Boarding School Survivors

Nick Duffell

Having started out simply to run workshops for those who identify themselves as 'survivors' of boarding school, we have been surprised by the interest shown from all corners of the world, resulting in a huge mailbag, many newspaper articles, radio broadcasts and requests to make TV documentaries. It seems that a previously taboo subject is now being aired at different levels. Here it starts to get difficult. First, our work is about trust and privacy. Furthermore, the mass media seem to be interested in an adversarial 'boarding schools good or bad' debate and it's hard not to get caught in that. For psychotherapists there's a trap in condemning 'abusive' institutions while maintaining clients in the victim role. A *40 Minutes* documentary, 'The Making of Them', which followed prep-school boys through their first term away and included an interview with me, had a huge emotional impact on the production team, as it did subsequently on viewers in Britain and Europe, but the BBC, despite recommendations (thanks to Kirsty Hall and Sally Griffen), failed to provide a follow-up help-line. We struggled to cope with callers who managed to get through to us.

It seems to me that these difficulties are in part to do with misunderstandings about the nature of change: it is easier to operate at the level of what Paul Watzlavick calls First Order Change, where solutions are pitched at a causal behavioural level. We have had to realize that understanding the implications of our work involves a Second Order Change level: we are working with the mindsets, belief systems and paradigms of a whole society, which holds particular attitudes towards childhood and still maintains a distinct and divisive class system. Rob and I have thought and dreamed about the specific nature of English society for many years. A recent dream of mine is that the whole English upper class has exiled itself from the lower class, that the mental life is set apart from the instinctual. F.H. Burnett's *The Secret Garden* seems to describe this position mythically; the novel hints that the mechanism is in the banishment of the child, who is hidden away from the light and lies crippled, awaiting the innocent child to seek him out and the instinctual child to work his magic.

The phrase 'Boarding School Survivor' seems now to have entered the language; pupil admissions are falling; even Prince Charles allows his unhappiness at school to be recorded. We don't know how much our work has contributed to this, but we believe that psychological interventions at

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a societal level work when needs are perceived. But attempting to change the context in which issues are seen and debated is a delicate task. While journals ranging from *Wingspan*, The *Times* and *Good Housekeeping* look for soundbites, we have been challenged to keep posing the broader questions: what are British attitudes towards children ? How do these affect our society and in turn our children? (As Arny Mindell says: 'The myth that is dreamed up eventually dreams us.') And is there a way out?

Our Findings

The BSS programme runs a two-weekend course for adult men and latterly women over some 5 weeks. The difference between how boys and girls get affected by boarding school would need another paper to discuss, and again is subject to the individual story; we know most about men. One argument that could be advanced is that withdrawal is a typically male pattern, that the male wound consists in distance, in deification; then you might say that BS women who shut down on their feelings and live withdrawn lives act like men and thereby betray their own natures even more.

We have had participants ranging in age between 18 and 68. It is often a struggle to fill the groups because our 'survivors' tend to be deeply private people with good reason to be afraid of groups. For many, guilt about their 'privileged' start makes it hard to admit failure or woundedness. From the groups we discover that individuals are affected in specific ways, which I shall outline below, but also how unique and therefore valuable each individual story is.

Enforced separation

In general we find that those who were sent away very young (aged 5–10) are worse affected than those who went later. We have a belief that children have a right to be brought up in a family environment and that professional carers can rarely be adequate substitutes — unlikely in a school house of 40 children with one housemaster and his wife. Individual stories reveal that the degree of truthful preparation that a child had, the allowability of feeling response and the very first few events at school are all of vital importance.

A further belief is that separation from mother and family is the most important event to be faced by the adolescent male; older cultures have carefully ritualised this departure from childhood and welcome to the world of whole initiate males. If boys undergo premature separation at a boarding school they may grow up to become men presenting outer false adults, hiding inner unseparated little boys. Having in this way not grown up they may well find authentic relationships beyond them, often seeking either to restore or to deny the maternal bond, and extending a vicious cycle of poor parenting and husbanding, fearing and projecting out conflict. That our society's leaders have traditionally been drawn from such a psychological class raises deep questions.

To Survive is to Adapt

Even though their needs are rarely articulated, children very quickly appraise their situation and adapt their behaviour in order to survive. Such behavioural survival mechanisms are as manifold and various as the human spirit

is creative. Inner strategies seem to be fairly universal and consist in shutting down on feeling and the retreat to a safe place — either in reality, or in the mind. We have no choice but to survive. In face of loneliness, bewilderment and a potentially hostile school environment the adaptive personae, sometimes already born at home, continue into adult life long past their appropriateness and are hard to recognise, accept and change. In our workshops we provide participants with tools and a framework to begin this work.

Double Binds

Supremely difficult for the child is to be abandoned in the new world while his head echoes with what he has been told: '. . . the best days of your life. . . for your own good. . . the making of you. . . it'll be worse for me with you not there . . . ', and so on. Although he may not be aware of what social status his exile confers on his parents, nor how this may spare them from much of the difficult job of parenting, he understands that his exile is desirable, even important, to his parents, and doubtless expensive. But now, like never before, he needs to have it confirmed that he is loved and approved of, for what further abandonment is possible? How can he risk upsetting them and spoiling their plans by saying he doesn't like it . . . and would they listen? So he can either deny his own feelings and experience, or make himself the bad one. This tactic can quickly become a way of life. We have found that some children dissociate from their family and parents, while others idealise their home in a compensatory fantasy, which can get shockingly revoked in the workshops. We have heard how some even wished to be back at school during the holidays to minimise exposure to the parental double-message; at other times we hear how grotesquely dysfunctional could be the family from which the child was released.

The Peer Group — Solidarity, Bullying and Abuse

After the family, the peer group is the next natural point of focus for the child, and at school quickly becomes the locus of meaning. If the group as a whole is to survive the ordeal of boarding school, then unconscious consensus demands that all live in a denial of feeling and vulnerability. Anyone likely to break this code is a threat; and so the group is on the lookout to scapegoat children who exhibit the unwanted feelings of the group. One slip can cost you dearly: nicknames are for life. This tense atmosphere is further complicated by the emergence of sexuality. The constant alertness to ridicule and bullying can produce a character finely attuned to the vulnerability of others and the need to strike first. The adult may find life in an institution — parliament, army, bar, church, even prison — child's play, as it were, after that. Malidoma Somé, in *Of Water and The Spirit*, argues that institutional life removes the need for choices. I would add that wanting and choosing are notoriously difficult where feeling and conflict are avoided.

There is also another side to the stress, for while we have worked with many stories of physical and sexual abuse from staff and students we also hear of great friendships forged under duress. Each school has its own particular culture, and one alert and genuinely loving older person could be a child's lifesaver.

Changes in our Thinking

While we are used to identifying general issues, particularly when questioning the role of such schools in our society, the workshops invariably reveal extraordinary stories to which we listen and respond with awe. I give two recent examples: one man told us how his unusual mental ability was 'rewarded' by being sent away from his siblings and friends — a profound double message which he still feels. A woman described how from her first day at school she lost contact with everything soft and tactile; when she rediscovered colour and texture in her fifties she understood how her interest as a geologist in hard stones had been a compensatory search for this lost world.

We designed the workshops to help people tell their stories and work through survival mechanisms, and to offer a way through the rebellion/compliance polarity. But it seems that they also function as a lens to allow people to look much more deeply at themselves. Often by the end of the course the family becomes a more urgent source of unresolved material; many are asking what it means to be a man or a woman today. Having been unwillingly initiated into a world of repression, many hanker for new rites of passage to serve as rituals of completion and cleansing in order to move on. Malidoma Somé also says that initiation rituals serve the marking of psychological completion and thereby prevent the recycling of low self-esteem processes. For some the course will have partly functioned as that.

Another change in our thinking has been seeing the boarding school issue as a magnifying glass, rather than as purely causal. For example, we talk of the problem of separation, but the tension between bonding and separation is the fundamental human experience. Separation anxiety exists at social, existential and spiritual levels. Needing to belong we identify with our compensatory coping selves and become more and more alienated from our natural selves and others. The boarding school seems to 'pressure cook' whatever tendency the child has to cope with separation anxiety learned at home. There is much in the 'false self' of the Boarding School Survivor which resembles what Bradshaw and Abrams have described as the result of loss of the inner child, but the conditions at boarding school are an intensive laboratory for this development.

It is well known that self-acceptance is the key with inner child work, but hear the dilemma expressed by one BSS man: 'It is easy to love the nine-year-old, but it's hard to love the survivor with his inability to touch or be touched.' The way back for all of us, whatever we've survived, always seems to consist in feeling the avoided pain, accepting our self-betrayal, and finding more fruitful ways to express ourselves. The Boarding School Survivors programme is a step in this direction.

Further Reading

Arnold Mindell, *City Shadows*, Routledge, 1988

Malidoma Somé, *Of Water and the Spirit*, Tarcher Putnam, 1994