Boarding School: a place of privilege or sanctioned persecution?

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'Why do we call it a tragedy when a child is taken into care and a privilege if he's sent off to prep school?' Katherine Whitehorn, The Observer, 16 Sept. 1990

In exploring the opening question, my enquiry covers some - but certainly not all - of the ways in which a boarder may be emotionally and psychologically affected by being sent off to school. Thus, the first part of the article presents on the one hand, an outline of authority and how it operates in boarding schools and on the other, the potential impact exposure to such conflict may have on the child, including the types of internal strategies the child comes to employ in order to deal with the situation.

The second part of the article examines the potential implications for the child of parental sanctioning of this experience and what meaning the child can come to give to the 'silent other' - the parent. This is then contrasted with the reparative potential for the ex-boarder of the therapeutic space and relationship.

Where appropriate, reference to Holocaust literature has been made in respect to these themes.

Authority

Authority, with all its potential for abuse and conflict, manifests itself in several ways in a boarding school environment: the groups are many, the hierarchies complex and the motivations seemingly infinite

and perplexing. For the purpose of this paper however, I will limit my reflections to the authority dynamics between the peer group and individual.

Rupert Brown's distinction between *interpersonal* and *intergroup* behaviour - acting as an individual and acting as a group member wherein '*who* one is as a person is much less important than the uniform one is wearing …' (Brown, 1996, p. 535) - delineates, in my opinion, the underlying paradigm of conflict inherent in institutions such as boarding schools, prisons and camps. Furthermore, since an individual's existence in these structures is very much defined by groups - which in a school environment can be marked by uniform, house, year, class, dorm, status, sports team, etc. - it follows that there be ample potential for the group to eclipse the individual and his or her needs.

So, what facilitates a peer group to establish its authority over an individual? In the first instance, the transition from a home environment to one defined by unfamiliar customs, codes and initiation can expose an already vulnerable child to great uncertainty and humiliation. It is after all difficult - if not near impossible - for the child to protect itself when feeling ill equipped through lack of experience and knowledge of how to handle shaming rites, seemingly random ridiculing and (officially prohibited) 'fagging' - running errands for seniors. And in terms of my own experiences at school, it was what I suffered at the hands of senior girls in the first days and weeks that remains most resistant to psychological and emotional digestion. Thus, the trauma of initiation can be said to be closely linked to what the concentration camp survivor, Primo Levi, describes as '[the difficulty] to defend oneself against a blow for which one is not prepared.' (Levi, 1989, p. 24)

Since power - and with that, authority - relies on a hierarchical structure, it follows that everyone bar the top echelon is exposed to another's exercising of authority. This results in a cumulative burden that is passed on down the ranks until it meets with the incomer - a psychological phenomenon observed by Primo Levi:

> The despised crowd of seniors was prone to recognise in the new arrival a target on which to vent its humiliation, to find compensation at his expense, to build for itself and at his expense a figure of a lower rank on whom to discharge the burden of the offences received from above. (Levi, 1989, p. 25)

Thus, in the oppressed not being able to defend themselves against the abuse lavished on them from above and thereby release their individual and collective frustration, they seek an alternative outlet in the form of the newcomer, the less experienced, the vulnerable - the scapegoat. In other words, they become oppressors themselves. This albeit temporary freeing of burden is illustrated by a personal anecdote which although relating to a peer and not to a newcomer, depicts in my view the potential for extreme behaviour in extreme situations: I recollect with horror, sadness and shame,

banging the head of a defenceless classmate against the side of a basin as she was washing her hair. The feeling I remember as a 13-year-old bewildered and raging soul was that of an intolerable bursting sensation which found expression in the only physical acting out I allowed myself in all those years. This girl, in that moment, was made to bear my agony.

What is more, although authority - be it of peers and/or of institution - is often established in the name of ritual and tradition, it is bound by a complicity that leaves the boarder unable, or at best reluctant, to question and fight it for the risks are great and unpredictable. The ensnaring of the individual in such a tightly woven web of conflict and silence with its resultant lack of freedom serves to further fuel the authority dynamic; a spiralling that is described as follows by another camp survivor, Bruno Bettelheim: 'no prisoner felt really free, but he felt the lack of freedom less if he had absolute power to make the others jump'. (Bettelheim, 1991 (1960), p. 184)

Equally, the exercising of authority in a boarding school setting is closely correlated to identity and is illustrated by this 17-year-old boarder's self-appraisal, 'I'm nearing the top of the school but I have no authority and am nobody - I want authority and to be someone'.(Lambert, 1968, p. 152) Such sentiments illustrate, in my opinion, the double bind of authority: the need to have authority in order to be *someone* for otherwise you are powerless and a *nobody*. And since, according to Erich Fromm, 'authority is not a quality one person "has", in the sense that he has property or physical qualities, [but] refers to an interpersonal relation in which one person looks upon another as somebody superior to him' (Fromm, 1960 (1942), p. 141), it follows that a child can only be *someone* through the measure of power he or she has over another.

In addition, this someone-nobody dichotomy is compounded by authority also being sanctioned and granted by staff; that is to say, if a boarder has not been proffered the mantle of authority in the guise of prefect or captain (or *Kapo,* in the case of camps), he or she can surmise that they are a nobody in the staff's eyes either. The conflict between privilege, function and identity plagued my senior years at school with upholding a position of authority compromising my integrity beyond comfort but demotion through rebellion feeling punishing and frightening.

The child…

> I was once a child,
> Three years ago,
> That child who longed for other worlds.
> But now I am no more a child
> For I have learned to hate
> I am a grown-up person now
> I have known fear.
>
> Hanuš Hachenburg, 1993, p. 20
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> (Hanuš Hachenburg was born in Prague on July 12, 1929, and deported to Terezin on October 24, 1942. He died on December 18, 1943, in Auschwitz)

Since leaving school I have been plagued by a variety of nightmares that are reoccurring in theme if not in actual content - namely escape, helplessness, fear, judgement, incarceration, chasings, kidnap, etc. Not too dissimilar preoccupation and anxiety is echoed by this seventeen-year-old boarder who worries that 'the school like the Church appears to emphasise external conformity to the exclusion of individual freedom. How can I be free without cutting myself off or selling my soul?' (Lambert, 1968, p. 279) If an environment is such that it eclipses the individual's needs through the use of a locus of control that is external to him or her, i.e. through authority, how does the boarder come to tolerate the anxieties described above?

In his work with boarding school survivors, Nick Duffell (2000) describes in detail the boarder's use of a *strategic survival personality*, a mechanism illustrated by a client: '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.' (Duffell, 2000, p. 10) Such a reorganising of personality can take many forms but perhaps one of the most common responses is that of conformity. However, copying the behaviour of peers is, as Bruno Bettelheim warns, not without consequence as 'this copied behaviour, not being in line with his own make-up, weakens his integration and he grows less and less able to respond with autonomy to new change.' (Bettelheim, 1991 (1960), p. 79) In this context, the belief that boarding school can be the 'making' of someone is, then, somewhat nonsensical since the limited opportunity for autonomous behaviour with its resultant conforming behaviour actually serves to undermine the process of personal growth. This is aptly put by this seventeen-year old boy:

> I am naturally lazy. I walk into school and lie down on a conveyor belt. I am carried along, stamped, have pieces cut of me, bits stuck on, am encased in exam certificates and emerge at the other end capable of becoming top of my profession I go into. The temptation to just be carried along is great, and the fewer questions you ask, the further you get. (Lambert, 1968, p. 365)

The seduction of the conveyor belt is hauntingly familiar to me - no questions, no problems. But no questions also means a burying of self; a kind of internal death or, at best, a half life - a process poignantly appraised by Fraser Harrison in his reflections on boarding:

> For most of us, …, this [repression] was the beginning of that process by which our feelings were first numbed and then disconnected, giving us the distinctive quality of the boarding-school 'man'. At all event, I am sure something vital was killed off inside me during this period which I have never been able to revive. (Harrison, 1990 (1989), p. 68)

The resulting amputation of feelings is sobering, and in my view, worthy of urgent attention

by educationalists and parents alike.

Maslow states that, 'the primal choice, the fork in the road, then, is between others' and one's own self. If the only way to maintain the self is to lose others, then the ordinary child will give up the self.' (Maslow, 1999, p. 60) How can a child reconcile a conflict of such import: avoid losing others and the safety associated *while* not losing him/herself? One response may be to split; the Winnicottian split between the true and false self is apparent in Bettleheim's self-analysis: 'it seems that a split was soon forced upon me, the split between the inner self that might be able to retain its integrity, and the rest of the personality that would have to submit and adjust for survival.' (Bettelheim, 1991 (1960), pp. 126-7) Otherwise put, survival takes the form of a retiring inner self that represents the true, core self which is cushioned by an external or false self that has made the necessary adaptations to accommodate the environment. Winnicott observes that

> compliance brings immediate rewards and adults only too easily mistake compliance for growth. The maturational processes can be by-passed by a series of identifications, so that what shows clinically as false, acting self, a copy of someone perhaps; and what could be called a true or essential self becomes hidden, and becomes deprived of living experience. (Winnicott, 1965, p.102)

Thus, the copycat behaviour - moulded and defined by institutional ideals and authority - promotes the forming of an adapted self which not only results in a suppression and loss of self for the child but also in a significant misinterpretation by parents who associate this change with the 'making' of their children.

I have had the great, albeit emotionally challenging, fortune to re-read my school letters home, and I quote from a letter from my housemistress to my mother following an emergency operation at the age of 11 when I was at the time in the care of guardians and far away from my mother who at the time lived abroad: 'needless to say, she [myself] has been very grown-up and sensible about this experience, and we are pleased with her'. This raises a number of questions for me: was she *pleased* with me because I had spared her and my peers exposure to any messy feelings that may distress them? Did she say this to protect my mother? My tentative conclusion is that both were true and in my first letter home after this ordeal, I too fall into a conspiratorial role whereby I assure my mother that 'I am perfectly fine'. These are curious non-disclosures and bring me to look at what the implications are for the child living in silence.

Conspiracy of silence

The child's silence that enables survival and adaptation is only one aspect of the silent vacuum that enshrouds him or her, for - as the cries from the Warsaw ghetto so hauntingly express: 'the world is silent; the world knows and stays silent' (Bettelheim, 1991 (1960), p. xvii). The child's world, namely the home, is also silent. And it is

this conspiracy of silence that I would now like to examine: the world is silent *but* so are we.

By way of example, I have only been able to find *one* reference to my unhappiness in the seven years of weekly epistles home and any mention of bullying, loneliness, need, confusion, etc. is noticeably absent. Fraser Harrison outlines the fears associated with exposure as follows:

> to complain would surely be to offend them, and that would alienate the only people on whom I could rely to protect me. …. I yearned for the company of the very people who had banished me, and yet I was frightened of losing their love by telling them how much I needed it. (Harrison, 1990 (1989), p. 67)

Many people have asked me why I didn't tell my mother of my unhappiness, a question I still struggle to find an answer to. But it is true that my letters resound with protection; protecting my mother - and quite possibly myself - from the truth because any protestations could endanger the by then fragile and only thread of love available to me.

If, for the child, complaining equates with rejecting his or her parents' gift and thereby with possible loss of their love, how does the young mind deal with the situation? One possibility is to conclude that he or she is bad - that they were so bad, they had to be banished. Another response is to gradually de-attach. Fraser Harrison says to this, 'the only cure, and it was a protracted business, was to learn indifference; that is to stop loving your loved ones'. (Harrison, 1990 (1989), p. 66) The oscillating between coded cries for help and de-attachment are familiar to me and it was the latter that won out in the long run: rejecting my mother, my home and, at intervals, the country I grew up in. The feelings were those of home being an abstract place that I was ushered to at intervals and which had lost any sense of safety and belonging. In short, an alien place.

In his or her attempt to puncture the silence brought by such de-attachment, the child may come to draw on a creative resource: the turning to *ersatz* figures. These can take many forms, an example of which is given by this seven-year-old boy: 'my Teddy helps me when I cry, it is from home, he's a bit old but I like him, Mummy always tucks us up and we say our prayers. I worry 'cause next year when I am in the big boys dormitories they take teddies away and I shall be by myself'. (Lambert, 1968, p. 217) It is difficult not to be moved by this child's loneliness - it is Teddy, a soothing transitional object, that provides him with the unconditional love perhaps once experienced at home and that may well be taken away from him. Equally, a surrogate source of comfort can, especially in younger years, be sought in teaching and house staff.

The boarder's isolation from parents and home also means that the adolescent is less able to test his or her natural destructive and aggressive tendencies without the fear of being struck by authority's vicious and at times arbitrary hand. The absence of safe experimentation of boundaries is not, however, without consequence because 'if parent-figures abdicate, then the adolescents must make a jump to false maturity and lose their greatest asset: freedom to have ideas and to act on impulse' (Winnicott, 1991 (1971) p. 150). In other words, the

adolescent's inexperience of an adult figure who is able to 'survive' the tussling search of self leaves the child struggling to separate and individuate. This 'jump to false maturity' captures in my opinion a paradox: for although physically separate from parents or primary caregivers, it is this very separation at a crucial time in the adolescent's development that frustrates the process of internal separation - the 'me versus not me' experience. This brings me to examine the role of therapy and its reparative potential of offering a 'present' other.

It feels like coming home

Primo Levi describes a dream he had in Auschwitz where his sister walks away from his story, leaving him with 'a desolating grief, … like certain barely remembered pains of one's early infancy' (Levi, 1987 (1979), p. 66). Where, in the search to ease such intense grief and pain, can the ex-boarder take the 'unlistened-to story'?

I remember looking around the room at the end of my first session with my therapist and tearfully saying, *It feels like coming home*. The relief at finding a space that has over time gradually allowed the silence and loneliness of all those years to slowly dissipate has been enormous - for after all, as she recently said, the tears I bring had nowhere to go, they had no home to go to.

Equally, I think it no accident that much of Nick Duffell's work with ex-boarders is through therapeutic groups and workshops. For me, groups continue to feel challenging, exposing and unsafe but the concern and interest shown towards me by both therapy group facilitators and peers has helped appease my fears and allow a gradual breaking of the silence.

So, how does therapy provide a homecoming for many ex-boarders? In a paper called 'Metapsychological and Clinical Aspects of Regression' (Winnicott, 1975 (1958), pp. 285-6), Winnicott espouses the concept of the 'holding environment'. Although it is not possible here to list all twelve items mentioned, his remark that 'there is a very marked similarity between all these things and the ordinary task of parent', points to the need for the therapist to take on certain aspects of parenting. And since the ex-boarder's experience of being parented is often somewhat deficient or lacking, it is all the more pertinent that the therapist working with this client group seeks to facilitate a safe 'being-with' environment. Empathetic resonance and unconditional positive regard are, I believe, key ingredients here, for in 'caring for the client as a *separate* person, with permission for him to have his own feelings and experiences', (Rogers, 1961, p. 283), the traumatised ex-boarder can come closer to owning and thereby integrating feelings which were previously denied or cut off in the name of survival. Equally, a safe therapeutic space can allow for some resolution of the conflict between a longing for intimacy on the one hand, and an exiling silence on the other.

However, given the nature of the defences used by the ex-boarder, and in particular, the skilled use of the false self, the informing function of transference and countertransference is not to be underestimated. This is illustrated by the work with a client who was sent to school at the age of seven. A year or so into therapy, the therapist became aware of a need to scream which, as the she humbly acknowledges, was initially missed and only picked up later in relation to the client's physical deprivation suffered as a young child:

> If I had given them [activities involving movement and touch] more weight, my sense of frustration and the feeling that I wanted to scream might have alerted me rather sooner to the over-developed 'false self' which I was encountering in the consulting room. This competent and socialised aspect of Linda had taken her from being an enraged and crying abandoned child to being Head Girl. In the consulting room as well, misery and fury were suppressed, hidden behind a polite, appreciative and concerned demeanour. Although I had intimations of this state of affairs, Linda's intelligence and apparent concern for me made it particularly difficult to name and engage with the primitive feelings that lay beneath the surface (Turp, 2001, p. 158).

Linda's sophisticated and apparently well-maintained 'good girl' mask captures, in my view, the need for therapeutic vigilance: the false self, with all its social adeptness, had managed to seduce the therapist until the countertransferential screams exposed its trickery.

So, although the false self enables many to manage in the world and at times lead what society may regard to be very successful lives, part of the therapeutic challenge could be said to entail two principal elements: firstly, to identify and draw awareness to the costly use of defences such as the false self through, among other things, transference and countertransference, and secondly, to allow the rage around abandonment, powerlessness and deprivation that cower behind the *strategic survival personality* to emerge in a containing way and become integrated. This work can be done in a variety of creative ways, including through the use of metaphor, dreamwork, painting and drawing, sand play, body work, 'two-chair' work, imagery, etc. Equally the use of therapeutic letters can allow the anger towards parents to be contained and diffused in a non-conflictual way.

If, as Maslow says, therapy 'can gratify his [the client's] basic needs for safety, belongingness, love and respect, so that he can feel unthreatened, autonomous, interested and spontaneous and thus dare to choose the unknown,' (Maslow, 1999, p. 67), the reparative and conscious gratification of basic needs can allow the boarding school survivor to heal and go beyond the previous arresting of growth and self-actualisation. I have, in respect to this, likened the therapeutic journey to an archaeological dig where seemingly random parts of the self are revealed which at times connect and at others not but which all teasingly slowly - and painfully - make for a bigger picture. This process of connecting *in the presence of another* enables the ex-boarder to inhabit more of his or her inner landscape and with that, to feel more real.

Conclusion

> I am not a mechanism, an assembly of various sections.
> And it is not because the mechanism is working wrongly,
> that I am ill.
> I am ill because of wounds to the soul,
> to the deep emotional self
> and the wounds to the soul take a long long time,
> only time can help
> and patience, and a certain difficult repentance,
> long, difficult repentance, realisation of life's mistake,
> and the freeing oneself
> from the endless repetition of the mistake
> which mankind at large has chosen to sanctify.
> D. H. Lawrence, 1964, p. 620

It has taken me a number of years and many hours of therapy to dare ask whether boarding school was, in my case, a place of sanctioned persecution. And just as it has been difficult for me, it is, I believe, a challenging question for many: ex-boarders, parents, governors and teachers in such schools, and on a wider level, society. The reasons for such resistance are myriad and complex, but can at least in part be explained by this form of education being associated with privilege in this country.

In his book, *The Making of Them*, Nick Duffell (2000) looks, among other things, at the British attitude towards boarding and in his view, erroneous notion that exposure to the boarding regime will be the 'making' of sons and daughters. In having explored the different facets of the opening question, I hope to have contributed to the further dismantling of this myth wherein I postulate that such an experience can, in fact, result in the 'unmaking of them'.

The fallout of boarding can and does often permeate into adulthood: the taboo around expressing emotion with its resulting encapsulation of self, the armouring, the ungratified basic needs, the separation and dependency issues, the conflict between intimacy and exile are but some of what a boarding school survivor may struggle with and potentially bring to therapy. However, since it has been beyond the scope of this paper, I have been unable to consider the trauma of physical and sexual abuse that some experience while at school.

Alarmingly, the British attitude to boarding schools appears resistant to addressing the endless repetition of the mistake it chooses to sanction. And although some may hope and argue that the parallels between the sanctioning by state and society of boarding schools and custodial institutions as captured by this seventeen-year-old's analogy – '[boarding school] makes me feel like a convict let out on parole in the holidays' (Lambert, 1968, p. 377), - are somewhat dated, I have no sense of any shift having taken place which may acknowledge the longer-term implications of the boarding experience.

That said however, I am also aware that there are alternative, more innovative institutions such as Summerhill that endeavour to meet a child's needs in a way more in keeping with a home environment. Equally, I would like to acknowledge

that this paper represents but one voice and in no way pretends to speak for all since for many boarding was, and is still today, a truly positive experience. After all, boarding school is a home from home; it is not the home the child is born into, and just as it may in some cases be better than home, much of how a child survives the boarding environment depends on his or her earlier experience of attachment.

Further reading

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