A psychotherapist in South Africa: Helping survivors to survive

Len Bloom

Until recently I lived in South Africa with a family of three (sometimes four) emotionally troubled African youngsters, made homeless by the poverty of their fragmented families and community. They had been stigmatised and humiliated by an anti-children, punitive and violently racist society.

I found myself abruptly and unexpectedly turning into a father, mother, psychotherapist and friend, in circumstances that flatly opposed the conservative values and practices of my profession. My large Victorian cottage was transferred into a retreat from an abrasive society, a home for boys who barely knew what a home should be. I had to face an impossible dilemma: to be on both sides of the boys in the family and the usages of society. As a humanist, I could not morally take society's part. I accepted the boys with their conflicting personal qualities: their bravery, street-wise skills and determination to survive *as individuals*, their charm and their elusiveness, their loyalty to one another, and even their petty delinquencies.

I have learned much from the youngsters. I am still learning. I have learned how to cross 'ethnic' barriers without tumbling into the traps of being patronising or bearing a white man's guilt: 'You have learned humanity from us', M once told me. The boys and I have learned how to help one another cope with our vulnerabilities. As a psychotherapist I have appreciated that although

(as Bettelheim warns), love is not enough to heal, it goes a long way towards healing. Understanding (whatever that means), is far from enough. Love, trust, respect for one another's differences, sensitivities, uniqueness and mystery are vital for friendships to last and for psychotherapy to work.

COMING TOGETHER. EARLY DAYS.

'Your house was a cathedral to me!' S announced dramatically shortly after we met. An African post-graduate student and I lived in a middle-class, 'white' area of a university, cathedral town. We were within walking distance of the segregated (mainly African), so-called townships and just off a main road. We often gave coffee and food to hungry, homeless children and teenagers and listened to their stories about hard lives. I've horrified most of our neighbours, and we discovered that we were open to their prurient interest and from time to time, were watched by the police from the house across the road. Twice, our garden was used as a refuge by children frightened by political turmoil that looked dangerous.

In April 1992, late one rainy night there was a persistent knocking at the front door, interrupting calls of 'Is anyone at home?'. An inexperienced burglar? We opened the door (protected, of course, by burglar bars), and in the dim street lights stood an African boy, shivering in cast-off adult clothes. He looked about 10 years old. Nervously, jaunty and courteously he asked for coffee and food. We fed him, he said little and when he left we never expected to see him again. But he reappeared, shared his name, T, shared our dinner and again vanished. The third time he appeared, he was chatty and announced: 'You've got a big house. Can I move in and you can look after me...? I am very clean and quiet'. I was taken aback, but there was a brightness, boldness and a hint of desperation about T that persuaded us reluctantly to agree. A few days later he introduced his friend M, older, frailer and deeply depressed, who looked at the end of his strength. Then, S appeared, a little older than M, silent depressed and pathetically fearful that he might be turned away.

Full house! We now insisted that we met the boys' grandmothers to discuss their future. Two grandmothers came to tears, accepted the situation and my friendship began with the remnants of the families. We agreed the boys might live with us temporarily, that they should keep out of trouble and go to school and that no more children could be introduced. I expected that the boys would soon drift away, but one night, for the first time, T warned me: 'Never forget, Len. We're your kids now'. The boys are 'kids' no longer but I am still sometimes teasingly reminded of that warning.

We settled down. I insisted on regular meals during which I cautiously introduced discussions

about how we could live together, share responsibilities and keep clear of conflicts with neighbours and authority. I was apprehensive and for a time hoped that the boys

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would move on before we ran into conflict with the outside world and between us. I felt that I was 'on probation': whites, however nice they seem to be are dangerously unpredictable. I let the boys know that they were 'on probation' and that we had to learn to trust one another if we were going to live together even for a short time.

After perhaps three months the shy S emerged as a nest-builder. He once had an abandoned shack, named it 'Alabama'. Used as a place to shelter, protect and advise boys homeless like himself — sometimes as many as five. S and M bloomed into imaginative competent caterers, cooks and organisers, S showed talents as a peacemaker. T bustled around, a very intelligent street-wise and resourceful busy body. At the end of about a year I had to go to London temporarily, and I realised that I was going to miss them and they convinced me that they were going to miss I left them my keys and instructions, and we got locked into battles with authority who wanted them 'in care'. We won!

The first night that T slept in the house, he wet his bed. He was apologetic and worried lest we turned him out. We washed the sheets together, and I comforted him explaining that sometimes when our feelings are too much for us we lose control. Then, for a while, he acted-out as a small boy. I had to help him wash his hair and read to him at night until he fell asleep. It dawned on me that I was living three inseparable roles: Father, Mothering-one and Psychotherapist, and that I have to sense how each boy needs a different 'me' as his moods/ attitudes changed. I doubted if was nimble enough to switch roles appropriately. What would happen if I failed? I had little to go on from my experience and education, but I found that I was needing, even welcoming, this stressful and joyful situation. I was forced to ask myself 'who am I?' seven days a week: What sort of person? What does life mean to me? Can I love people?

At first the boys spoke English shyly but well enough for hustling and befriending sympathetic white

university students. This was not enough to cope with the increasingly sophisticated urban South Africa. We decided that English would be our family language, and more rapidly than I thought possible they spoke English wittily and we began to share a family language and jokes. 'Have some symbolic pasta?' a baffled friend might be invited. T has more than once shrewdly observed 'whites should learn to understand us!' More subtle has been our sensitivity to the emotional protests and pleas hidden within conversation. S is particularly quick to hear latent messages. We have all had to feel free to candidly let out our feeling.

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The emotional boundaries between us melted as we came to depend upon one another emotionally and pragmatically, and we got into the unusual habit of being more and more open about our feelings. I could even be angry sometimes without arousing a counter anger, but sometimes counter anger made me respond more like a psychotherapist than a father – but both! As a family we were always aware that we are maverick and that we were (but no longer are) rejected by a suspicious and sometimes hostile neighbourhood. We closed ranks and counseled one another when one or all of us felt threatened.

I still do not know in what ways and to what extent the fact that I am white, foreign, culturally middle-class made a difference to our relationships. I feel that as an alien creature from overseas I have been far less threatening than a South African Whiteman might have been. My age has helped too: 'You're only white on the outside, Len'. It is helpful emotionally that I can sometimes when stressed step back and consciously adopt my professional identity to protect myself. S realizes this, and sometimes tells me to remember that I'm a psychologist when I'm acting too emotionally.

What kept me going? A few days ago the perceptive S reminisced: 'We needed one another. We needed a father. You needed a family', and he gently encouraged me: 'Phone me whenever you feel lonely. Any time.' I may have been kept going because I know he sense that I am silently inviting the 'boys' to do the same.

LIVING TOGETHER

We came together by chance, and I never consciously had a goal for the family. Indeed, I hardly expected it to last. Officials were hostile. I often warned the boys and myself that families usually do not go on forever, but then someone would retort 'You can't resign from being a father'. I have never felt that I have been exploited emotionall by street-wise charmers. It has been emotionally stressful for the boys to create a family and to consciously admit they had no family, though most other children had one. It was hard to accept that a white man – maybe any adult - can care about them as individuals worth befriending, and that he can do so without imposing emotional, moral or religious burdens on them. It was hard for the boys gradually to ease their resentment at the ways that adults had mistreated them. It was hard for me to accept that I could not escape being some sort of model or fantasy for the father that each boy was seeking, and that in a moment of uncontrollable anger would not be 'Len', but a symbolic, nasty white person.

I ask myself now if I have been too sensitive to 'ghetto thinking' – passively accepting fate. Have I been too quick to impel the boys to be assertive, to resist unfair or insensitive adults? But now only J is emotionally slow to leave the 'ghetto'. Brilliant at maths and physics, we are still trying to convince him that he is no longer a stigmatized street child, and he could succeed at university.

Every individual has his idiosyncratic survivor's kit, with its tangle of loving and hating, trusting and mistrusting. The family was a fairly safe, emotional space in which to learn to use one's kit. For example, at first S was charming yet elusive, warily attentive to my emotional ups and downs. He has matured into an intuitive, open, warm, funny and affectionate man, who is still anxious when he feels that he cannot be attached to someone. Very different is J: distant and watchful, anxious when someone is getting too close, then he withdraws – except that when he wanted to reach and be reached by me, he would come home, late and slightly drunk, sit close to me and talk passionately about the raw deal society had dealt him, often until 2 or 3 in the morning. I could only sit and listen: he needed me to say nothing, but he would go to bed submissively when I was too tired to go on. Different again is T, superficially the toughest, certainly most shrewd, and controlled until his pain conquers his controls and he breaks down and shows his distress by tears and apologies. And D is self-centred, dignified, yet anxious, aggressive, trusts and loves few.

There was no need to reconstruct their childhood and to allow them to relive it; conventional psychotherapy was inappropriate, and was hardly possible in our family setting. They

needed emotional space in which to invent themselves as growing children accepted by a supportive family in which I had to be each boy's own invented father, as close to each boy as he needed me to be. I learned from them individually how to express the respect that they had never had, the affection they craved for and could tolerate, the concern from an adult that they had rarely felt. Sometimes, of course, I made mistakes. Anxious that I'm not helping enough I could be too directive, invasive, too quick to intervene and interrupt. I only knew if I was doing the wrong thing if a boy froze, withdrew, or flared up at me. More delicate was the fear that a boy was too engaging or too hard to reach so that he is either kept at a distance or unconsciously drawn too close. Fondness is natural, so too is antipathy, so there was always the unpredictable danger of bouncing from one to the other. I am still uncertain if I have maintained the most therapeutic distance from the sometimes very hard-to-reach J. For the other boys my naturally mercurial temperament seems to work. Maybe it was better than formal psychotherapy for them to be close to an adult who was interesting emotionally, not bland, affectionate but not clogging, supportive without being suffocating. I have tried to make the family an open emotional space where the boys can work out their feelings towards the world of adults, and their identities in the wider society. I valued the boys; they have come to value themselves.

Hardest for me to reveal – both as a parent and as a psychotherapist – has been how to protect my emotional boundaries. Working and living with spirited youngsters establishing *their* freedom to re-

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enact *their* experiences and establish their emotional boundaries and identities it was easy to be overwhelmed. There were two threats: one was to be seduced by charm and compassion, the other was to fall into Searles' trap. Searles' trap is to become unwittingly 'a gratified participant', a co-actor and, at worst, finding oneself falling for the invitation to reverse roles, to join in the 'old boys together' game and unconsciously to fail to accept that one is an adult with

an adult's experiences and insight to share. It is lovely being accepted by the children-no-longer. But it is lovely because I am accepted as Len, a friend, a father but not as another but older kid.

I was recently again warned: 'You can't resign from being a father', implying that this relationship is still being valued by the children-no-longer. The 'grandchildren' are another bond between us: closeness is close; the sometimes pathetic dependency has eased.

We remain close. I care about the family and its members, but I do not feel that I want them to be children again. The four little 'grandchildren' satisfy my sense of belonging. But do any of the youngsters want me to want them to be children again? I feel that S does; he has been more wounded by his childhood than the others. Most people long to retain memories of the loveliness of childhood and to repress its uncertainties and unpleasantness. Emotional problems erupt because the depressions and horrors of childhood, and anger with past neglect never entirely fade. Some traumata wound some people too deeply. Not only do individuals have to change dramatically but their social world, too, if psychotherapy is to work.

But have we grown too close? Too dependent upon one another? It is for the boys also to judge. We enjoy being together, but we live our own lives as well as having a life of family members. That there are now four little ones to care and provide for and love seems a pretty good sign of reasonable maturity and independence.

And me? Am I holding on too long? Who means too much to me to let go? Am I too old for this exhausting sort-of-psychotherapy? Probably – but do I need to switch off? Did Freud or Ferenczi? I was aware that I tried to be a 'good' father as well as a competent psychotherapist. Was I? S senses my self-questioning and tries to reassure me – what more might I have done? Pressed the boys harder to finish their schooling – the 'brain wash' as T calls it – and to take any employment, even if it would have been dead-end of their insufficient education? Perhaps I could not have pushed them harder. Perhaps they would have vanished if I did.

Conclusions

The boys shared a dreadful childhood and found their three answers to the one problem – how to survive. 'We aren't jail bird, Len', said S with mingled pride and a little surprise. Looking back, what I did was to rehumanise four dehumanized boys. No! They had to fight a dehumanizing world, and they asked me, allowed me, to help them. We have come together sharing a reality that South Africa has not yet come to accept: that individuals matter more than social definitions. What should life mean to any child or adult? That their life is important. We have learned that from one another, and a few people in our town have learned that from us.