THE TRAUMA OF BOARDING AT SCHOOL

Jane Barclay

Ten years ago, I had only a fleeting idea that living two-thirds of each year at school from the age of nine and a half was in any way connected to how I related both to myself and others in adulthood. Since then, my awareness has been surfacing in fits and starts until I am now in no doubt, especially after working on the chapter in *Does Therapy Work?*(Barclay, 2011) that describes how I ended long-term therapy, that this experience left me with debilitating 'separation anxiety' and a host of life-constricting coping strategies and 'somatic memories' (Rothschild, 2000, p37).

I put all awakening down to inherent inner wisdom that strives above all for truth and integration. I put the hesitance of this particular awakening down to cultural normalisation (hard-wired during Empire days) of boarding school as being 'a good thing' for building character, fostering independence, turning 'little soldiers' into big ones (girls as well as boys), producing leadership qualities – all highly-desired attributes. Pupils readily adopt the mantras, 'It's for the best in the long run' and 'Think of others less fortunate'; these, and more, are cemented in place to defend the system from challenge and aid suppression of homesickness.

When my therapist included the word 'privileged' in his response to my apologetic sketch of 'Poshland' upbringing, including tentative mention of boarding-school, despite knowing he was referring to enough food and a roof over my head, what I heard was accusation. My spurt of rage (Barclay, 2002) quickly subsided; I wasn't sure enough of my own ground to fight for understanding or risk being challenged. I continued to link my anguished mix of clinginess and mistrust to other young-child experiences (my need to make sense of flooding emotions intense), and many years passed before I found a space to work more directly towards integrating my neglected, split-off boarding-school-self.

I attended a talk entitled Trauma of the Privileged Child (presented by Prof. Joy Shaverien) that spoke directly to my nine year-old heart. Wow. I enrolled in the therapeutic workshops offered by Boarding Concern (see below) and had an immediate sense of coming home. What relief to be among people who didn't need convincing but already

knew the loneliness, the need for recognition and struggle to be best at something, the unspeakable and therefore unfeelable homesickness, the universal lack of privacy, the comforts of sagging mattress, teddy and of treacle stodge.

After a year and a half more in therapy, with a woman this time, I know that eight years' incarceration offered no chance of recovery from the initial shock of being transported from home and left somewhere I was led to believe as jolly that instantly turned out to be otherwise. Being severed from all that was familiar and comforting shattered my core assumption (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), along with trust, that 'my' adults wouldn't leave me, that I could rely on them to keep me safe (Gerhardt, 2004).

Enforced adapting, becoming independent, reliable and emotionally stoic - this is the very process, ironically, that is so revered. Whilst adoption, fostering, evacuation and deportation are accepted as destabilising, and children of separated parents are encouraged to make home with one rather than split themselves between the two, the form of child-rearing that entails moving between home and school six times each year (not counting weekends and half-terms) is even now barely acknowledged as a disturbance to a sense of 'secure base' (Bowlby, 1979).

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The moment of trauma is the realisation that return home isn't possible. This may impact on the front steps, unpacking the trunk, at bedtime. Being sent out of the dining-room for crying was 'it' for me: first breakfast, a puddle of black treacle spreading across the plate – too much. The slicing separation of child from primary attachment figures is mirrored by internal splitting. Since the protesting energy that surges forth cannot be mobilised (Levine, 1997), it must be contained. Therein lies the split: the one who feels hurt, abandoned *and* betrayed gets locked away; expression of feelings are not welcome in this place and to feel with such intensity all alone is unbearable. What remains is a child whose thinking is on overdrive, searching for reasons for being left, commonly leading to the question 'what did I do?' since it offers the possibility of correction, and at the same time faced with a host of new instructions to assimilate.

Crucially, at boarding school, just as in any 'care home' or institution, children are not loved by their caretakers. They are taught, fed, housed but not parented. Bowlby writes extensively of 'secure attachment' and 'separation and loss within the family' in *Making & Breaking Affectional Bonds;* in *Why Love Matters,* Gerhardt adds neuro-scientific findings to support visible evidence of insecure-attachment-induced stress.

Contact by letter, periodic days out and even an extra visit for a match or concert cannot erase the certain knowledge that another goodbye looms; living in

anticipatory dread becomes normal. Nor do ever more glossy brochures of comfortable common-rooms, extensive grounds and the lure of attractive extra-curricular activities compensate for missing pets, home bedroom and even irritating siblings. Or for lack of goodnight hugs.

The first hour, first bedtime, first breakfast: the first week is a series of after-shocks before the bizarre becomes familiar. One new and bewildering experience relentlessly follows another (Duffell, 2000) without 'down-time', a private place to recover even temporarily or cuddles. No amount of being shown the ropes by peers, bracing encouragement from staff or even momentary comfort from an under-matron can provide reassurance since the reality doesn't change.

The process of acclimatising and desensitising can be compared to that of prisoners-of-war (Herman, 1992) who, if guarding and terrain combine to make escape impossible, can only sit it out hoping one day for release. Survival of treatment intended to depersonalise and make keeping order easier – use of surnames, uniform bed-covers, strip-washes, lack of privacy depends upon being canny and competitive. Upon suppressing longing; upon living one day at a time, eking out supply of rations of both food and affection; upon refusing to think about home and then when finally there blotting out 'the other place'. The legacy, that all forms of abuse and neglect have in common, is a sense, back home, of strangeness, of not belonging – until or unless a process of re-joining the splitting brings about integration.

'Abuse? That's going too far.' Both schools and parents 'sell' the benefits of boarding school to their children as they have had it sold to them. Together with persuasive enticements and reassurances, in terms of grooming this is on a par with any other version of 'it's for you own good'. Defences in the form of mantras, quickly learned by rote by new boys and girls, are necessary to protect all concerned (shown in Colin Luke's documentary *The Making of Them,* 1993) from the bleak reality, all in the name of top-class education which in turn leads to top jobs. Individual distress is contagious; if an epidemic broke out, the emotional brutality of the regime would be exposed. To challenge centuries-old beliefs that to have less leads to needing less and that to not-need promotes independence would mean, as well as the demise of a highly lucrative business, stepping out of 'all that is familiar' (p2). No wonder the investment to keep the status quo.

I emphasise, it is the power of collective defensive arguments, by those whom the system has served in terms of high-achievement and those who envy the academic advantages, that compounds the particular trauma of being sent to boarding-school:

a child who steps out of line and plucks up courage to complain (about continual separations, about missing home – though more likely about conditions since his feelings have been locked out of awareness) is most likely to be told that he or she is *lucky* – shamed into silence that can extend long after breaking-up for the final time.

For the first three weeks at prep school contact with home is firmly discouraged, on the grounds this would upset both children and parents (shown on Channel 4, Cutting Edge, *Leaving Home at 8,* Spring 2010). Imagine, if you haven't experienced this hiatus, or remember if you have: after a brisk and hearty, stiff-upper-lip parting, the measures a child must resort to, to bear watching all s/he knows as safe and familiar, including the source of hugs and cuddles, driving away. (It is quite common, I've discovered, not to remember the first 'goodbye', not consciously anyway.) The brain strains to make sense out of utter confusion. So much to learn, so quickly. Fear must not be seen by peers, distress quickly stifled; protest to staff is unthinkable. Activity without respite – 'timetable-ing' (Duffell, 2000) – is the well-known antidote to homesicknes. The adults in charge know that three weeks is the length of time that breaks a child's hope of rescue; the children themselves make the decision to stop looking ahead, to put needs on hold (the crucial moment of necessary self-betrayal) and turn to the immediate business of surviving.

The younger the child, the greater the emotional wrench when separated from primary sources of love and nurturing physical contact**,** and the greater the threat to physical safety when separated from primary sources of protection**.** The longing (I call this 'cuddle-hunger') that arises from unmet needs demands a focus and so deflects towards sweets and puddings, towards gold stars and top-of-form status, to shows of courage on stage or playing-field: to winning. Oh yes, and to being naughty. Enough to win admiration from peers. Imagine a school full of children with such determination: every aspect of living becomes a competition, from 'bagging' the thickest slice of bread (Dickensian measures to ease emotional starvation), to whose brother is the grooviest at sports-day. Pretending, 'telling stories', cheating when necessary – anything to get a sense of identity, of special-ness. Yet to be the best means being envied, a lonely state: public schools historically turn out officers, not 'men'.

So to post-trauma. In the first weeks, fight/flight energy must, if not mobilised, collapse into submission (Barclay, 2010). The third survival-serving response, to freeze or 'play dead' (Rothschild, 2000), cannot be sustained over an indeterminate

period. 'Freeze' takes the form of switching off needs that cannot be fulfilled (extended longing is self-torturing) and turning to what or whoever is available as substitute to 'make do'. Survival means living as two sides of a coin, back to back, one side permanently hidden (Laing, 1960), the other the face that is seen. It is the latter that people respond to, the one that its owner comes to believe is all s/he is.

The Strategic Survival Personality (Duffell, 2000) develops as a shell to present to the world. This way of being does serve its purpose in terms of locking away feelings; it also carries a high price. The hidden, silent 'face' must find alternative ways of making its presence felt, for example via an eating disorder, self-harming, cheating, aggression. The on-going splitting can manifest in depression and bi-polar mood-extremes as well as in powerful control of self (needs in particular) and others, including addictions – to behaviours such as gambling, sex and high-risk activities, and to drugs, alcohol and food. To quote my therapist, 'How can you relate to other people if you cannot relate to yourself?'

'*The syndrome that follows upon prolonged, repeated trauma needs its own name. I propose to call it 'complex post-traumatic stress disorder*'' (Herman, Trauma & Recovery, p 119). Out of hard-wired coping strategies grows the 'drama triangle' (Karpman, 1968) of victim, persecutor/aggressor, rescuer – each behavioural position a maladaptive bid to gain at least an illusion of power and of ability to self-protect, and to get needs for safety met without intimate engagement.

The most visible survival technique or 'face' particular to the ex-boarder is social confidence, the ability to 'get on' with everyone, often admired as 'charming': bubbly small talk and wit both serve to avoid being known, very exposing for someone who has long denied the existence of his/her inner self. Also common as a defence against social contact is arrogance. Next is competence: striving for excellence and competition in all things again serves to promote hierarchy and hence avoid intimacy with others. One of the hallmark legacies of boarding school is the double-bind of aiming to be 'top' but not getting 'above yourself' – hence ladles of self-deprecation.

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The cost of my own survival strategies all come under the heading 'fear of intimacy'. Looking back, my choice of first husband was driven exclusively by bid for safety: after a series of exciting-unsafe boyfriends, I settled for someone (another ex-boarder) as familiar as a brother, as able and as handsome as a father: someone least likely to leave me. Knowing each other, let alone sexual knowing, was impossible. *'I see the problems of sexuality in boarding schools expressed in later life as difficulties in loving, or more specifically in combining sex, love and intimacy in relationships.'* (Duffell, *The Making of Them*; p 169.) As friends, we got along fine. Became parents. Functioned

well in our clearly-defined roles of bread-winner /admin manager / gadget-fixer and cook / cleaner / hostess. Not until I embarked on my journey of self-enquiry via counselling training and then personal therapy did the heart of our marriage show up as absent

I began to make sense of all my relationships together with my irritation and frustration at girlfriends who gushed greetings but remained elusive, somehow 'not there' even when we were chatting over coffee. Instinctively, I'd homed in to people of my own kind: no wonder my hunger for meaningful contact remained unsatisfied. Boarders, including myself until recently, can become expert at 'doing' effusiveness, at 'doing' relationships, all the while 'being' absent. Now I understand my indefinable sense of 'something's missing' and dismal lack of belonging.

The first taste of attention from my therapist was like a grain of sugar given to a starving man, unleashing a craving for someone to love and be loved by (equally risky) that demanded to be satisfied – and was over time (Barclay, 2011), gradually enabling me to take these primary needs beyond the therapy room. No wonder, in retrospect, how my early years of therapy were all about having more and more: time and attention. I dared not let in nourishment and so remained hungry. No wonder, too, that my therapist's holidays that started with the words, 'See you in three weeks', were breaks to endure by ticking off calendars and drawing him pictures. Anything to stop him, and thereby stop me, from disappearing. Over years of work, separations became less threatening as I became more substantial, more connected to myself in his absence; however, the final goodbye (Barclay, 2010) left me pining with homesickness and drawing on my habitual, survival mode of 'having to go without'. After struggling alone for months, I sought help from another therapist, a woman this time, to complete this ending.

True freedom – from the prison of the 'drama triangle' – means reconnecting to and remobilising fight/flight survival energy (Levine, 1997). I've discovered just how different this feels from prickly defensiveness, muscles warmed up and primed rather than cold and tight, body expansive rather than hunched (Keleman, The Human Ground).

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Ex-boarders are likely to come to therapy without any idea of schooldays as a source of distress. Fiercely self-critical of being needy and suspicious of attachment, let alone dependency, they automatically deflect care by means of criticism and comparison and fiercely stick to subject-matter that appears safe: the 'problem' they've come about and what to do to beat it.

An unaware therapist who misses a passing reference to boarding-school may inadvertently give the client a chance to assert his/her case; more likely, the omission will pass unnoticed since the client won't be aware of its significance either. A therapist who colludes with collective assumptions about the privilege of boarding-school is potentially lethal. The first time I described my moment of abandonment and subsequent survival measures to a local group of therapists, I was received with a mix of surprise and curiosity. Only one in the group stayed silent; afterwards she came over and said, 'I'm sorry you had such a bad time; for me it wasn't so at all.' Perhaps I'd overused my personal experience and needed to present more clinical evidence to get my point across; perhaps she didn't dare, wasn't ready to get the point.

As therapist, to maintain awareness of my 'self' as separate from an other's depends on inhabiting me as 'home'. Attention to 'monitoring arousal and anxiety', 'use of brakes', and 'becoming familiar with the theory of the Autonomic Nervous System' (Rothschild, 2006) is invaluable. The unshakeable belief that I suffered trauma from enforced separation from home and parents enables me to let my experiences, and responses to a client, inform me. This includes remembering at all times that behind missed appointments, forgetting to pay and all the other defences against connecting with me more fully is a small child saying 'keeping my distance is what I had to do'. As much as s/he may long for love, safety meant self-reliance for all things, peers and adults alike not to be trusted – however high the cost in isolation.

A client I've worked with for three and a half years handed me a Christmas card just before leaving for our break – of three weeks. 'I tore up the first one,' he said, 'Of course, I gave myself a hard time for such waste. But I'd written 'with love'. This one, well, I hope you like the picture, it's a favourite of mine; and I've just signed my name.' I thanked him for the card, and thanked him for the extra gift of telling me what he'd torn up. My endeavour is to raise awareness rather than fight against denial, to remain respectful of defences and continue to proffer my own experience to inform and promote understanding – in conjunction with Boarding Concern which provides a place to call for anyone who is ready.

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