

HOME AT LAST

BOARDING SCHOOL PAIN AND ITS HEALING

Mark Stibbe

PROLOGUE

When I was a child, my father always used to utter the same refrain every time our car was within a few hundred yards of the house where we lived at the time. He would chant, “Home at last, all dangers past.”

I’m not sure where Dad found this but he certainly loved it and he frequently uttered it. It always made me smile.

In the years leading up to my eighth birthday, the sentiments behinds these words had considerably currency for me. Although my dad was a public school teacher, and we therefore moved a number of times, where we lived was always “home”. There was no doubt about it. This was where I belonged. This was where I felt rooted. This was where I felt safe, happy too.

Then all that changed.

On 16th September 1968, I was sent away to prep school. From that day on, the value of the word “home” decreased. The place I used to call my “home” was now somewhere I visited. Nine months out of twelve, I lived in a country house in Berkshire, mingling with hundreds of other boys for whom “home” had become a confused reality as well.

There was no mistake: home was now somewhere temporary. It was no longer a place of permanency.

For nearly fifty years, I lived with the legacy of this traumatic displacement. I remember when I was the Vicar of St Andrew’s Church, Chorleywood crossing the car park one day from the church to the Vicarage. I was in my forties and I had been the incumbent for about five years by then. My predecessor, Bishop David Pytches, had long since moved on.

As I walked towards the front door, I thought, “It’s very good of David to let me be a guest for such a long time.”

In my mind, my house was not my home.

I was a visitor there.

Reading this, some may say, “That’s inevitable. Vicars are always moving in and out of houses that are not their own.”

The problem with this is that it applied to other houses too. After leaving Chorleywood, I bought a house in Watford. Now at last I would surely feel at home. Not at all - almost every day I would come downstairs in the morning, look at the long vertical window and the sun streaming through it, and think, “How wonderful to be in a holiday house like this.”

In my heart, I was a temporary visitor not a permanent resident.

The ancient Greeks had two words that we can translate “I live.” The first, *paroikeo* carries the connotation of a transient abode, such as a foreigner might feel passing through a place. The other word, *katoikeo*, also translates as “I live” but here the connotation is of permanence. It means perpetually and continuously to make your home somewhere. Both words have *oikos* in them, which means “house”. But *paroikeo* has the prefix *para*, which means “adjacent to, nearby, not embedded in.”

For most of my life I have been a *paroikos*.

I have felt like a stranger in every place I’ve called home.

Until now, that is.

In recent years I have had to come to terms with the painful legacy of the ten years I spent at boarding school. I have been compelled, as a result of divorce and the loss of home and family, to face the things I didn't want to face about myself. In all of this, I have had to own the fact that most of my life I've felt like I've been visiting somewhere, passing through, not really belonging. Today I know where that feeling originated. I have experienced an extraordinary degree of healing. I have found a sense of home again.

Home at Last is partly my story of how I developed a homesick soul, partly a collage of lessons I have learned about how we can find true recovery from the sense of exile that children feel when they are sent away from home for extended periods of time.

Put like that, this book may have much wider appeal than just the world of boarding school. One man who read some of an early draft remarked that they could relate deeply to what I had written. They hadn't been to boarding school but had been sent away from home during the Blitz in World War Two. This had given birth to a separation anxiety that had affected the rest of his life. The applications of my story are therefore more far-reaching than may at first appear. Although the subject may seem a bit "niche", to quote one bookseller, its relevance is greater than we may imagine. Those whose childhood consisted of being sent from one foster home to another may relate to it deeply. Those sent away to live with relatives may find some comfort here as well.

Whoever you are, whatever your story, if you have a deep longing to come home, then this is for you.

It's time to move from being a *paroikos* to a *katoikos*.

For all of us with homesick hearts, we're about to hear our Father sing, "Home at last, all dangers past."

Introduction

I realise now, looking back, that there rarely was a time while I was growing up when I was not in boarding school. At eight years old I began ten years of boarding, first at a prep school and then, at thirteen, at a public school. There I spent nine months out of every twelve, coming home only at the half-term holidays. When I returned to my parents at Christmas, Easter and summer I found myself within a boarding house again, this time at Bradfield College where my father was a housemaster. Even when we escaped as a family to the rustic seclusion of the Norfolk coast, the boarding world was never far away. Our house near Holt became the hub for many visitors - headmasters of Eton and elsewhere; former boarders, some of whom became our godparents; old friends of dad and Mum, many of whom were teachers or alumni at boarding schools both near and far.

Before I started boarding school myself, I often used to wander down the staircase in the private side. Truly, in my father's house there were many, many rooms. In one half there were fifty or so boys, all boarders, who slept each night in dormitories. In the other half there were five of us in all - my father, mother, older brother, twin sister and me, who slept in our own rooms. In addition there was our Labrador Bronte, our beagle Emma and our Siamese cat called Suzie Wong. My mother, completely ignorant that this was a celebrated Chinese prostitute, had given her this name. "I liked the sound of it," she said when one day she was challenged by my brother Giles. That cat would constantly pass from one part of the house to the other, somehow finding her way into the 'boy's side.' Maybe, conscious of her name, she went by night in search of men in need of comfort.

At the bottom of the staircase I would often stand and stare at the wooden door that stood between the private side and the strange, uncharted world where “the boys” lived. I’d wander right up to that door and touch it, wondering if I was on the threshold to another world, like Narnia or Middle Earth. What was it like beyond that door? What kind of world lay on the other side? Who were these boys who strode in gowns like marching crows each day to the classrooms further down the hill?

One day, when all was quiet on the private side and the boys were home for holidays, I tried the door. It was unlocked! I slipped beyond onto a polished floor. I can smell it still today. Looking to my left I saw a door half open. It was my father’s study. There was a large mahogany desk beneath some windows. More books than I had ever seen were crammed into every space available on the shelves that ran like steps up several walls.

I tiptoed towards the desk and stared at the black and white photo of my mum - looking sideways, smiling like a film star. I smiled back. In front of it there lay a gilded knife for cutting open letters. I held it up to the light that streamed from the sunshine pouring through the windows. I thrust it forwards several times. “The vorpal blade went snicker-snack,” I cried inside, quoting as my father had a thousand times the victory shout from *Jabberwocky*.

It was only when I put the worn blade down I saw it. Lying in the corner of the study, behind the desk, there was a bamboo cane, leaning against the velvet curtain. It had bruised knuckles all the way down to its base and its wood was covered like an old man’s back in light brown spots. Straightaway I knew this was my father’s cane and that in this cosy place of leather chairs and books he must have wielded, when he had to, this whistling instrument.

At that moment, I understood that my father was not just kind and good but capable of imposing punishment. I would never stop adoring him but something changed.

I did not only love him now.

I feared him just a little too.

And something more was shattered. No longer did I see the world beyond the door as magical. I saw it for what it was: a world where privilege and pain went hand in hand.

Within a year I would be deported there myself, not to the other side of my father's house, but to a prep school in the heart of Hampshire where I was beaten by a similar cane on four occasions in my first two weeks.

It was only half an hour away but it seemed a million miles.

And it felt like exile.

The Boarded Heart

Today I write the far side of catastrophe - a divorce and broken family, the loss of home, a decent income and a hard-earned reputation. All that left when I made decisions that in any moral scheme were wrong - choices that I've spent two years unravelling through formal psychotherapy and informal counselling. I know I chose the path I took and I cannot excuse my heartless actions as the reflex of a homesick soul. Nevertheless I have had to own that there were wounds that formed the fertile preconditions of my unfeeling choices. It took me nearly fifty years to see it, but now I see it clearly. Being sent away to school created what I call a "boarded heart."

And I am not alone.

There are a growing number of psychologists who have realised that there are countless former boarders who have homesick souls and boarded hearts. Great Britain suffers from an untreated wound - a wound that affects the royal family, the criminal justice system, the police force, the armed forces, the institutional church, government, education, entertainment, the media, the secret service, business, and just about every sphere of society. Many in these different arenas betray this unhealed desolation. They succeed in what they do at work but they fail at what matters most at home. They masquerade in public as confident and smart while they are privately imploding. Many of these men and women are emotionally handicapped, incapable of empathy in their workplace roles and unable to enjoy liberty and intimacy with loved ones in their home and family. Many of them get married and then divorced, then married and again divorced. Many of them have children who grow up to repeat the same destructive cycle.

What is it that creates the potential for such distress? It is principally a British wound. We British were the first on the planet to endorse and cater for the abandonment of our children at the tender age of seven or eight-years old. We were the first country to legitimise the exile of our young in institutions that its occupants compare to prison camps and cells. Oh yes, there may be other nations that have boarding schools but I can guarantee these schools are found in countries that were once occupied by the British. They are a vestige of “the British way of life” in which children learned to dull their feelings in the cold and lonely world of dormitories and desks. They are remnants of a system geared to forming men and women who could maintain a stiff upper lip in isolation and deprivation.

That may sound like an anti-imperialist rant but that is not my purpose. My purpose is to expose the emotional cost of the boarding school system. My purpose is to show you what you may not realise, that the primary spheres that dominate our culture - such as government, education, business, media, arts, and so on - are led by people who are hurting and we all know how the saying goes - hurting people end up hurting people. Our culture is by and large led by people who lost the capacity for feeling when they decided at a very young age that 'big boys and girls don't cry.' Our nation, in short, is led by what I call 'boarding school orphans.'

I know.

I was one myself.

Facing the Pain

At this point some of you may be feeling angry because of what I've written. If you're a parent who has sent your children to boarding school, you may be protesting right now. "What on earth are you trying to say? Our motives in sending our children away to school were good. We honestly believed it would provide them with the best education money can buy. We didn't turn them into orphans. We loved them."

To you I respectfully reply, "I don't doubt for a moment that your intentions were and are honourable. But it isn't your motivation I'm highlighting. It's the effect that being sent away to school may have had on the psychological, spiritual and social wellbeing of your child, both in the short and the long term. The focus is their hearts, not yours - on the consequences of their boarding school experience, not your reasons for sending them there."

Then there may those of you who have jobs in the boarding school sector, say for example head teachers. Your complaint may be different. “Are you trying to do away with the private schools? Is your talk of *boarding school orphans* some sort of socialist agenda for undermining the private educational choices available to parents today?”

My answer is, “No! I am appreciative of all the positives of a private education. It’s just that there are some very negative effects for children too. *If private schools could own and deal with these effects, it would be huge!* Imagine the nation being led by people who are no longer living with a homesick soul and a boarded heart! Imagine the impact of not only of providing a cure but also a strategy of prevention within the schools themselves. So let me emphasize: I’m not trying to deconstruct the system. I want to see it transformed.”

Then there’s a third reaction. This comes from those of you who may resent the fact that many have been able to enjoy a privileged education. If that’s you, you may find it almost impossible to understand how people who have been away to such schools could in any way have suffered any kind of deprivation, even of a psychological kind. “Who are you kidding? Boarding schools are for toffs. Toffs don’t deserve any sympathy. They have everything.”

To you I can only tell my story. I was sent away to boarding school on my eighth birthday. I watched my adoptive parents drive down a gravel road, leaving me standing by my trunk in front of a huge country house. That night I was beaten - six of the best with a cane. My only friend was my teddy bear, to whom I clung for dear life underneath the bed sheet. If that sounds comfortable, then all I can say is that it wasn’t. It was hell and it has taken me nearly fifty years to get over it.

Respecting Diversity

All this is not to say that every person who has been to boarding school ends up feeling or behaving like an orphan. In fact there are often three types of ex-boarders I meet when I talk or write about boarding school pain:

Firstly, there are those who say, “I loved boarding school. I have met with old boys since and we have always reminisced about ‘the happiest days of our lives’. One woman described it as ‘one huge sleepover’.”

Then there are those who say, “I tolerated boarding school. My home life was extremely toxic so going away to boarding school was a welcome relief. Although I suffered deprivations, it was the lesser of two evils.”

Finally there are those who say, “I hated boarding school. It felt like a terrifying abandonment and the deprivations I suffered - especially separation from parents and home - have negatively impacted my entire life.”

While the lines between these three responses can be permeable for some, they are broadly speaking representative. If your experience was universally positive, then I am truly thankful.

For many others this has not been the case. There are more than we could ever count who were permanently scarred and who have never had an opportunity to speak about it to anyone. Indeed, they may have vowed in their hearts to keep silent about it. Many who have been damaged by boarding school find it almost impossible to talk about it because they have come to believe that to do so would be to commit the unpardonable sin - ingratitude. Maybe they even had to recite these lines from *King Lear* at school: “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child.’

Maybe those words were ingrained upon their soul.

I know they were on mine.

If so, it's time to break this collective silence and it's time for the healing to begin.

The Homesick Soul

For effective healing and liberation to happen, I am convinced that more than a psychological approach is needed. I respect the work being done by other champions in this field but in my view they lack one important, indeed vital ingredient - a spiritual approach. Yes the insights of human psychology and psychiatry can prove immensely helpful but if ex-boarders are by and large boarding school orphans then my experience tells me this: children separated from their mums and dads carry father and mother wounds and these are only ultimately healed by the intervention and infusion of a spiritual reality, and this I call "the Father's love."

What do I mean by "the Father's love"?

Boarding school girls and boys have daily been compelled to say the Lord's Prayer. If my experience is anything to go by, this enforced repetition rendered the words fairly meaningless for most pupils and at worst distorted the image of God as an approachable and ever-present Father. But there is a life-changing disclosure at the very beginning of the prayer, unrecognised by most schoolchildren: "Our Father, who art in heaven..." Jesus called the God who fashioned the universe, "Our Father." In the language that Jesus spoke, the word is *Abba*. This translates as something like "Dad" or "Papa." And that one word is life-changing for boarders and ex-boarders.

Most boarders and ex-boarders are blighted by what I call the homesick soul. In their hearts they cry, “Where are you, Dad? Where are you Mum?”

For many years I have written many books and spoken at many conferences in many countries on this subject. This is what I have discovered. *There is not a place on this planet where the orphan heart is not found and where the Father’s love is not needed.*

My approach is therefore unashamedly faith-based, specifically Christian based. It is based on the view, borne out by my own story, that only the perfect love of our Heavenly Father - a love that can also come to us also in a mother-like way - can fill the hole in the soul and free us from our exile.

Only the Love of all loves can heal the homesick heart.

Only the fire of the Father’s love can open up the boarded heart.

This is not the religion of the private school chapel, where God is so often distant and remote. This is what that Jesus had in mind - an intimate relationship with his Dad and ours. It is something we can all experience, not the reserve of the few. It is an invitation to everyone, however much they have failed and fallen. It is the gift that the Father wants to give to all those who have experienced desertion of whatever kind, including the desertion by their parents at boarding school.

Spiritual Healing

This is why I have written this book. While I respect the two other books presently on this subject - *The Making of Them* and *Boarding School Syndrome*¹ - both in my view lack a spiritual dimension to the healing process.

For example, both books fail to provide a diagnosis of the impact of boarding school life on the *soul*. If worth and belonging are fundamental needs in every human being, then what are the consequences when they are removed through the boarding school experience? Is the healing of such shame and homesickness a purely psycho-therapeutic process or is there a vital spiritual component these approaches miss? If men and women suffer from orphan hearts, does it not stand to reason that they need to find healing in the arms of the true and perfect Father? As King David sang in Psalm 27, “Even if my father and mother may abandon me, the Lord will hold me close.”

My conviction is this: we need to have a spiritual understanding of the trauma of being sent away to boarding school, and we need a spiritual dimension to the healing of that trauma.

That is why I have chosen to write a book in two parts. In the first part we look at what I call the cycle of pain. The boarding school wound is one involving four deep impacts to the soul: desertion, deprivation, disengagement and dependency. Only when we see the spiritual implications and consequences of these four components will we properly and thoroughly diagnose the wound that afflicts so many.

In part two we look at the cycle of healing. Here we embrace the four stages of the healing journey: revelation, restoration, reconnection and recovery. These exactly correspond to desertion, deprivation, disengagement and dependency. These four stages of the healing journey are all, in one way or another, spiritual in nature. They are four stages in the soul’s homecoming. They are four steps towards the Father’s house. They must be experienced if we are to enjoy the long-awaited end to our spiritual winter.

In all of this I will tell some of my own story.

In telling my story, I want to encourage those of you who are boarders or ex-boarders to come out and tell your story too. Share with someone you trust.

When we tell our stories, our shame is no longer a secret and when our shame is no longer a secret it loses its capacity to control our lives.

And have faith too!

Many of you, like me, may have experienced and caused some pain as a result of the boarded heart. Whilst I believe we cannot change the way our story has progressed this far, we can dictate the way it goes from here. With our Father's help, we can move our lives along a new trajectory - a redemptive arc in which we no longer live with homesick souls but healthy hearts and where we no longer live with shut-down hearts but learn to work with emotional intelligence.

So take heart.

Be brave.

And let's start this epic journey together, trusting that by its end we will all have found our freedom - a freedom that will bless beyond all words the people that we treasure most.