Reflections of a Survivor

Thurstine Basset, thurstine@bassetconsultancy.co.uk

Abstract:

This article is a personal reflection on being able to tell a story through writing a book about surviving boarding school. It pays tribute to 'Self and Society' in its role of publishing innovative work. The author makes a plea for 'home sickness' to be renamed as 'school sickness' and for boarding issues to be incorporated into the training of therapists and counsellors.

Keywords: boarding school, trauma, abandonment, privilege.

Surviving Boarding

I didn't plan it that way but 60 years after first being left by my parents in a strange and unfriendly institution, a prep school in Berkshire, and 50 years after finally leaving boarding school and putting the experience behind me, I got to write a book about it. Of course, when I say I had put the experience behind me, this is not entirely true as the experience of being sent away to board has to some extent lived on inside me throughout my life.

The words of my headmaster in a school report, when I was eight years old, give a perfect illustration of the world in which I had to learn to survive: 'My one complaint concerns foolish behaviour – nothing serious, merely pestilent – and much of his tiresomeness concerns Matron's department. In a third term he must put away these childish ways.'

The message to me was pretty clear – 'you are eight years old and you must stop acting like a child'. The child in you must be somehow put to one side as you learn to grow up fast.

I learned to adopt a survival personality that helped me make it through ten years of boarding, but was less helpful when dealing with the adult world of personal relationships and work. The child lives on in a semi-frozen state and can play havoc, emerging when least expected in your adult life.

You could perhaps forgive my headmaster for his lack of psychological knowledge in the 1950s, but surely now boarding schools must be concerned that all known and respected theories of child and human development do not support the practice of a deliberate breaking of family attachments at ages often as young as eight years old. Maybe they just choose to ignore these theories?

It took me a while to explore my boarding school issues and I was in my fifties when I attended a Boarding School Survivor workshop and then subsequently became a Director of Boarding Concern, an organisation that supports boarding school survivors. The workshop was lead by Nick Duffell who has pioneered work with ex-boarders. One thing led to another, and in 2016, Nick and I published 'Trauma, Abandonment and Privilege: a guide to therapeutic work with boarding school survivors' (Routledge, 2016)

Nick is both a survivor of boarding school and a therapist and I am a survivor, but although I have spent my working life in the mental health field, I am not a therapist. My input to the book is from a survivor perspective.

The book proposes a model of working: RAC – Recognition, Acceptance and Change. First a boarding school survivor must recognise that boarding as a young child has had a major, and usually very unhelpful, impact on their life. Secondly there is a need to accept the experience and the process by which a strategic survival personality is adopted by the child in order to survive. This was an entirely natural

response to a traumatic experience. Acceptance that the survival personality has lived on into adulthood as a 'not fit for purpose' aid for living can then lead to change so that a survivor can move from mere survival to living. This is not a simple process and can take many years of work.

In the book we outline three main survival personalities – the conformists, the crushed and the rebels. I was a bit of a conformist in trying to fit into the system and keep out of trouble, but like many others, I also adopted a rebel survival personality and, later on as an adult, needed to say at least a partial goodbye to the rebel in order to move on with living.

There is a quote in the book that illustrates my journey in this respect:

> I just rebelled against everything my boarding schools stood for. I was a rebel – but not one without a cause! – I fought every cause I could find. Over the years I grew tired of this constant battling, and with the help of both a good therapist and a loving wife, I began to give up the constant battle. My wife recently returned from a meditation retreat and amongst the various pieces of paper she brought with her, I found this quote: 'We are not really fighting with the people with whom we think we are fighting. The arguments go on inside our own heads. We are really arguing with ourselves'. I said to myself 'that's me' and I now have the quote in a prominent position on the wall in my office. (Duffell and Basset, 2016, p. 96)

There are other key themes in the book that have echoes in my life. There is the importance of what we call 'Emotional Courage' (Basset, 2005) which is the courage to abandon the stiff upper lip and let emotions in. Linked to that is also the realisation that vulnerability is not necessarily a weakness, but just part of being human.

The importance of story-telling for survivors is championed throughout. This is something I have a strong belief in, having worked for many years with survivors of the mental health system.

I found the process of writing the book highly therapeutic, particularly as I had spent a number of years immersed in boarding school survival issues – my own and others. Having published the book, there are two other things that have stood out for me – the impact of 'Self & Society' and the use of the term 'home-sickness'.

In Praise of Self and Society

In writing the book, and in particular reviewing the literature on the topic, Nick and I, as authors, found ourselves often acknowledging the important role of Self & Society in publishing material that might not find the light of day elsewhere.

For example, the original and first article on the topic of boarding was in Self & Society (Duffell, 1995) and this was a precursor to Nick's book five years later: *The Making of Them* (Duffell, 2000).

Subsequently, some of the first writings by women on the topic were in this Journal (Palmer, 2006 and Barclay, 2011). Sometimes, as with many things in life, the boarding experience can be dominated by reference to white, heterosexual men (some of whom end up as 'wounded leaders' running the UK – see Duffell 2014). Womens' experiences can be marginalised, even though young girls often have a tougher ride, having to cope with institutions that are both run on patriarchal lines and where misogyny is rife.

Self & Society also published the first writings about gay issues for boarders (Gottlieb, 2005), with the author shining a much needed light on homophobia in boarding schools.

So I say a heartfelt thank you..... 'Where would we be without Self & Society?'

'Home sickness' not 'school sickness'

We are also fortunate to have had the input of a very experienced child psychotherapist who worked in a boarding school and has contributed, anonymously, to our book. In illustrating the dilemmas of such a role, the psychotherapist says:

> When I worked as a school counsellor, I attempted to find many creative ways of holding/containing the contradiction of children separating from those they love versus what they gain from the total boarding experience. Attempting to hold the classic position of 'neutrality' as a therapist was exceedingly

difficult. The resolution for the child's pain and behaviour would be that the child returns to the familiar world of 'home'.

I have observed the pain in the child and indeed the parent, when that moment finally comes that each say farewell in a hallway, by the car or in a dormitory. Some don't touch, embrace or find words to say farewell, but turn away and 'don't look back'; others occasionally collapse. In some ways, it has echoes of when a child is placed in care and the struggle for child and parent to separate in such tragic circumstances.

Referrals to school counsellors are often because a child is said to be 'homesick' and this is a well-known and well-used term, but it struck me recently that it is also a misleading one in that it suggests the sickness is linked to the home and not the school. I would like to see the term 'school-sickness' being used instead. After all, it is the school and not the home that is causing the sickness. If there is any sickness in a situation whereby young children are sent away to boarding school, the sickness surely resides in the school itself and the cultural practice of early boarding.

What next?

A next step is to establish boarding issues as part of training programmes for psychotherapists and we have had an approach from the University of Brighton to work with them to this end. Nick Duffell has indeed already developed training at post-graduate level, working with a team of therapists that includes Joy Schaverien, who herself has written insightfully about boarding issues and came up with the term 'Boarding School Syndrome' (Schaverien, 2015).

In concluding 'Trauma Abandonment and Privilege', we write that:

> Working therapeutically with ex-boarders is not easy, it will take time and a lot of patience, but the rewards are great. The authors sincerely wish good luck to those undertaking the task.
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> Maybe – just maybe – one day the British themselves will kick the habit of traumatising their young children through early boarding. We can but hope. (Duffell and Basset, 2016, page 189)

Notes on Contributor:

Thurstine Basset worked as a social worker, mostly in the mental health field, before entering the world of training and education in the 1980s. He has subsequently written and produced a variety of training packages, articles, book chapters and books in the mental health field. Early in the 21st Century, he attended a Boarding School Survivors Workshop and was a Director of Boarding Concern, an organisation that supports boarding school survivors. In 2016, he co-authored and published the book 'Trauma Abandonment and Privilege: a guide to therapeutic work with boarding school survivors' Nick Duffell and Thurstine Basset, Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

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