Reflections of a Survivor

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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. 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.

References:
Reflections of a Survivor. My God, it could have been so different... Just imagine if they, the Arabs, had accepted the United Nations decision in 1947, for the creation of two states living in peace side by side - Israel and Palestine - instead of trying to destroys us, war after war, after war. Imagine what the Middle East would have been like today. Contributing Author. OpEds. #x27;Y x27; image. Contributing Author. Reflections of a Survivor is a collection of 15 essays by six different authors (12 of the essay are written by Melony Hill) that discuss an assortment of complex topics such as domestic violence, abandonment, mental illness, chronic illness, birth defects, family betrayals, self-esteem (and a lack thereof), sexual assault, etc. Through powerful prose, depth of experience, and a touch of humor, this collection fights the stigma of mental illness by creating a diverse portrait of the different ways a person can suffer, but all can overcome. One of the essays, A Legacy of Love Betrayed is by T Has anyone considered the everyday survivors of rape and sexual assault that have this hashtag presented to them on an almost daily basis. Survivors who have suffered at the hands of another and are doing their level best to recover from their ordeal. Survivors who can only dream of having the support network and wealth to access such support that these #metoo celebrities have. What gives me the right to speak about this you ask? Well, I am a survivor of rape who despite the #metoo campaign has never spoken publicly about her ordeal. To protect the people I have spoken with about my rape, I ha Reflections of a Survivor book. Read reviews from worldâ€™s largest community for readers. Helen is the second child born into a family of nine children in... Â Goodreads helps you keep track of books you want to read. Start by marking A Legacy of Love Betrayed as Want to Read: Want to Read saving... Want to Read. Currently Reading. Read. Other editions. Enlarge cover.