

A talk given by Darrel Hunneybell to the
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Some thoughts on the Men's Boarding School Survivors workshops

I am a Psychotherapist, working with individuals and groups. I have been a mental health professional for over 25 years, both for the NHS and local Government, latterly as a manager of crisis and residential services, I also worked as a counsellor at a part residential school for boys with emotional & behavioural difficulties (EBD) excluded from mainstream secondary education. I now work in private practice.

I first became involved in this area of specialism when I assisted Nick Duffell with the Boarding School Survivors Workshops in 2005. Since that time I have worked in the workshops and with individual boarding school clients, although it is the group-work that I have been asked to talk about my observations can be applied to both.

Not having attended boarding school gives me a unique perspective; I have brought a beginners mind to the workshops. What I have noticed is the common understanding that the participants have no matter which school or when they attended, and given the rituals and routines of the institutionalised boarding school this should not surprise me. Encouraging participants to talk meaningfully, to explain the significance of an exeat, the importance of the tuck box, the betrayals of Sunday letter writing, the meaning of getting one's colours, the danger of the dining hall, creates a deep, holding space out of which can emerge the feelings attached to these rituals and routines, the process of remembering who and what has been lost. I often feel pain or anger at the way in which boys sadness and longing are dismissed with a joke, with a 'well others had it worse' or 'it wasn't that bad'.

I want to talk about what has been an important insight for me. What I have seen is that there is one moment in the boarding school child's experience that symbolically holds the key to everything that happens from then on. This is

petrified in the moment the child crosses the threshold of the school on his very first day.

I have come to see this moment as the point when the boy begins to put on a mask of self-betrayal, this is the moment that the false self, or as Nick Duffell calls it, the Strategic Survival Personality, begins to take form.

On the threshold the boy separates out the one who lived at home, close to mother, father, family & friends, pets, toys from the boy who was sent away. This has a profound effect on that boy's development, in order to survive he over identifies with the institutional authority. In this move he turns to the masculine school environment and banishes all that is nurturing and feminine onto the vulnerable home loving boy, he creates a private world which is the repository of all things emotional, homely – I feel that this is symbolised by either the bed-space - if it is safe - or the tuck-box, that warm link to mother, as if suffused with her scent. I am also struck by the contempt that there can be for that boy; as if to acknowledge him is to acknowledge weakness, failure, need, and vulnerability – heavens forbid.

In the workshops there are many stories from that moment of both survival and self-betrayal. As one participant put it

Apart from how I feel inside I am happy with my life

I thought I enjoyed boarding school; my mother's nickname for me was chameleon – if I can fit in anywhere then who am I?

and from another man

I feel that I failed but I don't know what at!

In being at the workshops do I confirm my loser-dom or am I challenging it?

And another man describes perfectly the masochism, the pervasive self-defeating behaviour. Avoiding and undermining pleasurable experiences, and preventing others from helping him

I have drifted through life without making connections with other people. I have had two relationships but I constantly feel that I want to be on my own . . . but then I am lonely . . . It would be easier if my wife didn't love me

I either can't or won't choose to receive love that is offered to me.

There is talk of defences and fear of being overwhelmed by the memories. Grown men who fear that if they talk about school they will never stop crying.

Such deep grief, hidden from view, kept in his pocket like a cherished object, a secret that cannot be shared. Over time this grief gets buried deeper and deeper, over time it becomes harder to take it seriously and it becomes less and less available. In order to survive the boy pushes this weakness further and further away until he can get on without it.

It appears that for many participants at the workshops the way in which they managed the trauma of abandonment is by splitting off the boy at home from the boy who went to school - present in the workshop is the man who I am now and the boy who was sent away, they bring both of them to the workshop but they are not conscious of each other.

This is where I look back to my experience in hospitals. What I have come to see is that there are similarities between the Boarding School system and the psychiatric asylum system, as in, both have a culture based on the twin evils of abandonment and institutionalisation, held in place by the rituals and routines, and both require the participant to adapt their selves to the expectations of the all controlling environment – in both this is all pervading. Both have the veneer of care and neither can bear the expression of feelings. There is no intimacy, there is in its place authority rather than loving care – you can see the attraction of the legal, military, civil or political world for so many ex-boarders.

The constant self-betrayal, feeling one thing and doing another. That sense of always having your bags packed ready to go. The way in which he is never really present in his relationships, as one man put it

Like living life from behind a Chinese rice-paper screen

Let me highlight this with an example from one of the workshops, On Richard's first day at school all the boys were assembled in the gymnasium, the new boys and the old boys. The ball was thrown into the centre and a ritual game began. If the ball hit you then you were out. In order to survive, to show that you were good material, a man, then you had to avoid being hit by the ball – being kicked at you with some force – it was kill or be killed, for Richard this became his default way of dealing with the world.

You can imagine how survival became the issue, how to keep alive, who was a danger, who was weak, how to keep the ball moving, keep it away from you. Imagine the longing for relationship in this man and imagine what it

might be like to be with him. He has to be in control, losing control he loses himself; he does not know who he is or who he has to be. He says:

I thought I had understood, I thought I had all the bases covered, I thought I had control

Although not from a Boarding School Survivors workshop, or from a man, I would like to share this snippet from a recent BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour interview with the comedienne Miranda Hart in which she talks about her boarding school experience. I include it because for me it captures the split, the subtlety of the movement from the adult survivor to the child then and painfully back to the adult survival personality:

Hart begins – *Oh, I loved boarding school*

Jane Garvey says - *That's a very strange thing to hear someone say*

I know, probably the best years of my life. I loved the structure, your friends are all just there, it is an incredibly privileged thing, you don't have to do anything, you don't have to do your washing, you get cooked for, it's amazing really.

Garvey wonders if this is all true

What about the loneliness and the sobbing into your pillow?

and here's the survival personality

No. I had loads of friends, I remember a lot of fun, a lot of giggling, lots of practical jokes

What kind of practical jokes?

Ridiculous things, we used to, - and here she remembers the girl she was then, she reveals the one who was split off - we all had a section of our dorm, a bed, a chair, a little chest of drawers

then the bullying

and we used to remove a whole section of someone's room, including all the furniture and place it in odd places like the tennis court.

What in the middle of the night?

No, we would do it at lunchtime so that, I can't believe I am revealing this, - I find this both sad and painful - so suddenly you turn up for a tennis lesson and there would be your bed, your slippers, your family photographs on the court, and that is quite extreme isn't it

It is quite extreme

and here is the split closing and order is restored

But you can maybe see where the comedy comes from

and finally Garvey colludes and the status quo is restored

Look where it has got you!

In this part of the interview I cannot help but feel for the child for whom even the supposed privacy and sanctuary of the bed space is unavailable, in this the bullying ensures that there is nowhere for the child to make sense of its world, to retreat from the institutional into the personal. The workshop participants will often not get the importance of a personal restorative space, often symbolised by bed, I will say:

I got to go home at the end of each day, home may not have been perfect but in that process of going home, I get to have space from the intensity of school, to retire and restore – to make sense of my day before the next, maybe even to get help

As one participant put it:

The comic, the joker, is how I survived, but now people don't take me seriously, in my actions I ask them not to take me seriously

The boy who was sent away does not believe that he matters, that anyone would want him.

To finish I want to talk about hope. What moves me are the deeply profound steps taken in the workshops. The importance of having a coherent narrative and remembering it, telling the stories, both sides of it, the two sides of the split in relation to each other and held by the emergence of a third position a more real self, that in us which wants us to be more of who we can be. When

he steps from self-betrayal and masochistic neglect into a more real relationship with his Self. In that moment there is the beginning of healing.

These are some of the thoughts I have had from my work to-date, this is an ongoing learning for me and for the participants engaged in their own work. In contradiction to school, they break away from the institution, a move towards the choice for freedom – to redeem and cherish the self.

I would like to acknowledge the brave steps taken to redeem a truer relationship to themselves by those who I have had the honour to walk with through the Boarding School Survivor Workshops and in my psychotherapy practice.

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Duffell N: (2001) *The Making of Them: The British Attitude to Children and the Boarding School System*, London, Lone Arrow Press.

Interview with Miranda Hart by Jane Garvey, Woman's Hour, BBC Radio 4, 3rd November 2009

Further information can be found at:

Boarding Concern - <http://www.boardingconcern.org.uk>

Boarding School Survivors - <http://www.boardingschoolsurvivors.co.uk>

Boarding Recovery - <http://www.boardingrecovery.com>