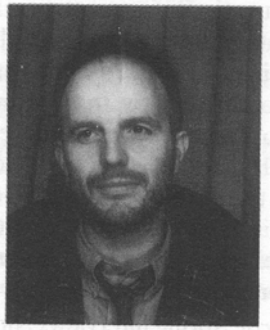
THE BOARDING SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Lizzie Spring interviews Nick Duffell about his Survivors Workshop



Nick Duffell was born in 1949 and went to boarding schools both in Europe and England. He took a degree in Sanskrit at the University of Oxford and taught in an Indian private boarding school. For 13 years he worked as a carpenter and a roofer. He was trained as a psychotherapist at the London Institute of Psychosynthesis, and currently works in private and clinical practice with individuals and couples, as a family therapist and conciliator, and is developing his work teaching creativity and self-awareness in large corporations.

L.S.: What was your worst experience of boarding school?

N.D.: I don't think there was a single event I would pick out; it was more cumulative and seems to fall into two aspects of boarding school life. The first, as an 8-year-old going away, it was not simply the separation from your parents, it was the impossibility expressing your feelings, since the code of behaviour was not to be a "blubber". The other aspect was: Where is my home? I became aware that home was where you spent the greater part of the year, where you lived longest. That, of course, was school. Therefore, by definition, school became home. But it wasn't home, because there was no family, no way to be oneself in all one's feelings, no freedom.

The English public school system is so hierarchical, that the only way you gained recognition was to move up the scale, the ladder and you only moved up or became more privileged the longer you were there.

L.S.: When did you first become aware of that?

N.D.: Around about the age of twelve. As I moved into my teens, I became more rebellious. I think I became more aware that there was a value system here that didn't meet the kind of values that I was beginning to make for myself. Then I expressed it in a gentle kind of rebellion.

L.S.: Like what?

N.D.: By the time I was 16, 17, one way I rebelled was to say: "Well, I'm not going to take the route of revenge, in the way I'd seen the others had done, so that, e.g., making it as a prefect wasn't a big deal for me. More explicitly, I was not a sportsman and I rejected sports; I was a chubby kid anyway, armoured with fat to protect myself, and tended much more to go behind the pavilion with a Number Six and make my rebellion that way.

But, while they were trying to mould us into this product based on the old concept of 'the gentleman' and administrator of the colonial empire, they were feeding us with Sartre and Camus, in effect stimulating intellectually an anti-authoritarian, anti-society viewpoint, very revolutionary literary stuff. And it made me ask questions about what was going on in school structures.

L.S.: How did you get the idea of doing survivors' workshops?

N.D.: I started working on the 'Brothers' programme with David Findley and it hit me that there could be a space for men to come together in a group setting to talk through particular experiences, particular problems. I didn't want to be seen as someone who had never really left school - that was a terrible fear - as if I was still occupied with those days, that they were still central and meaningful to me, in fact that I was still under the effect of denial. Then I met Andrew Mullis. We had dinner one day and he said: "Great. Why don't we do it?" Then I started to feel that maybe we actually **could** do it and together we developed the programme.

.... September again .....

Article in the Independent

N.D.: Andrew and I had gone completely different ways. Whereas I'd gone into Indian mysticism, drugs, manual work, carpenter, done self-sufficiency, lived in Wales and old farmhouses, denying myself from career and success (caught in and driven by rebellion and anti-authoritarianism) Andrew had gone by a completely different route: he'd been to Cambridge, been very successful in industry, had been a bit of a whiz kid, then later in his 30s had decided to get out and go free-lance, firstly as a management consultant and trainer, then into the Psychosynthesis Trust to do his counselling training there. We realised we had complementary skills and experiences which enabled us to hold the workshops around a central ideology. We conceived of it as a kind of will project and finally got it off the ground, launched

it and we were overtaken by the enormous media interest which started with the article I wrote for *The Independent*. We had a tremendous response, lots of questions and we realised the whole thought form round the project wasn't really articulate, so it's been a process of articulating response to questions and we're still building and running the workshops. We find the programme very exciting.

Parents' Ambition

... there's no place like a public school to emphasise what one's place is .....

L.S.: In your article you wrote that the 'seeds of motivation' to do these workshops were sown in childhood, what were these seeds?

N.D.: Let me go from the outside: the whole process has shown me the importance of being an individual in society and there's no place like a public school to emphasise what one's place is. I was the first Duffell to have the dubious honour to go to public school - my father came from Hackney, he'd paid my fees before I was three as well as putting my name down; so I was fulfilling a huge ambition for him and I was carrying a lot for the family. I felt very out of synch with the upper class atmosphere of the public school. That's one aspect, then there's the sense of where you live being school - your home becomes an alien environment - so that a kind of placelessness began to gnaw at me - this comes up again and again in the workshops.

Certainly we find that when men come to the workshops and begin telling their stories and look at themselves through this particular lens, it always becomes a way of looking at earlier pains and relationships with parents and deeply personal issues as well as investigating what it means to be a man.

Self Protection

A lot of the belonging needs will be met in the workshops because they offer a space for these men to share the ways in which these needs were denied. At school we had to belong, but we couldn't belong as little boys who missed our parents. We couldn't belong as little boys who cried. We couldn't belong without fear and we couldn't belong later with our sexual doubts, with the explosion that happens at puberty. So we aim in the workshops to provide a very secure space to contain this and to allow the process to unfold.

L.S.: What was the advantage for these children to clamp down and remain silent? Especially in the early years?

N.D.: A need to survive, a need not to break the code. One man told the story of his first day of term: one guy goes round the dormitory saying: "I know who's going to blub tonight. **You** are going to blub. **You** are going to blub." But that night he was the only boy to cry. So there is this code of grim self-protection.

L.S.: But what was so self-protecting about that? If they'd all cried ....

N.D.: But that's the point: it's self-protecting in that when one person really gives way to their emotional side, everyone is forced to do it. So by keeping silence, you can all be silent. The other way of dealing with it is to victimise anyone who does break the code. People have told me that one slip of the tongue stayed with them for the next five or six years and a wrong word could become your nickname forever. Others saw it happening and didn't dare speak out so the code was kept working, unbroken.

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Empire Builders

N.D.: Just look back and see historically what was designed into that system: I began to see it when I was teaching in a boys' school in India, it was very isolated in a British Raj old cantonment, an old military station on top of a Rajput Fort in the central plains and the presence of the British Raj was still really alive. I realised that the whole of the British Raj, the Empire, was run by men who hadn't really left school. They had gone into another institution, the army or colonial office, where the same codes operated. I found it strange to consider how much power was wielded by people who were, at heart, still little boys. Public Schools were designed, in the nineteenth century, when Victorian expansion was at its height, when suburbs were being created and there was a new middle class who wanted to give their children the 'best education' they could and wanted to give their children the chance to become like gentry, as it were. At the same time the Empire needed administrators. What better testing ground than the public school system. It was the perfect training.

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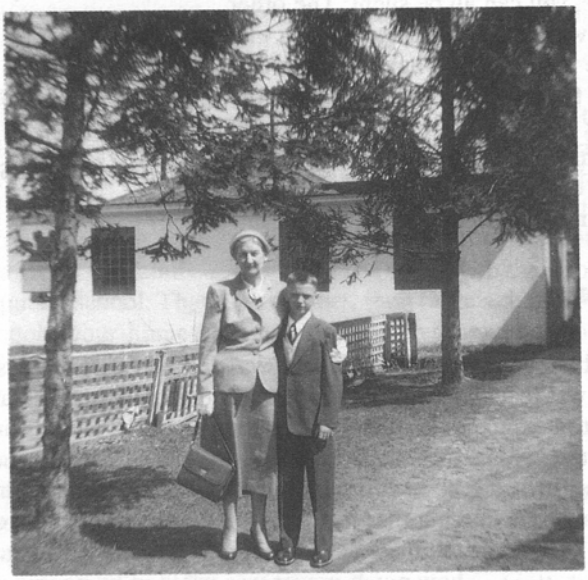
Alice Miller says, when talking about corporal punishment:

> "Who will bear the brunt of this humiliating treatment when the colonies are no longer there to perform this function? How will they then attain revenge?"

The whole idea of the gentleman, a man of action, good at games and sports, who could keep his feelings to himself **and** survive, i.e. the Kipling hero, that was the original intention of this system and it worked well for that purpose.



... leaving the woman you know to go to a woman-less environment ...

Like a Ploughman's Lunch

L.S.: Do you think that's why boarding schools are still so honoured in this country?

N.D.: There are many reasons, I think. Firstly there's an attitude to children in this country, it's starting to be revealed in, for instance, the cases of sexual abuse. The child has long been considered as a miniature person to be curbed: the child with its predilection for freedom and naturalness needs to be socialised. So the boarding school has been seen as an excellent institution to socialise children.

Also, it's very convenient. One of my experiences as a father (I have two teenage sons) was the struggle during my elder son's GCSEs to get the homework done. My

parents had none of that; they didn't take on any of the responsibility to try and get me through school, that was handed over to someone else.

It's also rooted in the social motivations: we're so keen on tradition in this country and here you have a ready-made series of institutions where tradition is the thing, where it seems like they've been going from time immemorial. In fact most of them were started in the nineteenth century, though the model goes back to the 15th Century when Christ's Hospital was founded. They follow the 'great traditions' of Church, Bible and Scholarship; but they also have this incredible self-referring sense of tradition in that they create their own legends and mythology, their own customs and privileges. So when you went to one of these schools it meant you had to learn a new language. In my school you couldn't have your jacket buttons undone until you were a prefect; a new boy wasn't allowed to whistle. You had to know what the terminology was for the various buildings and aspects of life. There was this enormous tradition that you had to take on and that kind of tradition is tremendously deceptive and it's appealing to parents. It's a bit like the ploughman's lunch, a creation of the 1960's, but makes you feel as though you're connecting to centuries of tradition.

Psychosynthesis

L.S.: Your background is in Psychosynthesis. How are you using it in the workshops?

N.D.: Psychosynthesis is our main support, although our methodology is very wide. The workshops are very eclectic. We steal from everybody's methods, we take what works. We use the reflective exercises of psychosynthesis, as well as exercises from, for example, Family Therapy, Psychodrama, Gestalt, roling, and de-roling. But Psychosynthesis holds a particular context, one aspect of which is, that life is looked upon as being the journey of the soul; that there is a wisdom in us which is calling us so that, despite victimisation our experiences and our behaviours are actually serving us. We are dealing with people who are actually in the world, people who don't necessarily see themselves as victims. So by identifying and accepting ourselves as victim to outside events, where that has been the case, we can realise that's not static: you don't have to go to blame and revenge forever. You can allow, through consciousness, the potential to ensoulment. Another very important aspect of Psychosynthesis is that it acknowledges the will - probably its greatest contribution to psychology - it's about knowing the place of the will, that consciousness alone is not enough. So when these men read the article or see the brochure and say: "Yes, maybe this is a way. I'll risk it. I'll put my money down", something is not only happening in their consciousness, but also in their will. This is an act of will. Holding the will can't happen without shifts of change in consciousness, but also there can't be shifts of change in consciousness without the will. If you leave it all hanging out, you just get the old style encounter group. Psychosynthesis asks: "What

for? Why are you letting it all hang out?", because grounding experience is important and because it is always looking for the next step, looking at the impulse for the next step.

Women Survivors

... it's been very important to re-evoke these experiences in the setting of an all-male group, because that's where they suffered it and that's where the transformation will take place

L.S.: So how do you see the workshops developing?

N.D.: The programme is on-going: we will continue the workshops as long as there is demand. We've decided to extend the programme to women, first by offering a mixed group. I hope it's going to come off. One of the things we've realised about that is that it's been very important to re-evoke these experiences in the setting of an all-male group, because that's where they suffered it and that's where the transformation will take place - such as there may be. So I'm becoming less keen on doing the mixed group now and also know that Andrew and I cannot facilitate the women's group. We have one or two people in mind to help us, but we're not completely ready to let go of the programme yet. I don't know what the future of that is.

Sex and Lavatories

L.S.: How do you relate male sexual attitudes to sexual attitudes at boarding school? What are the issues?

N.D.: Well, Number One: Women were strangers. They were from a different planet. Your relationships with woman, what you knew about women, - apart from, say, mothers and sisters - were based on matron and the headmaster's wife who stood for the good old fashioned sense of 'the matron', they stood for some kind of physical care, they were accessible to us as mothers. I got ill a lot at school and what that gave me was privacy **and** women. If you went down to the infirmary, you got privacy and there were women there. There was something rather wonderful about that, it was a different atmosphere.

It's the lack of privacy that makes the whole process work so well, because you're never alone. In some places, like one set of toilets where I was at school, even the toilets have no doors. There was another funny system about toilets at my prep school where we were told to go to the toilet by rote, by number: "Will these numbers now go and move their bowels."

L.S.: And did you? Could you?

N.D.: I don't remember, but my fantasy is that we were all pretty anal-retentive. There was no privacy in bathrooms. We had a system: 3 baths in which 40 people would have baths after school. You'd wait all afternoon to get into the bath, in the same water, a prefect could come in and take the position in front of you. 'Indulging' the body in any way was really out.

There are two strains going: one round the lack of the feminine and the other round the fear, shame and guilt of sexuality and wanking.

Of course, when we moved into puberty, what happened in my peer group was that we came back full of stories of our conquests in this wonderful world of women outside, which were largely based on lies: we had a private life of our own in which we were very successful. That set up tensions for the future.

Beating

There were darker aspects that I don't really know about in my own process. There were of course the beatings. In my school, beatings happened at night: we'd know if there was going to be a beating, because the canes which were up in the prefects' room would be down in the afternoon, so we'd know there was going to be a beating. The whole house would be silent after lights out waiting for the footsteps which came along the passage and say: "Duffell, get your dressing gown and slippers on and come downstairs" and, as you came down, the prefects would be lining the staircase and you'd go into the junior common room and bend over a chair, a Windsor chair, and grasp the back of it while your offence was read out and then you'd be beaten.

There was also sexual exploration with others. There's no doubt that some people were abused by masters. As a result of allegations on Esther Rantzen's show recently, and the subsequent trial of some boys' school masters for sex abuse of children, they've started a thing called 'Boarding School Child Line'. They were in touch with me about it. It's very heartening to know that kind of thing is happening.

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I get a lot of letters from wives which say virtually 'My husband was at boarding school and I put his inability to maintain a relationship down to this.' Relationships can be difficult if you've been through this system.

A basic idea is, if you perceive woman as the object of your sexual desire and she is patently outside your experience, it helps foster the myth of the fantasy woman. It helps foster the myth, that at some stage a woman will be available to fulfil that

particular fantasy and perhaps helps to degrade the idea that sexuality with a partner is something that goes hand in hand with a relationship; along with the fact that liberated sexuality cannot function unless you understand and acknowledge yourself as a sexual being.

L.S.: The culture seems preoccupied with beating, is it not just an explosion of anger?

N.D.: Beating. What is behind the attitude to children, where the child is obedient, where the child does what is good for its own sake? Alice Miller quotes from J. Salt's *Essay on Education and Instruction*, 1748.

> "As far as willfulness is concerned this expresses itself as a natural recourse in the tenderest children as soon as children are able to make their desires known by means of gestures. They see something they want but cannot have, they become angry, cry and flail about or, if they are given something that does not please them, they fling it aside and begin to cry. These are dangerous faults that hinder their entire education and encourages undesirable qualities in children. If willfulness and wickedness are not driven out it is impossible to give the child a good education. The moment these flaws appear in the child it is time to resist this evil so it does not become ingrained and a habit and the children do not become depraved. Just as soon as children develop awareness it is essential to demonstrate to them by word and deed that they must submit to the will of their parents. Obedience requires children to
>
> 1. Willingly do as they are told
> 2. Willingly refrain from what is forbidden
> 3. Accept the rules made for their sake
>
> They will never afterwards remember that they had a will."

As I read that last paragraph I instantly remembered that, at my boarding school, when you were beaten by an adult, the head or housemaster, after caning you had to shake hands and thank the chastiser for the correction duly administered. When it was administered by a prefect, the emphasis was on the offence and its punishment. The other precept which I often heard at home was 'Spare the rod and spoil the child.'

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These are the kinds of attitudes deep in our culture. It's beginning to change and that's what we're changing. Being child-centred doesn't mean just having Childline, though it includes that. Castrating, accusing or hanging child abusers won't change anything; and that's

where I think Psychosynthesis and the rest of the Transpersonal movement can hold a much wider context: the way back to what we've forgotten is not just the abused child but also divinity, because, in consciousness, we have stability, there's choice.

The Boarding School Survivors Programme of Workshops for Men is currently running in London and the Midlands. For details call 081 - 341 4885 or 0926 424026 (Leamington Spa)

Interview by Lizzie Spring.