

Bob Arnold and Thurstine Basset are courageous survivors of boarding school

# Stiff upper lip?

'This is to certify that you have successfully completed a four-day course over seven weeks, have suffered and recognised various wounds to your Soul, have identified and grappled with manifold patterns of survival, and are hereby qualified as a genuine Survivor of the British Boarding School System.'

That's what it says on the certificates that we were presented with at the end of our course. But how did we get to be there in the first place? The answer is that all the men on the course had been sent away to boarding school, some as young as six years old. At a guess, the average age of the course participants was around 50. Why, you might ask, had it taken us such a long time to get around to exploring the experience?

## Introducing ourselves

First, however, let's introduce ourselves in our own words.

'I'm Bob, a successful business man: well paid, a wife, three terrific children, two dogs, large semi in Southampton, small sports car glistening in the drive, holidays in the United States and Europe. To the outside world, I have it all. But I feel like I am dying: not physically, not mentally, but something deep inside of me. Some evenings I sit alone, cigarette in one hand and a large, stiff drink in the other, thinking 'What the hell is going on?' My life is crumbling around me and I seem unable to pick up the pieces.'

'I'm Thurstine. I work in mental health. My headmaster's report early in my stay at prep school said: "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". I was eight at the time. By the time I was ten my reports were saying things like: "Though he has plenty of ability, his attention wanders and he fiddles with anything there is to hand" and "His attitude was curiously disinterested for one of his obvious intelligence". I didn't enjoy boarding school but I learned to survive. The patterns of behaviour I learned have stayed with me all through my life. In some ways they have served me well, but in others they have fundamentally limited me.'

## How we came to be on the course

Bob's GP said he was suffering from acute stress and suggested that counselling would help. A significant element of the stress was a crumbling marriage. This seemed to be down to his inability to support emotionally his wife's depression, which in turn was caused by his difficulty in sharing his emotions.

During the first session, the counsellor asked Bob to talk about the traumas that had happened in his life. The first and obvious one popped out straight away: 'At eight years old, I went to boarding school.' Her immediate response was to suggest contacting the Boarding School Survivors.<sup>1</sup> On the website were details of a book, *The Making of Them* by Nick Duffell.<sup>2</sup>

Thurstine's route was through a therapist, himself also a boarding school survivor. The woman in the Brighton bookshop who took his order for the Nick Duffell book was also a survivor. She bought the book too and has registered for the course for women survivors of boarding schools.

Nick Duffell's book takes a psychoanalytical view of the impact that the boarding school regime has on those that pass through its daunting gates. The principal message is that in order for children to cope with the emotional trauma of being separated from their families, they quickly learn to insulate themselves from the pain by switching off their emotions. It is a bit like how the body goes into shock when we suffer a physical trauma. The trouble is that this protective mechanism remains switched on throughout adulthood because of the length of time that we stay at boarding school. This often results in the survivor having an incapacity for showing or even feeling emotion.

Reading the book touched us both. It was not just the painful stories it had to tell, but the realisation that we had been living our lives in a state of some 'emotional disability' because of the impact of boarding school. This disability has been so central to our beings that it had been impossible for us to see it.

On the way to the course we both felt nervous. The whole idea of facing strangers and talking about a painful time in our lives was not something either of us relished.

### The course

It's difficult with a group of strangers to achieve a sense of confidence in everyone being able to talk openly, but the workshop accomplished this rapidly. We were all desperate to get our stories off our chests. The scars of boarding school ran deep; many shared, but some shocking and unique. However, in all cases, the sense of sharing these injuries, after many years of not speaking about what happened, was overpowering. The friendship and open honesty that arose in the workshops was enormous.

The facilitation and guidance through the workshops by Nick Duffell and Rob Bland was both sensitive and passionate. Difficult things needed to be said, and the strict rules for giving everyone their own time to talk without interruption or comment helped. To set expectations, the workshops were a positive launch on our respective journeys as survivor-graduates. They were not expected – in our view rightly – to achieve for us an immediate sense of the healing we are all seeking.

Lest it should seem that we are just a couple of privileged whingers, we should point out that there was space at the workshops to talk about the benefits of the education we received and some of the good things about the whole experience. However, when we brainstormed the key aspects of the experience, the flipchart sheet was mostly full of words like 'shame', 'sadness', 'anger' and 'misery' ... albeit in beautiful grounds! Looking at the list, it was hard to imagine how an advertising company would sell it as the 'best education money can buy'. But of course, nobody has to sell it. Boarding school is so deeply ingrained in the British establishment psyche that generations of parents submit their children to it as if in a trance.

### Salvation/the future

So are we cured? Have we achieved salvation? No. But at least we are aware of some of the causes of our emotional difficulties. The healing process results in the survivor leading a richer and more fulfilled life. The question is, how do we get there? The workshop and the book have some answers. There is a benefit in analysing our survival behaviours, determining how these behaviours both serve and hinder us, and examining why they came into being and what underlying need they satisfied. The approach is one of recognition, not necessarily abandonment of these behaviours – not an easy process. And there is an underlying quest in all of this: to discover the 'real' self. Adopting a survival personality at such a young age means that your vision of yourself is obscured. Understanding your survival personalities certainly helps, but it's not the complete answer. You need to get in touch with your 'real' self.

Although there is a cognitive process in analysing our behaviours, it needs to be supported by an emotional healing. For example, one of the more emotional events during our weekends was when we did some visualisation. One of the facilitators talked us into a relaxed state, and then asked us to remember our lives before we went to boarding school. This was not easy. These were memories not just buried by time, but deliberately buried to help us survive at school. Then he asked us to remember going to the school on our first day, and what it was like.

Bob comments: 'For me, this brought back a flood of painful memories. Regardless of the beatings and the bullying that took place at school, the one thing that hurt above all else was the physical separation from those that love you and existing in a world where no one loves you. Reliving this pain was unexpected, but somehow consoling and warming. Having the group with you when you go through this is very reassuring. This pain that lasted through the weekend had one unexpected side effect. It felt like I could see other people with new eyes: not just the other survivors, but ordinary people in the street. It was as if my ability to feel emotion had been rekindled, and it was not just the pain that I felt, but also compassion and empathy.'

### Emotional courage

In sharing some of our experiences with you, we have tried to escape from the socialisation process known as the 'stiff upper lip'. Part of this involves giving space to the 'quivering lower lip.' It takes some doing after so many years. We are toying with the term 'emotional courage' to go alongside 'emotional intelligence' as something that's needed to live, survive and love in 2004 and beyond.



1. Boarding School Survivors: [www.boardingschoolsurvivors.org.uk](http://www.boardingschoolsurvivors.org.uk) (also see related site [www.abss.org.uk](http://www.abss.org.uk)).
2. Nick Duffell (2000) *The Making of Them: The British Attitude to Children and the Boarding School System*, London: Lone Arrow Press. Available from <http://boardingschoolsurvivors.co.uk/>