

# Unmaking the boarding school child: Leaning into vulnerability

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**ABSTRACT:** When children are sent to boarding school it can leave them traumatized and disrupt trust leading them to hide their vulnerable selves both in childhood and adulthood. The experience can also give rise to shame with the child believing they 'are bad' (Brown, 2018). The authors recount their respective journeys as they have sought to discover and heal boarding school trauma by leaning into vulnerability as they find the courage to share the stories of their experiences.

**KEY WORDS:** Trauma, abandonment, loss

In this paper we outline our respective journeys of recovering from boarding school trauma. Joy Schaverien (2021, p. 607) has identified four elements associated with what she has termed, 'Boarding School Syndrome': 'abandonment', 'bereavement', 'captivity' and 'dissociation'. Abandonment comes from the child's loss of family, home and love

leading to mourning, 'bereavement', for that loss (Schaverien 2021, pp. 608-10). The boarding school regime leads to a feeling of captivity or 'imprisonment' and with no language to describe their experience the child dissociates developing 'a false self, a form of psychological armour to protect the vulnerable self from being overwhelmed by un-processable feelings' (Schaverien 2021, pp. 610-11). Boarding School Syndrome describes 'a very complex set of events, the impact of which differs in each case' (Schaverien 2021, pp. 607-8).

The title of this paper arises partly from Philip Corrigan's 1988 (p. 142) article referring to 'what grammar school did with to, and for my body'. At the end of the article, he outlines ways to counter act 'the powers of the grammar' by 'catching up the lost threads, the funny, awkward, difficult, silly moments when we felt this, or sensed that'. Then he concludes: *The last certainty, here is where I have to start, with me, unmaking the making of the boy* (Corrigan 1988, p. 158). If Corrigan had been writing now, he might have referred to adopting a position of vulnerability: '... the emotion that we experience during times of uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure' (Brown 2021, p. 13).

We are both now in our seventies and have been working at 'unmaking' the protective armour against vulnerability we developed at boarding school for many years. A commonality in our stories includes the importance in discovering language to enable us to tell our stories and a space in which we will be truly heard which includes the therapeutic space. Like other trauma survivors, it takes time to tell our stories as we reiterate them again and again until, as Joy Schaverien (2015, p. 105) expresses it the trauma '... no longer carries the huge emotional charge it once did'. Integration of trauma takes time (Herman 2001, p181). We have found that the re-telling may take different forms across time and that learning about how trauma in general and boarding school trauma in particular impacts the individual is helpful in providing 'a map of the territory' (Schaverien 2015, p. 105). Finally, our stories reveal that leaning into vulnerability and shame assists the boarding school child/adult to trust themselves as worthy of love and connection.

### **Thurstine:**

Have I recovered from the trauma of being abandoned in the privileged environment of an English boarding school at the age of 8? Am I still angry with my headmaster who stated in my report when commenting on my bad (or as he saw it 'pestilent') behaviour 'In a third term he must put away these childish ways'? Was my childhood stolen from me or merely locked away and frozen in time to emerge at unexpected and often unhelpful times during adulthood?

I think 'discovery' is a better term for the journey I have been on for the last 20 years. It started when a psychotherapist suggested that I attend a Boarding School Survivors workshop back in 2004. I was in my mid-50s. I was very ambivalent about going and set off to London after saying to my wife 'God knows why I am going to

spend a weekend with a bunch of dysfunctional ex-public school boys when I have spent my life carefully avoiding situations like that!’ Yet to my surprise, what I found was a powerful sense of camaraderie amongst the group of men who had all experienced the trauma of being left to fend for themselves on their own in 1950/1960/1970s residential institutions still operating under a Victorian model of childcare. Had the staff read up on child development and psychology? Hell No! It was the age of Jimmy Edwards and Whacko! Harry Potter and Hogwarts were just a glimmer in J.K. Rowling’s eyes. Individual one-to-one therapy had signposted me to a form of facilitated group therapy and this group approach suited and worked well for me. ‘Survivors’ from trauma ‘need help from others to mourn their losses’ (Herman 2001, p. 69) and sharing in groups with people who have had similar experiences can lead to mutual support through ‘the pain of mourning’ (Herman 2001, p. 228). I had found a group whose stories I could relate to and who could relate to my story.

The weekend turned out to be transformational. I felt a strong physical reaction. It was as if I had shed a skin and my body felt lighter. Going to work the following Monday in London. I floated along Tottenham Court Road – my feet hardly touching the ground. I didn’t know then, but I say now that recovery from Boarding School Syndrome can only be achieved by feeling your way out of it – thinking your way out of it just won’t work. Once I was reacquainted with those feelings of loss and abandonment, I began to slowly welcome them in and recognize them for what they are.

A result of connecting with my boarding school experiences led me intellectually to a growing recognition that my work in the mental health field was linked to my school experience particularly as my first job in mental health was at a large Victorian psychiatric hospital run on very outdated lines. However, it was later that I understood the link emotionally. I was helping out a friend, a mental health survivor poet, who was running a workshop for people who had used mental health services. He asked that they write a poem about surviving these services and I joined in writing a poem about surviving boarding school. Out it all poured! I had spent time helping mental health survivors tell their stories, even published a book on the topic (Basset and Stickley 2010), but never realised that I too had a story to tell.

So was it all my mother’s fault? She didn’t want to lose me at such a young age, but nevertheless went along with the plan which was seen by my father and the rest of my wider family as the only way to educate children. I took my bear with me to school but on arrival the headmaster said, ‘best that the bear doesn’t stay’ – better of course would have been ‘best that the boy doesn’t stay’! So, my mother cried all the way home, clinging on to my bear. How many mothers have felt this way over the years? Their story has not been told but their tears would swell a mighty river. My feelings of being abandoned were a mix of sorrow and bewilderment and over time I came to realize that this way of being was going to last for 10 years until I would be able to leave school aged 18.

Over time my anger subsided and I made my peace with my mother and was able to tell her that I loved her. Later, towards the end of her life, my sister and I had to take her to a care home for people with a diagnosis of dementia. We left her there and, home later, we both felt terrible for abandoning her in this strange and unfamiliar care home. We both realised that this must have been how she felt when she had left both of us in boarding schools. After the workshop in 2004, I felt drawn to the world of boarding school survivors and worked for some years as one of the directors of an organisation that supported survivors. In 2016 I wrote with Nick Duffell, *Trauma, Abandonment and Privilege* (Duffell and Basset 2016). Nick had always wanted to follow up his groundbreaking *The Making of Them* (Duffell 2000) with a practical book on how to carry out therapeutic work with ex-boarders. I had always enjoyed writing and had published considerably in the mental health field. It felt liberating to be able to use these skills in writing about a topic that is deeply personal to me.

I cannot really say if I have recovered or not. However, I have discovered a great deal in the 20 years since I attended the workshop. Now in my mid-70s, I have learned to embrace vulnerability as a strength. I understand the feelings of abandonment when they occasionally emerge in everyday life. I can now feel as well as think. I do my best to live and love in the modern world but as a straight white man whose early education at boarding school was in my opinion sexist, racist and homophobic, the journey can at times be a bumpy one. If you want to change the world, then best to start with yourself.

But – what of my bear? He always symbolised going off to the boarding school to me and I believe I displaced feelings of loss and abandonment onto him. Vamik Volkan (2006 pp. 53-54 cited in Trimmingham Jack and Devereux 2018, p. 209) argues that displacement of unprocessed emotions onto such objects allows ‘the person to externalise and postpone the complicated grieving process and the objects continue to be associated with “hot feelings” until the work of mourning the loss is finally achieved’. Over the years my bear was greatly loved but rather fell into disrepair. During the lockdown of Covid my wife found a restorer of bears and now he has a new life and is transformed.

### **Christine:**

In 1957 when I was seven, my parents sent me to a country boarding school convent south of Sydney, Australia. There I shut down emotionally from any need for love and affection, becoming a rebel and rejecting my parents – an unconscious rebellion against being sent away while my younger sisters stayed at home.

I was twenty-eight when my trauma erupted. I spent three years pouring it out to a therapist while directing my anger against my parents, as I swung between rage and abandonment. When I finally learned that my parents’ decision to send me away was based on problems in their marriage, it had a cathartic effect. I packed it away and went on with my life, taking that small girl with me and trying to reassure her that she

is loved as she is, teaching her how to recognise and appropriately communicate her feelings, how to use her gifts and to accept her mistakes. We stumbled along. There were successes and failures.

My second return to trauma was when I was forty-four. I believed (mistakenly) I had dealt with my experience emotionally and now, as an academic in the field of education, I wanted to explore my small primary boarding school (then closed) through an intellectual lens. I used unstructured interviews with ex-students and teachers (nuns), analysing how the school regime associated with gender, class (it was an elite school) and religion was designed to shape students and how those involved responded to those shaping discourses when they were at the school and later in life. I adopted a sociological perspective: a way of thinking that sets individual thinking and behaviour against society-wide influences and structures. It led me to understand that all, including my parents, were actors in a set drama written in that historical period that was influenced by the British belief that an elite boarding school experience would produce refined, educated, obedient women who would be religious and make good wives. I concluded that the regime caused suffering not only for students but also for the nuns (mostly young women) who were idealistic in their desire to serve God. We were all victims of beliefs that 'goodness' meant 'obedience' and that love for God was expressed through sacrifice and suffering. It left me feeling a deep compassion for all including myself. When the publisher of the subsequent book (Trimingham Jack, 2003) asked me to write about myself in the introduction, I resisted exposing my story publicly. So I wrote a few factual, non-revealing paragraphs, pushing down that fear of exposing my vulnerable child self.

My third return occurred when I was sixty-seven and discovered the UK research on boarding school trauma. I read it all, then turned to reading general trauma literature. Finally, I had a language to understand my boarding school experience! Schaverien (2021, p. 607) has found that the term 'Boarding School Syndrome' and research on the topic has 'given legitimacy, and a name, to the suffering of many ex-boarders'. Again, my subconscious erupted and repressed memories and emotions arose as I confronted the abuse I experienced at a secondary convent where I was punished with days of solitary confinement. I decided to write the first book about the Australian experience, writing as both an outsider (an academic analysing the experience informed by research) and an insider (one who was reconnecting with repressed aspects of that boarding school trauma). It was a deep dive, bringing together emotions and intellect in a form of written narrative therapy (White and Epston, 1990).

While writing, I had regular visits with a well-respected and experienced therapist. Five years earlier, we had worked together for a year after my father died. When I decided to end our sessions, he told me I needed at least another two years of therapy. I agreed but couldn't see my way forward and he had nothing to offer me in charting a path. It was only when I read the boarding school literature five years later that it all made sense. One day when I was driving to see him, it suddenly came to me

that he had been to boarding school, even though there had been no disclosure from him (attending boarding school is far less common in Australia than in the UK). When asked, he admitted I was right. *What was it like for you?* His response: *I hated it!* I asked him to buy and read a copy of Schaverien's book (2015). He purchased it but later said he never found time to read it. Judith Herman (2001, p. 151) writes: 'Therapists who work with traumatised patients have to struggle to overcome their own denial.'

What led me to know this? I have a heightened capacity for tuning into the emotional state of those around me and sometimes intuitively knowing what is going on for them. Did I hone this skill at boarding school where survival in the group depended on being hyperaware of what was going on around me? What does this mean for other ex-boarders who are in therapy and are perhaps less reflective, assertive and able to drive their own process than I am?

When the book was published (Jack, 2020), I felt comfortable that it would resonate with many ex-boarders, but extremely uncomfortable about others reading it because there was shame about exposing myself in that way. It is a feeling I am only now beginning to understand 'shame' and Brené Brown's work has been helpful: "Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging, and connection" (Brown 2021: 137). Yet there is more at work here for me. Feeling comfortable about boarding school survivors reading my work comes from a belief that they will empathise with my experiences, not see me as flawed or reject me. However, my fear is that those who have not had this experience will see me as 'other' and offer me sympathy or pity me. When this happens (and it does), I feel abandoned and rejected all over again. What I need is for them to mine their own experiences of abandonment or rejection so they can stand beside me, creating as Brown puts it 'emotional resonance': *'I know that feeling. I'm not going to fall into it right now but I know it and I can communicate with you in a way that makes you know you are not alone'* (Brown 2021: 128). Of course, I cannot control how people respond to my book, but I find it extremely helpful to understand what is driving my fear and what would be helpful. It has also taught me that I need to lean more into self-compassion rather than self-judgement – a learning journey I am still on. We are still holding hands and stumbling along that young boarding schoolgirl and me. What if my therapist had been aware of boarding school literature when we first worked together? What if he had been willing to read it and respond to it in our later sessions?

When I began this paper, I had no intention of writing about my struggles in exposing myself to a wide community of readers in my book. Practising leaning into vulnerability has given me the courage to bring my feelings of shame out into the open. Now I understand that 'we all have it', that we are 'all afraid to talk about it', and 'the less we talk about it, the more control it has over us' (Brown 2021, p. 136). It has been liberating to own it, to write about and to learn that doing so is a powerful tool in connecting to others (Brown 2021, p. 139). There is a joy in the unmaking.

Freeing myself from the ramifications of my early trauma involved both an intellectual and an emotional approach: 'Language is our portal to meaning-making, connection, healing, learning and self-awareness' (Brown 2021, p. xxi). The value of having an intellectual understanding of trauma is supported by research that indicates that 'education about what trauma is, the causes of traumatic responses, and how they manifest in people's lives within the social context is extremely important' (Haskell and Randall 2009, p. 88). I would extend this argument to say that having a sound intellectual understanding about boarding school trauma gives survivors agency. It enables us to tell our stories, to access the related feelings and to understand how the trauma has impacted our lives. Adopting a historical and sociological perspective is also essential in understanding that our 'one and only life cycle as something that had to be and, that by necessity permitted of no substitutions' (Erikson 1963, p. 260). For us, it included growing up in a particular family, culture and historical period in which boarding schools were seen as advantageous.

## **Discussion**

The voices of the boarding school survivors speak loud and clear in two recent publications with a variety of stories from both women (Simpson 2018) and men (Laughton et al. 2021). Also, individual accounts abound, for example Okwonga (2021) and Onyema (1972; 2021). There are many ways we can share our stories: in therapy, groups, written form, art and film. Linking objects may be central in that process. Telling our stories takes time as we may want to return to them again and again. What is important is that we do tell the stories and that those who listen respond with empathy, including therapists allowing the stories to resonate with their own experiences. Mutual self-disclosure has a part to play in this dialogue. Therapists who have boarded are usually very helpful and empathic as they understand the context through personal experience. But what if a therapist is still struggling with their own boarding baggage? We know that trust is built by sharing vulnerability but what if the boarding school survivor unconsciously senses that they cannot put full trust in their therapist? Feeling abandoned, rejected, inadequate and shamed are all part of our common humanity and learning to lean into and share these feelings has the potential for connection and healing in many settings including the therapy space, for both client and practitioner.

We acknowledge the importance of Schaverien's (2021) four elements or ABCD of Boarding School Syndrome: Abandonment, bereavement, captivity and dissociation – but we would like some more positive Es: Enlightenment empowerment, and emancipation.

We also note that psychotherapists who want to undertake specialist training on working with ex-boarders are informed on the UK Boarding School Survivors website that: 'Ex-boarders are amongst the most difficult clients'. So, are we both examples of being 'amongst the most difficult clients'? It is perhaps not for us to say, but we sense

that it is *the work* between client and therapist that is difficult and not necessarily the clients themselves.

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