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We welcome your letters and emails. Email Margaret Akmakjian-Pitz at o2quiver@aol.com or write to Glanrhyd Lodge, Cloigyn, Pontantwn, Cydwelli SA17 5NB

The deadline for inclusion in the next issue is **25 January 2007**

Emotional courage

50 years on – the impact of a boarding school experience, by Thurstine Basset

In February 2006 I was 58 – not a particularly special birthday.

And yet, 58 is a significant milestone to anybody who was sent away to boarding school at the age of eight. Fifty years ago I had that experience. I don't remember my birthday as an eight year old but it was the last one I was able to share with my family until I was 19. I don't recall being prepared for the experience of boarding school as, for example, the cricket commentator Henry Blofeld recalled on a recent Desert Island Discs. His mother started calling him by his surname 'Blofeld' as the day of his departure approached. I knew I was going though. I had all the new uniform and the big trunk for all my clothes. Everything was new – the trunk, the clothes, the boys, the teachers, and the school. Nothing was familiar.

As an adult, I have worked in the field of mental health and social psychology, and over the years I have both learned about and taught the various theories of human development – psychodynamic, humanistic,

behavioural, cognitive and many more. And yet no theory seems to fit with the British habit of sending children away to board at ages of eight and sometimes younger. One moment you are in the environment of your family with strong attachments to your mother, father and any siblings. The next moment you are poleaxed into an alien and institutional world. This sudden breaking of attachments is the worst possible psychological practice regardless of which theory of human development you study or adhere to. It is something that has by its very nature to be survived and it is a tribute to the resilience of the many children that have this experience that they do indeed find ways of surviving it.

When I was pushed through the doors for the first time, my sense of bewilderment and loss was almost overpowering. The first and most natural thing I wanted to do was to cry, but I soon discovered that this was frowned upon and discouraged. I learned to bite my lip and joined centuries of British-educated and privileged children who develop a 'stiff upper lip'.

I have had some pain and trauma in my life, but generally consider I have been quite lucky. Certainly I have mostly remained fit and healthy. The feelings I had when my parents finally left me to my own devices back in 1956 rate highly among the most painful in my life. My mother cried all the way home as she held my teddy bear (the one familiar thing I had with me) that she was advised not to leave with me. Some weeks later on their first visit, my mum and dad found me in a cheerful mood. I had made a friend and my mum recalls that I almost completely ignored her, as I was so intent on playing with my friend. I ran straight past her. This story she quotes to this day as proof that it was she and not I who suffered from my going away. In truth, of course, we both suffered. Her suffering was allowed to have at least an element of emotion within it, whereas my suffering was quickly turned into a survival technique where all emotion was repressed and I faced the world with a cognitive shield. I learned to think and not feel.

This was my 'survival personality'. I can remember a conscious decision to take it on. Early in my first year, I was looking at the league table that was published for the whole school. At the top was the boy with the most 'plus marks' and at the bottom the boy whose 'minus marks' greatly outnumbered the plus. A line was drawn somewhere in the middle of all this with boys who had more pluses than minuses above and the others below. I was below the line and realised that it was a mug's game to be there. Being below the line meant a life of punishments – mostly the cane. My headmaster had picked up on this bad behaviour that saw me below the line. He wrote in my report 'In a third term he must put away these childish ways'. And so, aged eight, I made the decision that it was time to grow up.

I cannot describe my 10 years at boarding school as unhappy. Indeed there were many happy moments. I achieved some success both academically and athletically. I had

many good friends. I was not abused in any way. I was punished and caned on a few occasions but nothing too much – certainly compared to some other boys, whose names I can still recall and who were punished and caned on a regular basis. Some didn't return when a new term began. Maybe they learned to survive elsewhere.

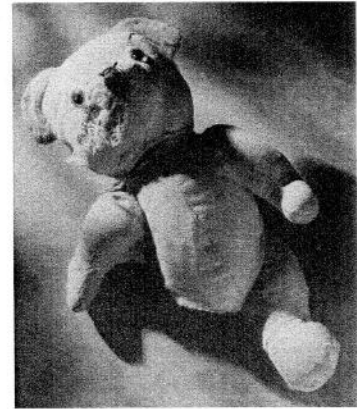
I have said I wasn't prepared for going away at eight, but equally the same could be said for leaving school at 18. The feeling of finally leaving after all those years was as high in an almost ecstatic way as the original feeling had been low in a deeply miserable way. Both experiences, 10 years apart, had an other-worldliness about them.

The school I went to when I was eight is still in business. In fact, it is flourishing and is considered one of the best preparatory schools. I left at 13 and have never been back. With the 50th anniversary of my first day there I think it is time to pay a visit. I have thought about visiting many times in the past few years but never quite got round to it.

My interest in exploring these long-distant events was roused when I attended a workshop for survivors of boarding schools about two years ago. These workshops are run by Nick Duffell, whose pioneering book *The making of them* lays bare the psychological damage that the British boarding school system does to young, often very young children. The fact that this damage is dressed in the robes of privilege makes it both hard to comprehend and equally hard to speak out about.

I wrote something about the experience of attending with one of the other participants, and we came up with the term 'emotional courage':

'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':

Facing up to this damage and speaking out about it takes courage. Not the courage of 'grin and bear it'. Not the courage of the 'stiff upper lip'. Not the courage of 'boys don't cry'. (These characteristics are often seen as strengths but in fact they are weaknesses masquerading as strength.) The courage I am talking about here is the 'emotional courage' to recognise and face up to pain and hurt, to acknowledge it and through experiencing it to grow through it into a more complete person. In this context, crying is a sign of strength not weakness.

The boarding school system is more kindly now (teddy bears are permitted) than when I endured it from 1956 onwards but it is at heart still the same system. Speaking out about it is hard. All your socialisation processes tell you not to. Surely it is pathetic to complain and moan – worse still that you are a privileged whinger.

The British boarding school system for boys can be seen as a form of hot housing for masculinity. Miller³, writing more generally about men and mental health, says:

'At first glance maleness might seem to be straightforwardly health-promoting since it offers privileged access to a range of valuable

resources. However, closer examination reveals a more complex picture. Several writers have argued that the privileged male role imposes expectations about masculinity that may have a serious, detrimental effect on the mental health of men themselves, in addition to that of women and children. Successful male socialisation requires men to be silent and strong, leaving little scope to acknowledge and deal constructively with feelings of vulnerability or powerlessness. Instead men are offered safety through dominance and control of the external world, and survival through the means of sanctioned violence'.

Miller (writing with Bell⁴ in 1996) also notes that the end product of male socialisation is alienation from meaningful intimacy, and objectification of all those who are 'not me'.

In effect, some of the problem here is to do with the general socialisation of boys and men and is not necessarily something that boarding school is unique in fostering. Society attempts to extinguish or certainly to suppress emotions among men. This is a gradual process for all boys as they grow up. However, those boys who go to boarding school get an extra dose (even overdose) of suppression at an early age.

I emerged from the boarding school survival workshop with strong feelings of both sadness at the premature loss of childhood and great joy of allowing the pent-up feelings from many years ago to flow again. I felt unblocked. I also had gained new understandings about my life.

For example, I had never fully understood why I was drawn to social work and the caring professions. In my first job in a large psychiatric hospital in the early 1970s, I felt I immediately both knew the system and wanted to change it.

I have subsequently also found a number of mental health workers

The end product of male socialisation is alienation from meaningful intimacy, and objectification of all those who are 'not me'

from a variety of professional backgrounds, both men and women, who feel their work and their fight for a more equitable mental health service has its roots in their own boarding school education.

On another related note, I was recently talking to a colleague who is a survivor of the mental health system. He thought that the reason British psychiatry was so lacking in emotion and soul was because its main proponents, the psychiatrists, were mostly products of the British boarding school system.

Another revelation for me was when I thought about my work with survivors of the mental health system. I had been enabling people for many years to tell their story, but didn't realise I too had a story to tell myself.

Recently, I attended a poetry workshop at a mental health service user/survivor group (CAPITAL in West Sussex), run by a friend of mine, the survivor poet Frank Bangay. Frank said 'I've picked a line from a poem by an Irish poet and the line is: Roll forth my song like a gushing river - just write in relation to your survival of the mental health system'. I was the only person in the workshop who was not a survivor of the mental health system, but I had no difficulty writing my poem:

*A boy of 8 goes off to school
sadly he doesn't know the rules
but happily he works out a way
to survive the system day by day*

*A lad of 18 he leaves one day
sadly its now too late to play*

*by chance he finds a useful role
to fight the system and make it whole
A man of 55 finds out
what his choice in life's about
he fought the hospitals until they
closed
he helped survivors along the road*

*This other thing he learned to do
to help out others and be true
the only trouble with this plan
he never learned to help his man*

*Twenty years of survivor stories
before I learned to tell my own
roll forth my song like a gushing river
how I wish I'd stayed at home.'*

It took emotional courage to both write and read out the poem. The poem seemed to be the piece in my jigsaw that finally brought things together for me. It helped me make sense of who I was and who I had become. I cannot read it without crying - the tears are part of letting go of distant and repressed feelings. It brings me face-to-face with myself.

Emotional courage also involves what Wellwood⁵ calls 'making friends with emotion'. He says:

'Emotions are often problematic because they are our most common experience of being taken over by forces seemingly beyond our control. Usually we regard them as a threat, imagining that if we really let ourselves feel our anger or depression, they would totally overwhelm us.'

Wellwood⁵ speaks of accepting emotions, going towards them and facing them directly and fearlessly,

and by so doing to use their energy as a renewing and awakening life force.

I have always liked the concept of emotional intelligence as it acknowledges intelligence that is not just cognitive. Emotional courage seems to me to be a means for the expression of emotional intelligence. Half a century is a long time to wait to acquire enough emotional courage to get in touch with some of your innermost feelings – still better late than never as they say. Wish me luck when I go back to my old school...I still have the teddy bear...perhaps I'll take him... I just asked him and he said he'd rather stay where he is.

Thurstine Bassett is an independent mental health training consultant. He developed the Certificate in Community Mental Health Care for the Mental Health Foundation and is also joint course leader for a diploma in community mental health at the Richmond Fellowship. He was a social worker before moving into training and education, where he works from a broad base across disciplines and involving service users and carers.

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The Radcliffe writing award

– attracting the next generation of authors

New Radcliffe writing awards have been announced for 2007. The awards are designed to encourage aspiring book authors with new ideas and fresh thinking and to overcome the catch-22 situation in which no previous track record is often a barrier to publication. Each winning entry will earn £250 and a certificate, and all proposals will also be considered for publication and will earn the usual royalties.

The 2007 awards are for proposals for new educational texts and references, with an emphasis on those areas of particular need. An award will be made in each of the following categories: clinical and biomedical texts and references; and revision aids for undergraduate and postgraduate examinations.

For more information and how to make a submission, contact Andrew Bax on abax@radcliffemed.com. Proposals must be received by **31 January 2007**.

talking point

What are your views on the current interest in CBT as the all-purpose answer to everything? Writing in *The Times* (4 November 2006) BACP Fellow Phillip Hodson points out that although the five main mental health charities have announced their support for the proposed expansion of NHS psychotherapy with a broad emphasis on CBT, there are dissenting voices. While Tony Blair's advisor, economist Professor Richard Layard is moving ahead with plans to launch a nationwide health service programme of CBT, psychologist Oliver James tells Daily Mail readers that CBT only appeals to Tony Blair because it is 'quick, cheap and simplistic' but is seriously lacking in long-term efficacy.

Hodson writes, '...if you believe nobody loves you then CBT therapists believe they need only to produce evidence that one person does love you for you

to be proved wrong and for your behaviour to change'. On the other hand, he points out that—according to 'most authoritative sources'—at least half those patients receiving CBT for panic disorder had suffered relapse or sought new help after 24 months. Professor Layard has also recently stated that CBT is appropriate for only about 40 per cent of patients overall. CORE research, however, shows there is no significant difference in the long-term success rates for CBT over traditional forms of therapy. In other words, as we heard at the BACP conference and AGM recently, 'it's the relationship that matters'.

What do you think? Send your thoughts to the editor, Margaret Akmakjian-Pitz email: o2quiver@aol.com or write to: Glanrhyd Lodge, Cloigyn, Pontantwn, Cydweli SA17 5NB or start a 'thread' on the website: www.aiponline.org.uk