

Trauma at the Threshold: An Eight-Year-Old Goes to Boarding School

Simon Partridge

... Macduff was from his mother's womb
Untimely ripped.

(*Macbeth*, Act 5, scene viii)

Amid rustle of frocks and stamping feet
They gave the prizes to the ruined boys.

('Consider', W. H. Auden, *Poems*, 1930)

I attended the Boarding School Survivors' Workshop for Men 2006 on 21–22 October and 9–10 December, led by psychotherapists Nick Duffell and Darrel Hunneybell. I had become increasingly aware that deeply disturbing issues relating to my time at boarding school had not been dealt with in my Kleinian-orientated psychoanalyses. My recollections on being left at prep school for the first time were triggered by seeing the film *The Making of Them*, by my own experience, and by the brave witness and generous encouragement of the other participants.

On the Sunday morning different members of the group bore witness to their Boarding School experience. I was aware of a rising tide of feeling which focused on the 'threshold': the precise point at which Ma and Pop, sister Penny, and the familiarity of our farm-life were about to vanish as I crossed, irrevocably, into the domain of my prep school in 1955. It was just before or just after my eighth birthday – I can't remember which, and I have searched in vain for a record. It came flooding back as the filmed faces of the young sons and their mothers, about to go off to prep school, surfaced from my memory of *The Making of Them*, which we'd all seen the night before. The film was a masterpiece of understatement, the faces and body language eloquent beyond words, the pain of separation, the rupture of deep attachment, barely concealed behind

an expected show of bravery; the story excruciating in its inexorability.

Nick senses my bursting feeling, perhaps prompted by my attack on the previous witness as an 'intellectual wanker'. He encourages me to let go. I feel a swelling anger at my mother for leaving go of me on the school doorstep. Nick throws a large cushion into the centre of the group of chairs. Murderous feelings towards my mother for abandoning me fill me up. The cushion becomes my mother – Nick encourages me to get my anger out. I stamp down on the cushion to get her in place – my foot on her throat, to keep her there so that she can't get away. In the circle there is no way of escaping my violent intent, much as I want to flee.

Nick invites me to put a word on the flip chart but I refuse; I want to go further with the feelings – I can fall so easily back into thoughts.

OK, says Nick, sit right down on the floor and hug that cushion. Then, in a move which completely throws me, he invites me to turn my murderous hatred into a plea of what I would have *liked* my Ma to have said at this moment of dreadful parting. That seems an impossible one; I have to flip to the other side of hatred. Somehow I'm rescued by the mutual sadness I'd seen in the faces of the mothers and sons in the film, and by the empathy that I feel is streaming towards me from my fellow sufferers. To my amazement the words my mother couldn't utter come tumbling, imploringly out of my mouth, accompanied by sobbing:

I'm so sorry I have to leave you here – but it's something our sort of people just have to do – it happened to me – I'm hugging you so tightly because I love you so much – I'm crying too because I'll miss you so – I found it too difficult to get your name tags all sewn on in time – I'll come and see you as quickly as I can – if anything nasty happens I want you to let me know as soon as possible and I'll come and rescue you.

For good measure Nick asks me to repeat my 'mother's plea' with added feeling, as if I haven't quite got it all out.

Dazed, I get up off the floor and, worried about the emotion let loose on my fellows, say I'll be all right. And I think I will. I seemed to have reversed the 'switching moment' at which boarding school survivors are able to turn off all emotion – a ploy that Nick and Darrel have picked up time and time again in the course of the workshop. I see how the deadly 'skill' has to be mastered, on pain of annihilation, at the moment when the vulnerable little boy has to transform himself in an instant into that precocious man, able to survive in an institution stripped of parental love, domestic warmth and familiarity, and when mother's heart must turn to stone.

The image of an inverted oasis comes into my mind, prompted by my own prep school on the rural Sussex/Kent border and the much grander one of the film. One is driven down the drive through lush countryside only to enter an emotional desert. The epitome of this is the barrack-like dormitory and a

personal space compressed to a 'tuck box' some 24" × 18" × 18" for one's private effects – a universe away from my carefree childhood haunts in the barns, trees, fields, and woods of our farm with its friendly cats, dogs, cows, and pigs. Penny, younger by thirteen months, is soon in a girls' boarding school literally a mile or two further down the road, but, cruelly, it might as well have been in another country for all the contact we were allowed.

At last, I see clearly that at the prep school threshold a terrible violence, disguised by privilege, is done to children and parents – ordained by a powerful and unquestionable Establishment. This is where the upper lip of the [mostly] upper classes quickly learns to lose its expressive ability, where it sets into stiffness, where the face always knows 'how to act' but can seldom show what it really feels. No wonder I was secretly drawn to the warmth and directness of ordinary, rooted country people whom I was lucky to come across.

The promise is that you'll inherit power, influence, and wealth (for many no empty promise): the price is often that you'll be severed from your deepest feelings and thereby lose your true self and your way through life, condemned to wander forever in a hopeless, confused state.

How sad. How misguided. And how long and difficult the struggle to undo that deadening inner template.

Outrageously, the sending away still goes on.

Resources

Association for Boarding School Survivors – see details at www.abss.org.uk

Duffell, N. (2000). *The Making of Them*. London: Lone Arrow Press. (sample chapters can be read at www.boardingschoolsurvivors.co.uk)

Schaverien, J. (2004). Boarding school: the trauma of the 'privileged' child. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 49: 683–705. (available at www.boardingrecovery.com/articles.htm)

Heward, C. (1998). *Making a Man of Him: Parents and Their Sons' Education at an English Public School 1929–50*. London: Routledge. (A fascinating insight into the role of a public school in constructing 'masculine' identity, and the emotional costs, in the first half of the twentieth century)

The Making of Them. A film by Colin Luke a BBC film maker who pioneered the use of one-person crews equipped with tiny, unobtrusive cameras. He took a neutral approach which allowed him to enlist the co-operation of both parents and schools, as he followed a group of small boys and their families through the first term of prep school. The process of making the film had an unusual impact on the hard-headed film crew. They became distressed as they witnessed the attitudes of the parents to their children, and then the children's loss of spontaneity as they had to adapt suddenly to an alien, male and all-encompassing institutional environment, cut off from the comfort of their families and homes for weeks at a time.