Working with gay boarding school survivors

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In the past five years I have worked in groups with about 40 fellow boarding school survivors and I have corresponded, spoken and shared experiences with dozens of others. More recently, I have worked as a psychotherapist with around twenty, most of whom have been gay, lesbian or bisexual. It was in September 2004 that I started to run workshops, the subject of this article. These were designed specifically for gay men, like myself, who felt that their boarding school experience was difficult to come to terms with and had had a long-term negative impact.

At that point it was exactly ten years since I had entered therapy. When I started that journey, I was unaware that my anxiety, isolation and sense of failure were linked to my schooling. Since then, I have oscillated between anger about the damage done to me and insistence that I have little genuinely to complain about. Struggling with this duality is common. Boarders can buy into the myth that we were special and fortunate. It is a tenacious introject. I find it less painful, less shameful, to 'defend my parents' and maintain the story that I was happy, than to admit that my daily reality at school was tedium and torment. If I do voice my real feelings, I may do so apologetically.

The major selling point of boarding schools is that they instil 'character', self-confidence and self-reliance. I think this claim deserves to be questioned. It is probably true that boarders can grow into competitive and domineering adults, and these are qualities well rewarded in our society. However, the cost in many cases is surely too great, in terms of the trauma of early abandonment and institutionalisation, the symptoms of which are clearly seen in adults who are hardened, pressured, do not permit themselves normal human weakness or failure, and are resistant to loving and being loved.

Nurturing parents know that their children are dependent on their protection and love. They set boundaries to contain their children and support them to become gradually less dependent, by individuating, by making choices and developing their adult form. Crucially, this is an organic process that needs to be at a pace appropriate to the individual. Boarding can be damaging because it takes parents and family out of the picture and substitutes premature independence, combined with dependency on the school, an overweening, ersatz authority. An institution is not designed to meet a child's emotional needs, and the child may conclude that their emotions are unimportant or a mere nuisance.

It is important that more therapists are aware of the scars that ex-boarders may carry, very often hidden from view. 'Now that I realize', one client said to me, 'that my problems of low self esteem, depression, fear of intimacy and difficulty with relationships are classic by-products of the boarding experience, I feel that much of my previous therapy was wide of the mark. 'The surface the client presents can be quite polished and urbane. When I myself meet other ex-boarders, I tend to connect through humour and am skilled at appearing confident and tough; I have to show that I survived. I was conditioned from childhood not to ask for emotional support, nor to share unhappiness. To talk about my needs or vulnerability at boarding school would have been unthinkably 'sissy' or 'soft' - especially taboo given my awareness at some level of being gay.

The key thing to note is that, at an early age, we had every significant relationship abruptly, unnecessarily cut off. Mothers, fathers, siblings, cousins, grandparents, friends, pets, home, neighbourhood, community were suddenly lost. (I use the word 'unnecessarily' advisedly: of course there are rare exceptions where family life is so dysfunctional that boarding comes as a relief by comparison.) The breach of relationships has implications, for example, when an ex-boarder grows up and comes out to his family; the healthy connection, which might support a person in the process of coming out, has already been radically broken. Not surprisingly, 'nesting' and the security of a home can feel extremely important and healing, and many of us have found new communities and 'families of choice' which have gone some way to filling the gap left by the rupture in our childhood.

A vital part of the healing work is making the effort to imagine - or to remember, if we are ex-boarders - the shock felt by the child on first arrival at school. In a sense, that is to make contact with the child before he adapted to his new environment and shut down his authentic, feeling part. 'I didn't complain to my parents' is the message I hear from ex-boarders when asked to recall their first hours at school, 'Because that would have let them down.' This is a very wrong thing for a child to have been taught. To be vulnerable or powerless should not invite contempt, and to need love and reassurance is human and natural.

The child who arrives at boarding school is well aware that his parents,

having invested a great deal in the success of this project, expect him to be calm and courageous. Resourcefully, he may come up with a piece of double-bind reasoning which runs something like this: 'I am privileged to have been sent away from home, I'm lonely and I'm dying to be touched and comforted but I'm not going to ask for that, my parents have sacrificed themselves and sent me away because they love me, and I know that they love me because they tell me so, therefore the experience that I am aware of having is not real, or is not to be trusted, or there is something wrong with me. It is not possible to imagine that my parents have been selfish, cruel or ambitious for themselves. I must be ungrateful, undeserving, rotten to the core.'

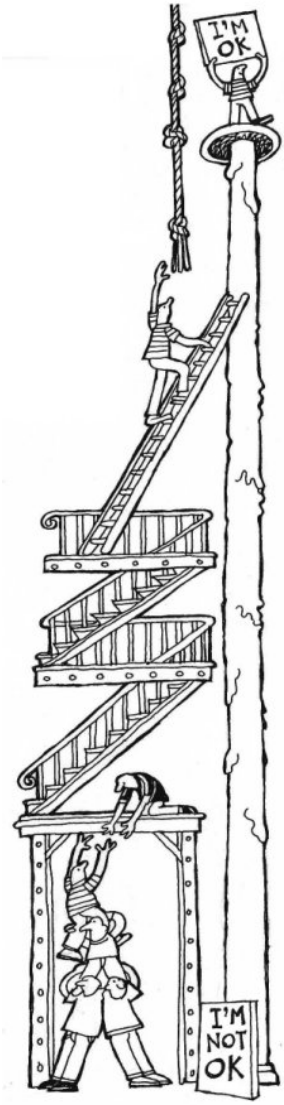
At the same time the child puts an immense, instinctive effort into not crying, disciplining and deadening himself, strangling his throat, tightening his chest and restricting his breathing so as to hold back his tears and shut off the waves of his grief and homesickness. This way of using himself becomes habituated, and is evident both when I work with adult ex-boarders and when I reflect on my own somatic self-organization. It becomes what the child, and then the adult, recognizes as his identity. It corresponds to what Nick Duffell has termed the 'strategic survival personality'.

Duffell quotes a client as once having said to him, 'I became a strategic person, always on the lookout for danger and how to turn every situation to my best advantage. I still do it. It's exhausting. I don't know how to stop doing it.' This fits with my own experience and also what people have reported to me.

One of the manifestations of the 'survival personality' is extreme poles of control and chaos. 'I look to all the world as if I'm fully in control, but inside me is turbulence', one person said to me. 'I try to deal with everything on my own, won't let anyone help me. 'It seems important to act competent, and not to feel one's own chaotic feelings. Several people have told me of 'seeking refuge in work', over-committing or over-extending themselves, being addicted to work and/or to the abuse of drink, drugs, food or sex. Life feels shortened, because they do not allow themselves to stop and breathe.

I increasingly connect this squeezing of time to the conditioning of school timetabling. A non-boarding youngster typically luxuriates in free, unregulated time, whenever he or she is at home and particularly at weekends for example. This can almost be seen as the teenager's developmental task, to 'hang out', as they wait for their adult identity to form itself. It is hard to convey to someone who has not grown up under a tight, institutional regime, what it is like to have no moment which is not precisely allocated to one demand or another, every space filled lest, heaven forbid, the pupil have some self-contact, and access to some emotion be it sadness, anger or lust. I do not know to what extent this pertains today, but it was certainly formerly part of the process of teaching pupils to keep marching on, putting up with whatever

privations and self-denial might be required.



Greasy Pole - David Shenton

Thus boarding school survivors tend to be stoic and ever-enduring. They have been 'trained to put up with a lot', as a workshop participant expressed it to me. They are inclined to deprecate the information in their body about their needs, impulses, appetites and preferences. They often lack a subtle, sensitive feel for their own boundaries. The structures of traditional boarding school actively discourage the normal, organic exploration and discovery of boundaries. 'There are rules for everything', one client told me, 'and you won't get far if you question them, however eccentric. You cannot go here, you mustn't go there, but there is no way you can stop people from invading your private space. In fact, there isn't any privacy. It's like the army, but for immature, impressionable children'.

Another said, 'I can never belong to anything, because for so many years I was forced to belong to the school. I wore their uniform, obeyed their rules, jumped out of bed and went running to the chapel or the refectory whenever they rang their bell. 'And poignantly this person added, 'I would rather live like a hermit than have anyone ever tell me what to do and when to do it.'

Boarding schools seem to produce compliant conformists and sabotaging rebels, both externally referenced. Both types are reactive to their environment, rather than responsive to themselves. Sometimes both co-exist as sub-

personalities within the same individual. I am aware of this dichotomy in myself and watch for it in the therapy room. Up to a certain point, one can expect the client to comply or co-operate, but, sooner or later, the rebel side asserts him or herself, absolutely refusing to be moulded and very happy to 'cock a snook'. I see this not as 'resistance' to be overcome, but as an attempt to make a personal boundary, which I will support in any way that I can, for example by facilitating the client to express, and to have a bodily experience of, their anger. It is part of the process of developing their sense of self, which was disturbed by being separated from home.

Men who were sent away at a variety of ages, from seven up to about fourteen, have attended my workshops. They were at boarding school from the 1940s through to the early 1990s, so pre-Wolfenden Report up to the era of Section 28. They include men who did, and men who did not, identify as gay when they were at school, and others who had at least a dim awareness of their gayness. Some are still uncertain of their sexual orientation. Some had sexual relations at school, and this was not always consenting. All were at single-sex boarding schools, and all experienced their schools as profoundly homophobic environments. Their parents, in some cases disappointed by their failure to align with male gender norms, had no doubt sent them away, in part, to 'make a man of them'. They went to a place where silence around gayness suggested a real sense of dread. Sex was punishable by expulsion - the threat of a second exile - and only took place under pretence of machismo and coldness. My memory, and generally that of the people I have worked with, is of repressive, austere, joyless institutions from which everything tactile, sensual or voluptuous was deliberately excluded. 'Ironically, there was plenty of sex in the Latin poetry that was force-fed to us, 'one man pointed out, 'but I kept myself safely emasculated and ignorant of what it really meant. "Amo" was just a verb to be conjugated'. Masculinity was policed from the outside and self-policed. 'If you were identified as a 'cock watcher' or a 'perv', at the very least you were derided and threatened. 'Some attempted to keep themselves safe by adopting an exaggeratedly firm handshake, with no hint of a limp wrist, and doing whatever else they could to pass themselves off as heterosexual.

The author Paul Monette, a gay boarding school survivor, firmly believed for years that sex and love could not co-exist. 'As long as I kept them apart, love would be sexless and sex loveless, endlessly repeating the cycle of self-denial and self-abuse'. Several clients have indicated their aversion to intimacy. This can manifest as engaging in furtive or dangerous sexual activities, obsessing about an unavailable partner, or withdrawing and isolating all together. Others report anxiety and/or physical tension that prevent a satisfying and pleasurable experience of sex within a loving relationship, which may be because sexuality has been split off from the rest of the personality.

'I yearn for a sustained, warm, intimate relationship', one gay ex-boarder told me. His behaviour, however, shows as contradictory and ambivalent. It would seem that, in common with other ex-boarders, he avoids anger, conflict, play, spontaneity, weakness, and being open to possible rejection - all constituents of intimacy. 'It is almost like an allergic reaction, whenever I get close to a possible partner, or even think about intimacy', another client has reported.

If and when they do get into intimate relationships, survivors relate to their partner in a controlled and controlling manner. 'It's the difference between being committed with all my heart and soul, being passionate and honest, and saying what I'm thinking, or, on the other hand, always making calculations and judgments about what I'll get away with', one man explained. 'I want to ensure that he doesn't leave me, and also that he doesn't discover the truth about me, how bad I am - this is an absolute 'must', I will do anything to achieve it'. To me, this has the flavour of real, urgent, life-and-death need for survival, the 'strategic survival personality' in action. Honesty, empathy and sharing may appear to be present in the relationship, but at some level it is a masquerade. The ex-boarder is playing a secret, clever game - a 'role', a 'pretence', as some described it to me - censoring his true thoughts and feelings, clinging to his partner while passing himself off as a secure and confident person. After all, he got a lot of practice 'passing off' at boarding school.

Sometimes it needs to be explained to ex-boarders that what they have been engaged in is a pretence of loving. As survivors, they have learned to care mainly or exclusively about themselves, whereas having a real, gratifying, loving relationship involves action and effort. 'I know that I will be really healed when I can make love to, with, for and about my partner', someone movingly said to me.

Relationships require us to manage both closeness and distance, to regulate our contact and ourselves. The people I have worked with find this difficult. To anyone who has not been at a traditional boarding school, or has not had an analogous experience of complete abandonment, missing an absent friend or lover is a manageable experience. Some survivors, on the other hand, find it intolerable to hold the other at a distance. Separating from the other is like being emptied out. Better to switch off loving feelings, than attempt to cherish and sustain them in absentia. That is the dilemma. 'After the experience of being incarcerated at school, literally counting out the days, months and years', one person said to me, 'it's just too painful to let myself miss my partner'. Missing and longing have to be abolished as experiences, and endings or transitions erased. Thus there is no continuous thread of relationship; each new meeting entails starting afresh. This is something a therapist needs to keep feeding back to his client about, finding ways to support a sense of continuity of relationship, until hopefully in time the client begins to

have feelings about it and makes different choices.

Quite often, survivors move between extreme poles of closeness and aloofness, impulsiveness and caution, in a way that others can experience as teasing or confusing. I have experienced myself being absolutely determined not to get close to anyone and then, if occasionally I did, being equally determined to cling to the other as if it were a matter of life and death for me. This is connected with the poor sense of boundaries and insubstantial sense of self that characterise the survivor. We cannot get and stay close to another person, and in right relationship with ourselves, if we do not know where we end and they begin. In order to stay, we need to know that we are whole, and that we are free to leave.

The workshops have been quite unique gatherings. It is unusual to invite a group of gay ex-boarders to come together on the basis of their common history. The discovery that one is not alone can be transformative. One thing that has struck me forcibly about the participants has been their truthfulness, their strong appetite for contact and connection with one another, and their evident delight in finding a safe place to share their stories, their feelings and their reflections on the ways in which boarding has impacted on their adult lives. The feedback has been that they have felt lighter, liberated, relieved of a burden, unblocked, stronger, and more in touch with their own sadness and gentleness, having had an opportunity to get to know others who survived a similar childhood experience. Men who are used to hiding, feeling small or invisible in groups of other men, report having had a powerfully different experience on the workshops, after breaking their silence about their hurt and anger. They were willing to give to each other, and receive from each other, affection, appreciation and acceptance, which they might ordinarily find intolerable. For me it has been key to reverse the efficient suppression of emotion, which was supported by the boarding experience. Ex-boarders can flirt with feelings but then briskly move on. Working with them, it is important to let them have space for their feelings. In particular, they are entitled to feel rage, and it needs airing at some time. In that way, they can come to a place where they feel clear, and can celebrate themselves and feel proud rather than ashamed.

I want to acknowledge that boarding schools are beginning to move with the times. Whether they are any more than 'children's care homes' for the 'privileged', even now, I will leave for others to judge. For some outgoing fourteen or fifteen year-olds, the experience of boarding might be a life-enhancing adventure. For the younger ones, I can only express some relief and pleasure that there tend to be more frequent and longer visits home, more fluid interaction with parents and friends, mobile phones and email to stay in touch with, and counsellors and other sources of confidential and sensitive support. I am told that the modern

curriculum generally includes discussion about sexuality, feelings and relationships, that the competitive ethos is softening, that there is a kinder, less authoritarian, less bullying atmosphere. In today's boarding schools, I am informed, to be gay no longer automatically means to be ashamed and invisible. Thus, the worst effects of separation from family are being mitigated, though those whose parents are distant, whether geographically or emotionally, will continue to struggle, as will those who are first sent away at a young age. The younger the child, the more likely it is that removal from family life, parental care and all the attachments of home will preclude them getting what they need in terms of reassurance, safety and acceptance - in a word, love.

Acknowledgement

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my debt to the great pioneer in the field of boarding school survival work, Nick Duffell, whose ideas and experience underpin and provide a framework for my thinking, and who has taught me that the deep wound to our souls deserves recognition and honouring. I also give warm thanks to Richard Nickols, who joined me in facilitating the Spring 2005 workshop.

Further Reading

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The Association of Boarding School Survivors is contactable at P.O. Box 3027 Brighton BN1 2BZ or via www.abss.org.uk and for information on Nick Duffell's workshops see www.boardingschoolsurvivors.co.uk

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