" their suffering, their situation of humiliation, their need for dignity? Shall we finally work together to get them out of their minor-position, and build up a society not based anymore on an unbalanced relationship of Major-minor, but on a balanced one of Equivalency (see fig.2)?

Building Peace

You perhaps think that feeling in a minor-position, even the worst one, is not an excuse to do horrible things as what happened on Sept 11. I totally agree. Such horrible things should never happen! But on the other hand those people also shouldn't be in such a horrible minor-position as they feel they are. And they don't know how to get out of it without using such horrible ways.

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The system of the Equivalency -in opposition to the Major-minor system- permits to take care both of not having such horrible things happen again and of having those people get out of their minor-position. In the Major-minor system usually one has to choose: either one is on the side of the one, or on the side of the other. That means in this case that with the Major-minor way of thinking we are

- either sympathizing with the victims of the attacks and against all kinds of people who could have been the ones who organized or participated in the attacks;
- or if we try to understand the needs and motivations of the ones who in some way could be against the US or North-Westerner culture in general, we are supposed to be against the US.

With the Equivalency system we can get out of this forced choice between being "pro" or "contra": we can develop respect for both sides.

Equivalency will mean :

- On the one side we'll have to take all possible creative but respectful measures so that such terrorist attacks can't happen anymore. And we look for the people who participated in and organized these attacks to put them in the face of the consequences of their deeds, and bring them to work on reparation.

- On the other side we'll have to develop a process to get ourselves out of the Major-position we are in for too long. We'll have to learn humility: not expect everywhere things to be like we are used to, not judge what's different from what we know, be able to appreciate what's different, be able to adapt when we are abroad, learn to speak a second language, etc. And we'll have to communicate well enough with the populations who feel in a minor-position towards us, to discover how progressively they can get out of this position, and we'll have to work on making this happen.

In the Major-minor system one usually looks for "the" solution. In the Equivalency system the focus is not on the solution, but on the process. And of course a solution will emerge out of this process. But we should be able not to focus on the solution to give space to the process so that it can run in an Equivalent way.

As every time after a tragedy caused by humans -whatever it is: a war, a genocide, a terrorist attack, an abuse- we have to admit we can't change the past. We can't make alive the ones who died. We can't give back a leg to the one who lost it. We can't make someone who suffered for years from incest act as if it didn't happen. We can't undo humiliation which did happen. We can't make suffering which happened in the past to away as if it had not happened. We can't make the past disappear. And so there are wounds. There is pain. There is sorrow.

But what we can change is the present and the future. We can choose to go one way or the other: either we continue to develop or even to increase violence, or we start to build peace. Finally. That's the choice we have.