

# Poshland

Jane Barclay

Reading Jane Palmer on Boarding Schools in March 06, a piece I had waiting in the wings leapt out at me to provide some contextual background to this bizarre form of 'education.'

Who sends their children away to school? Where do they come from or where are they aspiring to go?

I want to tell you about the country I call Poshland. It's where I came from. I don't live there any more, though I visit from time to time, always coming away feeling bleak and frustrated, wondering why I thought it'd be any different.

First, you're either in or not, from birth, otherwise commit to years, generations even, of a grindingly slow and humbling adoption procedure. Suspicious natives will sometimes criticise directly, more often welcome profusely - insincerity abounds - before slamming the door in face of any presumptuous confidence in arrival. Temporary passports are issued warily, immigration is unthinkable, for fear of - what? Infiltration, diffusion, ultimately annihilation.

Entry by marriage is tenuous, the golden rule then is to 'know thy place.' Getting above oneself is harshly punished by cold shoulder. Behaviour, demeanour, dress-code, housing, style, language are governed by non-followable rules, full of subtle teases; foreigners are always spotted, probably by trying too hard to conform, and are still recognised and scorned years after they think they've made it.

Tourists are acceptable, the more open-minded native may even appreciate difference, so long as visitors bugger off back to where they came from.

I recognise fellow ex-pats, including the ones who've successfully ironed out Poshland-speak. I realise I'm instinctively pulled towards

my own kind despite a loathing for a system I've suffered greatly at the hands of. I broke the house rule: I chose to leave. The narrow-minded prejudice within the system - represented by my now-ex-husband - became untenable. It was a painful break away; occasionally I'm still hit by a longing to be accepted in this place that, while I lived there, I never quite belonged to - in moments of forgetting that I do belong, but to another tribe.

I certainly hunger to compare notes of misery, and am glad to have found some compatriots originally from Poshland to satisfy.

Misery - in this land of plenty? During a recent visit, I heard a man bemoan lack of time and money, his way of saying 'I don't really like it here.' Big house, tennis court etc cannot compensate for what's missing - a full and available pot of affection. Sent away to school aged seven, he's sent his own son away, to endure more cuddle-deprivation, continuing the cycle of emotional starvation. Perhaps he knows he cannot provide it himself... So, he seeks sympathy for his plight, redirecting attention to material things to protect himself from knowing the true source of depletion. Yes, I have compassion; yes, I also despise such resistance to awareness. How much easier to be with clients, who by their very nature are responding to a wisdom that seeks to heal. Happily for this work, my pot is now a lot fuller, thanks to my own healing process.

Poshland is peopled by the cuddle-starved and the insecure. Hence narrow-minded clinging to one's own kind, to the familiar; hence the 'keep out' signs. As I made my escape, ranks closing behind me, I knew I was perceived as a threat, having done what others hadn't. 'How dare she' came across loud and clear, representing the whispered 'how could she?' - find the courage, manage alone, manage without us? (How? When what I'd previously experienced as safe became a prison, my choice was sacrifice myself or run...) Rejected by me, both silent and verbal disapproval rejected me back - betrayal felt on both sides - particularly by the men who sensed similar rebellion in their wives. Marriages in Poshland tend to revolve around control - financial (men), domestic (women), sexual (both); who ultimately leaves may depend on who feels more unbearably controlled....?

I know women who've chosen to physically stay while rebelling in spirit, expanding within the confines of their prison, developing interests beyond the norm. (Men too, resorting to computer-addiction, affairs.) This seems to be better than not at all, but resistance from a hostile partner steals something. So does secrecy. Joy, I think. Here lies the difference between surviving and thriving. The strain of splitting shows. I have great respect for the spiritual rebels - some have remained friends - for their awareness; they don't project their fears onto me, rather they applaud my courage - perhaps disowning their own.

Insecure - how come? In Poshland, 'Don't swank' is another golden rule. Self-pride is discouraged, it's one of many punishable offences. Later on, that pride gets dumped onto offspring in a way that demands achievement, as well as leaking out in extreme arrogance or extreme self-deprecation. Old-boys are notorious for the former; the latter are less visible, the 'failures;' sometimes I come across an exasperating mixture of both. On my recent trip, I also chatted to a woman selling jewellery - direct selling at charity fairs is an acceptable way of doing business, being safe - and offered her the copy of S&S I was carrying. She said she didn't have her glasses and anyway, she was 'too thick' to understand it. Trying something new is a no-no in Poshland. It's way too threatening. Revealing ignorance carries shame that prohibits learning. Talking to anyone not formally introduced, strangers from other tribes, is terrifying. I know, I learned both the shame and that terror from an extremely insecure mother who didn't even feel secure in her own Posh family; it was just better than venturing abroad.

Poshland is stagnant. Children go to the schools their parents went to, get taught by ex-pupils, they make friends with parents' friends' children, rely on parents' introductions. 'He hasn't changed a bit' is regarded as the highest compliment.

Insecurity underlies the no-entry rule: need for such tight borders implies loose or non-existent sense of personal boundaries (in Poshland, no-one goes near anyone with a cold; they assume

they'll catch it,) due to harsh mistreatment which inevitably invades and wipes out self-hood. The more I study this, the more I see the same fear-based 'not enough room for both' in families in general and mirrored in wider-world international and religious conflicts.

Why else would I want to visit? Occasionally I want to test how secure I've become in my self, whether I can risk exposure. (My life in Poshland was far from friendly or safe. Damaged people denying damage - 'it never did me any harm' - tend to act out.) I'm pretty sure now that 'I' won't disappear; I can choose how long to stay and when to leave and can bear any rekindling urge to cling: from belonging nowhere, I've found another pack to belong to - a healthy mongrelly mix!

Defiant arrogance, deep-rooted confidence? There's a world, literally, of difference.

Forming attachments has been challenging - a major legacy from Poshland's care system (nannies, mothers' helps, boarding school.) Without introductions, I've had to rediscover and rely on instinct to choose friends, career, food, everything. At first, I was lost: who was I? I experimented by copying, gradually forming my own style. My voice, though, I didn't change. Perhaps I wanted it to give me away. I will be known posh 'n all. Deliberately altering my speech would be giving in to shame I used to feel for being privileged, apologising for having it easy. As it turned out, my shame was the deep 'I must have been bad enough to

deserve it' kind that gets injected with sinister treatment.

In adulthood, holding my own has won some respect. In adulthood I can afford to be selective, and even tolerate dislike. As a teenager, bolshiness (inverted snobbery) did me no favours in the belonging stakes. I wasn't popular, even then I challenged poshness. Being disliked and lonely didn't help the self-yuk I'd learned from familial abusive treatment, but being fake would have been worse. Interesting, how I've often felt a fraud, as a counsellor, as a writer... inevitable splitting has taken some years to reintegrate.

To act on my curiosity by paying a visit, has been about

welcoming back an integral part of me; once I needed to deny it, defy it, escape. Now I can own it. And acknowledge that harm from boarding school does, as Jane Palmer suggested in her final paragraph, vary according, in part, to other experiences of attachment.

What have I brought back from my trip? Beyond bleakness and frustration, a warm glow of freedom, and courage to visit other places - Godland perhaps comes next - hesitantly crossing the border, unsure of welcome, afraid of getting sucked in, afraid of being spat out by my newfound tribe.... My belief in room-for-all is big enough to 'let's go see.'

Jane Barclay's biography - I've been developing private practice for six years, continuing to study and write about relationship dynamics, with clients, in supervision, with therapist/s, colleagues, groups, family as well as the wider world - not forgetting my self, of course! I'm now six months' married and well into living 'happily ever after'...

### **Beethoven's Ninth and the sound of one hand clapping**

Although I had not planned to watch in any way, I turned on my T.V. at the exact moment when the Prom chorus was coming in with the 'Ode to Joy'. As always, I was totally awestruck as the whole piece gathered force and, at the ending, reduced to tears. I joined the audience in applause, except that I couldn't; my two smallest fingers of my right hand having curled inwards, with a quite recent malfunction. As I came down to earth slowly, the thought came to me of how much has such truly amazing music altered people's behaviour. Oh dear!



**John Ridpath**