

## **Nick's address to the *Boarding Concern* Conference**

Held at the Methodist International Centre 81 - 103 Euston St., London NW1 14/11/08

I am really touched to be addressing on this first conference of Boarding Concern. The origination begun in 2001, but changed its name from the *Association of Boarding School Survivors* for several reasons: because we no longer wanted to be provocative, because it was a hell of a mouthful to say, but chiefly because we had considerably widened our brief. In Britain boarding school touches on social, educational, political, and psychological issues; all are mixed and interconnected.

In the UK we are addicted to this form of education; it is the single factor that utterly shapes our social landscape. It affects us from top to bottom. And currently, here in the UK, the gap is widening between rich and poor, and between us and Europe. Instead of, as previously, distancing ourselves from Europe we have now exploited it. We have managed to convert a continent into, one the on hand, a stag-party venue for the lad culture, and on the other, a retirement home for the middle-aged middle classes, who don't fancy their chance is in our state hospital service any more than they fancied the chances of their children in the state school system.

British society is pretty mobile, but, despite Tony Blair's wishful thinking, the gap between classes is neither imaginary nor has it been transcended. In fact it is growing. Bizarrely, it looks like the public have still not sated their appetite for public schoolboy leaders, and we currently have an old Etonian runner champing at the bit in the stalls. We know that the public school culture is at the heart of this gap making. I suggest we need to 'mind the gap'; that we need to fill it. And I suggest that what we fill this gap with should be real values.

If you have ever seen any of the glossy brochures, which the boarding schools use to promote themselves, you will notice that they are full of value-speak. So I want to try saying something about values - in each of the areas I referred to - in order to show how we can spot the falsity of the BSA's terminology - it is in fact what George Orwell (who loathed Eton) called 'Double Speak' - and look for genuine values ourselves. Here are some pointers.

### ***Social values.***

How the boarding schools love to talk up the value of Community! Boarding-speak says it is wonderful for children to grow up in community. But I am not sure that they have any idea what a community is. I have just returned for a conference in Switzerland and on the last day stayed with colleagues outside Bern in a housing project that was completely child focused. The estate is built in a big U-shape, keeping out cars, around a central green area, with a meeting hall where the mothers do yoga and the fathers organise the football. The whole thing is like a big playground. You can only buy in if you have children, and when they grow your neighbours grow too, and new people come in to replace leavers. This is an attempt at social engineering and it works; it supports parents and children, with people of all ages. Like myself, my colleagues run seminars and they have no trouble leaving the children with other families or having time to themselves, when they need it. They would not dream of delegating the looking after their children to others for a whole term, because everyone is involved and likes it. To me this is real community; it is an evolved version of old-fashioned street culture.

Yet here in Britain we accept the double speak that community means sending children away to places miles from their homes to live in herds in sanitised military bases. It is insane, and our neighbours – excepting perhaps the new Russian super rich wanting to launder their money - want none of it. So the gap keeps widening.

### *Educational values*

The most prized values of boarding school parents we are repeatedly told are Choice and Quality. We all want choice, but recent research from the new science of neuro-biology tell us very clearly that the part of the brain associated with decision making is hardwired to the emotional centres. If our feelings are not involved, through physical lesion, for example, we cannot make good choices – this is now well documented. We can only chose for the world of boarding school, with its ‘community’ life, by splitting off our feelings – which is a psychological lesion, encouraged, in my opinion, by the culture that supports this habit. Could this is be why we have an inverted view of the word ‘public’ as in public school? In the United States a ‘public’ school is what is says, and in the UK it ought to be. (Don’t write in – this is a kind of a joke.)

But what about quality? The current promotional line goes that: “.... busy parents today value the opportunity that coming home at holidays and half term gives to have quality time with their children.” We can only choose for boarding schools for the young by ignoring that both parents and adults suffer for not having *quantity* time together. Forget quality time, that comes along with quantity as any divorced parent knows. Being present when your child is growing up is good for you and your child, even if it isn’t always easy. And how can the choice be real when choosing to board only is available for those who have an extra £25000 per year available? This is what makes the biggest gap between us and our neighbours, this conceit of money and the fostering of elitism - it is a false vision of quality.

### *Political values.*

When you really begin to see this gap and the role of boarding school in it then the issue becomes political. The very existence of Boarding Concern is a political fact. And this year we moved nearer to be treated as such when I had a meeting with Barry Sheerman MP, who heads up a new Commons Select Committee which in the wake of the Charity Commission review will be examining the question of whether boarding school is in fact good for children. Barry is no fool and nor is he a boarding school survivor; he has heard of Attachment Theory and of our work and has a copy of my book. He wants to call me as a witness to this Commons Select Committee.

So what can you do to engage in the political dimension of Boarding Concern? What about becoming an activist! What is there to do? You could write to the new Commons Select Committee, give money to Boarding Concern. Join it and badger the directors to give you a task; try to set up your own support groups for ex-boarders, etc., etc.

But here I want to add a health warning: to be an effective activist you have to live the values, walk the talk. It is no good acting if you haven’t done your own inner work, or have stopped short; it then has a tendency to become what psychologists

call 'acting out'. Externalising the problem too much is a mistake, and you can sense it in the quality of a person's action. Much of the radical political movement of the last 40 years failed due to an inability to do the necessary inner work and stop projecting out. You have to use your anger to focus yourself and to be able to take a meta-view while making your own inner work your source – along with your values.

### *Psychological values*

Finally, to psychology, or psychotherapeutic values, which is more my home area. Boarding school means that children are vulnerable and have to do without their normal bodily expectation of being protected, attached, and dependent. This means that they are more available to be bullied and abused. There are many people who are concerned about boarding for this reason. I call this the *overt* problem, and we campaign hard to shine light on that.

But it is by no means the end of the story; if it was, our work would be much more straight forward. There is also a *covert* problem, which is more difficult because it is an internal problem. My work with Boarding School Survivors proposed that boarders survived by rapidly creating what I called a *Strategic Survival Personality*. This is a pseudo-adult internal figure invented to protect the unprotected child. But because it is created by a child under duress it is but a cartoon fantasy of what an adult is. It is why ex-boarders make such brilliant spies and comedians – this facility in

All attempts to protect psychologically end up also as defence. We build walls around us to shut out danger and at the same time cut our selves off from love. We invariably cut off our nose to spite our face. Boarding School Survivors have a tendency to seek help only in crisis and that stay loyal to the boarding schools' value of self-sufficiency and independence, which you will see writ large in all the boarding schools' glossy brochures. Thus they betray themselves, they send themselves away again, they send their souls away.

So I recommend taking this soul-work seriously with a variety of therapeutic work: reading, personal therapy, workshops, couple therapy etc., especially focusing on intimate relationship – if you are lucky enough to be in one - and what happens in it. I am sorry to say that it is a life-long process of self-observation and self-regulation, but now for the sake of *living* prioritised over *survival*. This is particularly an issue in intimate relationships. How the problem works in daily life is that Strategic Survival Personality sees any approach as a threat. It is almost impossible to hold the concept of 'WE' when you have been surviving in profound privacy all your life. It is common sense that surviving means you live by the precept of 'every man for himself'.

Our bodies expect dependence and care. They do not expect us to be living alone – especially if we are actually in an intimate relationship or a family. They expect us to be spreading and receive care, and building towards the higher mature value, neither overt dependence nor independence, but *interdependence*. Living in any other way we abandon our bodies and live isolated lives inside our minds. If surviving being a boarding school survivor is hard work - just now you may have groaned inside when I referred to a life-long discipline of self-knowledge and self-acceptance – then

think of the reward. Turning this around, after so many years, your body returns to you; your relationships become fulfilling. You start to come home.

And this time, you come home for good.