

Some issues that arise for women attending Boarding School Survivors workshops.

Extract from Nicola Miller's presentation on November 14<sup>th</sup> 2009  
which includes reflections from Helena Lovendhal and Pippa Foster

Women want to feel safe to tell their stories as their emotional bodies remember them. The stories that are told on these workshops are at odds with many of the beliefs they have held dear. 'My parents did their best and of course they loved me, so how can I possibly continue to feel so unlovable – this must be my fault, as I fear, I must be stupid and ungrateful. I'm so ashamed that with all this therapy I haven't got over this'.

Experience of the BSS workshops and what women share, leaves me most engaged with the question 'what do girls at BS actually internalise about being a 'woman'? This concerns our gender, our identity, and our sexuality.

On top of everything else that comes with being sent away to school, girls are sent to an institution which runs on patriarchal values, despite them being run by women. Hence women are sent away from home - and mother - to a place which makes them strangers to their own female nature. This is in contrast to boys who are sent to a place that at least mirrors their maleness, however distorted and dysfunctional.

Hence women boarders are removed from their female ground and with it their bodies. They learn to not just mistrust it, but even fear it and ultimately disown it.

Girls lose mother the same as boys, but we also lose our **gender** role model. Girls are left with a deep distrust of their own womanhood. Not only do they feel unloved, rejected, but they also reject themselves. How can they hope to feel sexy, loveable and whole as they struggle with such deep feelings of distrust and resentment of their mothers, whom they needed so badly to present a person with whom to identify. Add to that mix the distance created with their fathers and you get an inevitable crisis in future relationships with themselves, their bodies and their future sexual relationships.

This is a confusing and complicated psychological dilemma to face at the same time as our bodies go through the biggest physiological change of our lives. As our female identity develops, the feminine we have available to identify with, is often, absent, uncaring, cruel, or 'masculine'. By 'masculine' I mean affirming the values of achievement, strength, rational and physical skill, a persona fit to compete and thrive in the world of success, self-sufficiency and reliability. Despite the exposure to what could be a superior academic education, it seems as if the education of girls has less to do with her and her abilities and more to do with getting the right education to support a husband and the Establishment, of which the business of boarding schools is very much part. Our distorted identity is then rewarded by gaining associate status in the patriarchal environment that created it in the first place.

When we gather in a BSS group, this is who we have become to various degrees. The intrinsically 'feminine' self has had little opportunity to 'grow-up' and we may feel the deepest shame about our vulnerability, emotionality and our need for the 'masculine'. At this point we recall, girls have also lost their fathers. In many girls schools the absence of father was frequently reinforced by the absence of male

teachers and boys. Father's by nature and social expectations often abandon the family, but how could mother deny her maternal nature to give up her child? The parent that is going most against their biological nature in sending their child away is the mother. As a result the parent who is the greatest betrayer in the act is the mother, and therefore she is the parent most hated, and experienced as most treacherous.

Working with BSS women we see that many of us are terrorised by the internalised projection of the destructive, uncontrolled power of our sexuality. **Misogyny** in women is a terrifying, destructive force and groups of BSS women have to dig deep into their reserves of courage and life-affirming nature in order even to sit in the room together, the perceived danger can be so intense.

Girls school values have patriarchal and biblical roots – there is an implicit condemnation of women's sexuality. Our bleeding is 'the curse' and we deal with it in secret and in shame. Uniforms were styled to ridicule our form and keep any natural desire to flaunt our blossoming, either denied or strictly under control. Why did we wear a shirt and tie, if it wasn't to dissemble as a 'man', or a tunic if it wasn't to 'box' us in?

We learn that our bodies are utilitarian and not to be mentioned – 'work it out alone' 'guess the facts, learn through uninformed and unprotected risk. So we do use our bodies, to gain attention, to placate another or manoeuvre a situation. Various subtle forms of eating disorder are common as well as the explicit signs of self-harm. Some women do speak of sexual abuse and most often it is heavily disguised as 'just punishment' or 'comfort that I craved and welcomed'. 'I betrayed myself, it is my fault'.

BSS boys enter a world where there is a place for their gender to build empires or lead armies, while for BSS girls it is necessary to thrust their repressed sexual energies into a man's world. If BS offers such a great training ground for women who would be bankers or aspire to get to the top in business, why have so few succeeded? I suggest the answer has to do with the price these women must pay, for BS culture has taught us that first we must surrender our femininity. This self-betrayal can be masked by success, or sometimes by rebellious non-conformity. 'I will not succeed' 'I will not be a woman because women are not to be trusted'.

I'm going to share 3 caricatures that might help illustrate how we as women may have developed particular survival strategies. These bear no relation to any one person I've met and are not meant to trivialise. The phrase from 'MyFair Lady', where Henry Higgins exclaims 'why can't a woman be more like a man' always make me smile. Some men may be thinking, but I'm not Henry Higgins, I suggest that many of us women are, somewhere deep down I'm Henrietta! If Henrietta comes to BSS workshop she may have left her suit at home, but she'll exude success and confidence, desperate to know why she is so very unsuccessful in love and relationships. Then there is Eliza; she's flamboyant, colourful, makes us laugh. She threw in her lot with the girls who decided survival was best achieved through becoming a 'lady'. Now she sobs as she begs to understand why she should feel so worthless and unfulfilled when her life appears so 'rosy'. Finally there's Jane,

Calamity Jane – she's tough she can cope, always escaping another complicated relationship while being an amazing friend in a crisis. She's a therapist and can make sense of everything in the room, except her own despair.

In the womens workshops we find the opportunity to confront our own versions of Henrietta, Eliza, Jane, and connect with the girl who designed and gave life to them – because back then, the girl in us depended on the characters, or survival personalities.

Very often women stay in touch with each other, either as a group or with a few individuals. They survived their school days somehow, and they come away from the workshops more consciously aware of their survival as a testament to life. The fact of surviving 2 weekends with 12 BSS women gives many hope and the knowledge that in a safe-enough environment, bonding and attachment are possible. Sharing and learning from each other, we see parts of ourselves we never new existed, mirrored all around the room. This experience also breeds courage, courage to accept what was needed in the past was lost, courage to accept we do not have the power to change our history, and the imperative - we must surrender the constant struggle to recreate what we needed then. So we grieve our female nature, we acknowledge with respect the characters we have become, and we start to really listen for the loving and creative girl who has all the beauty and potential of a woman.