TRAUMA, ABANDONMENT AND PRIVILEGE – A THERAPEUTIC GUIDE TO WORKING WITH BOARDING SCHOOL SURVIVORS,

 by Nick Duffell and Thurstine Bassett, Routledge, 2016. ISBN: 978-1-138-78870-1

Nick Duffell has done pioneering work in establishing that behind the façade of privilege, private boarding education can be emotionally traumatic for many children. In this excellent new book, he and his co-author, Thurstine Bassett, take their mission to the field of psychotherapy and associated professions. They want more clinicians to be aware of this potential trauma and to better understand how to work with adult clients who attended boarding school.

The book draws on different psychotherapy traditions. Readable, short chapters are interspersed with useful case examples, as well as by questions to aid the therapist in reflecting on the material. There are also potential exercises for the clients themselves.

The focus of the book is an exploration of what the authors call the ‘boarding school syndrome’. At its core, this is the process by which children learn to minimise or even dissociate from their emotions. Although many boarders may already come from avoidantly attached families and nanny or au pair care, the practice of boarding itself deliberately ruptures previous attachments in order to re-socialise the child in its own peculiar culture. It promotes personalities which appear self-reliant, competent, “little soldiers” who can cope with anything.

 The fall-out from this process is that the emotionally unsupported and abandoned child develops chronic anxiety and mistrust: a fear of being wrong or of getting caught, along with the need to armour the self, by using the rational intellect or by projecting emotions onto others to defend against vulnerability. The authors advocate therapy which provides a safe, accepting and mothering environment in which to take off the armour and mature, learning to integrate the defensively cut off islands of self and to learn to “live” not just survive.

As an ex-boarder myself, I found many of the case examples and quotes from ex-boarders painfully resonant and moving at times. However, my own inner ‘Rebel’ (one of three ‘strategic survival personality’ types) threw up a few questions including whether the book’s overarching narrative would apply to securely attached children and whether there is a more complex story for those with disorganised early attachments. Avenues for future research, perhaps.

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