

FROM DARKNESS INTO THE LIGHT:

*Addressing issues of codes of silence,
brotherhood, mob-think, rites of passage and
belonging in a boys' boarding context*

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IBSC conference, St Andrew's School, 13 March 2020

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FROM DARKNESS INTO THE LIGHT:

1. Introduction
2. My journey to Bloemfontein today – via Bishops (2008)
3. Key concepts (x2)
4. What does the law say?
5. A tale of two schools
6. Are all forms of initiation and/or are all rites of passage bad?
7. Codes of silence
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9. Discussion

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FROM DARKNESS INTO THE LIGHT:

1. Introduction:

General aim

To try and help counter the damaging perceptions in some parts of our society and in many parts of the world beyond our shores about all-boys' schools, at which I am sure most if not all of us are proud to work and contribute.

2. My journey to Bloemfontein today – via Bishops (2008):

Attending conferences like this one over the last 13 years has certainly challenged and re-shaped the thinking in the Maritzburg College staffroom.

My tale of woe: *“Cold Showers & Porridge: Forget not the lessons of your grandfathers”*
[2008]

Our subsequent journey as a school: our modernizing efforts have had a dramatic effect over the last six years to reshape the Maritzburg College experience for boys especially – but for staff too.

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3. Key concepts:

Rite of passage:

Marks a major transition in a person's life – the passing of a milestone.

In this context: *“A significant stage or event in a young man's life.”*

Culmination invariably takes form of a ceremony.

On completion, the individual gains a recognised position within a group.

Fosters tight relationships within the group, based on shared experiences etc.

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3. Key concepts contd:

Initiation:

The negative aspects of what newcomers experience as they integrate into a group.

“Any activity expected of someone joining a school that humiliates, degrades, abuses or endangers them regardless of their willingness to participate in the activity”.

The process is often dangerous and injurious, and usually secretive.

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4. What does the law say?

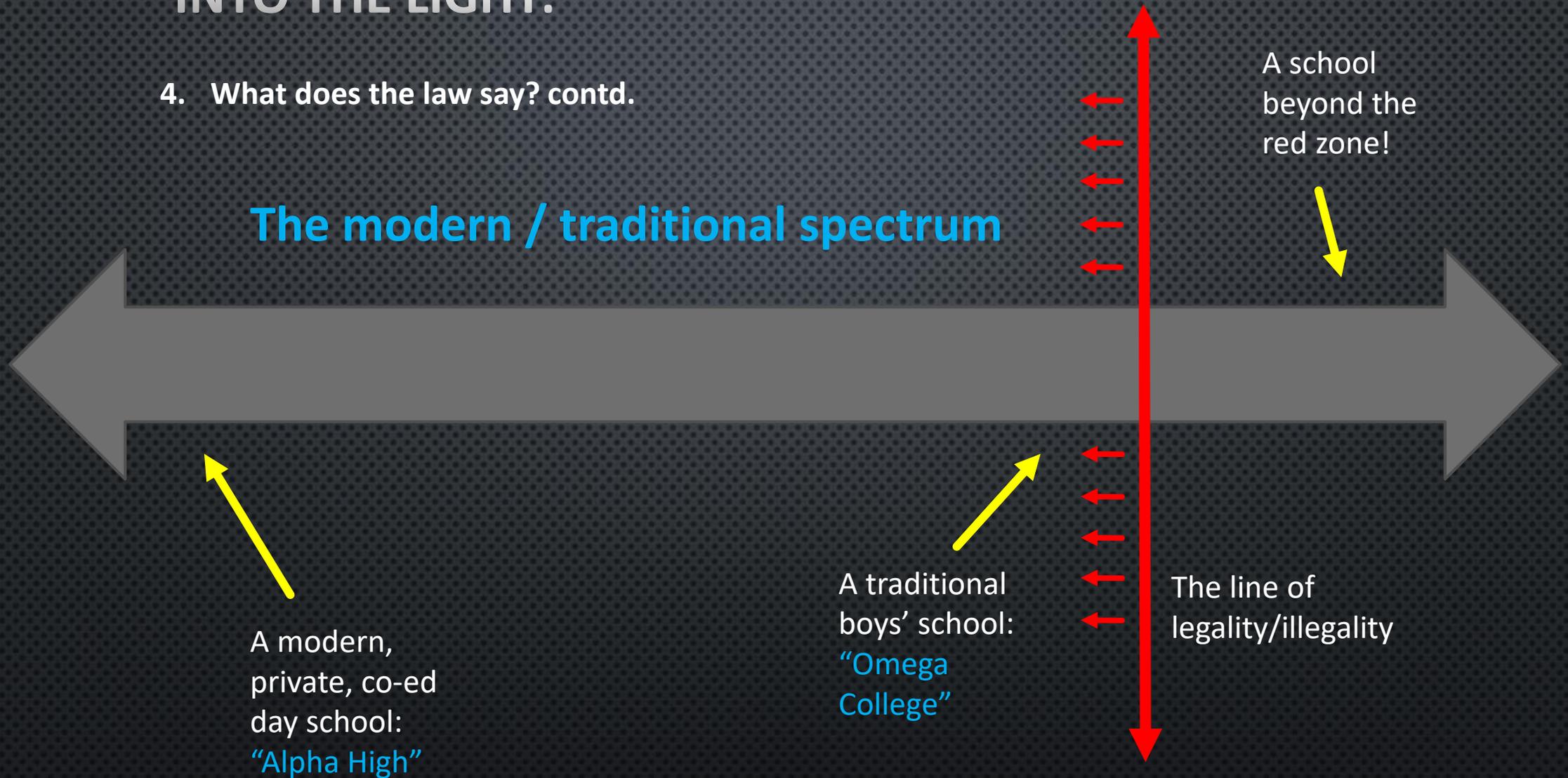
An investigation by the SA Human Rights Commission (SAHRC, 2001) led to the report titled “Regulations to Prohibit Initiation Practices in Schools” (RSA, 2002) as adopted by parliament during December 2002.

These regulations stipulate, *inter alia*, that “no principal, educator, or learner may be involved in initiation practices or any other actions resulting in the humiliation, degradation, harassment, assault, violation of the dignity, intimidation or maltreatment of learners.”

[Discussion of the above, as well as the Bill of Rights, the Abolition of Corporal Punishment Act, the Schools’ Act etc.]

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4. What does the law say? contd.



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5. A tale of two schools: **Omega College** – characteristics

[Note: My fabled “Alpha High” would in many cases display the very opposite characteristic.]

- Bigger and older?
- Well-established / “traditional”
- Robust self-identity – illustrious alumni
- Boy-driven authority (prefects)
- Rites of passage – physical mettle and grit
- Alumni on the staff (especially in the BE)
- Housemaster – “old guard”) / alternately a younger, passionate alumnus
- “Back in the day...” / “In my day...”
- Admiration for “the old ways”
- Scornful of paperwork and formal reporting –e.g. at roll calls, inspections of lockers, following up on incidents, filling in the house diary etc.
- Thoroughly male-dominated staffrooms: women are in the main “helpers”
- Speakers at assembly - alumni
- Strict, regimented and stern – “robust”
- Strong HIERARCHY amongst staff and especially boys
- Separate quads, pathways, benches etc. for seniors

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5. A tale of two schools: Omega College – characteristics contd.

- Punishment: top down, using the Code of Conduct and school rules
- Formidable identity to the BE / to being a boarder / to being in a particular house
- *Landbouskool?*
- Sense of isolation that underpins identity / “us vs them” mentality
- Termly boarders
- Orientation camp = aspects of a physical “test” for the new boys
- Powerful mythology – self-identity
- “Traditions” and “privileges” – entrenched as timeless and unchangeable
- Rituals: standing up, greeting, waiting at doors, saying “Sir” or “Please”
- Laddish (boorish, even) traditions – serenading the local girls school, streaking
- A suppressed but exercised fondness for actual initiation (e.g. on First Team debut)
- Culture: Suspicious of change and modernity
- Particularly a love for RUGBY (a special case)!

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5. A tale of two schools: Omega College – characteristics contd.

- Lots of talk about “brotherhood” or the “Omega tribe”
- “Snitches get stitches and end up in ditches”
- No / lack of cameras
- Sentimental: walls decked with old photos, memorabilia etc., a sense of “To be here is a privilege” and “You need to earn your right to be here”, a sense of “Are you good enough to be here?” – i.e. an underlying sense for a new entrant that “I need to pass a test”
- An identity that is exclusive (“us vs them”)
- Service within the school for a junior is “fagging” (or similar)
- Vocabulary used is of “boys will be boys”
- A learner is governed by external RULES
- Less concerned with what is RIGHT – primary concern instead with what is LEGAL
- Prominence and recognition given to First XV and other sportsmen
- “Beau ideal” = unsmiling giants of the First XV, who dominate the prefect body
- Emphasis on so-called “manly” virtues of “courage”, “respect”, “self-discipline” etc.

In a nutshell: If your school meets many of these criteria, then you need to be very alert to danger!

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6. Are all forms of initiation and/or are all rites of passage bad?

For initiation, “YES!”

For a rite of passage, “No, not all are bad”.

When an existing rite of passage – e.g. a “journey” or orientation camp – has elements that can be classified as “initiation”, these must be excised as if they are a malignant cancer!

A healthy / tolerable rite of passage:

- A milestone that leads to a **graduation** of sorts. There needs to be a start, a middle and a finish.
- At best **voluntary** in itself – otherwise compulsory for sound education reasons. I would think that a “journey” would fall into that category.
- Managed by (senior) **staff**
- Subject to accepted, published **guidelines** – need to be transparent. It is done “in the open”.
- If it contains elements that you would not want to be in the public domain, then it’s probably illegal!

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7. Codes of silence:

“An unspoken yet clearly understood commitment by a boy to his peers that they will not disclose even the most disturbing and dangerous information about each other to adults.”

An Australian case:

*“To **dob**, to report someone to the teachers, is the worst thing that anyone can do in a boarding school. It is seen as ratting on your mates even if they bully you. I was accused of being a dobber. The worst thing is to be seen as a dobber.”*

12/12

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7. Codes of silence contd:

The difference between “snitching” and having to speak:

Adults and students need to understand there is a clear difference between tattling or “snitching” to get someone in trouble and disclosing disturbing information (i) to **save a life**, (ii) to **prevent harm to others**, or (iii) to **right a wrong**.

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8. Conclusions

Many of the aspects of the hidden curriculum at an all-boys school – the team-spirit, the terrific and lifelong friendships, the sense of belonging and pride, the service, the inspiration that one derives from being part of a (in the main) noble school, with the striving for excellence, as well as the courage and honour of the boys – are the reasons why we work at such schools!

Some of these are fostered by certain healthy, perhaps at times challenging rites of passage, that give each school its own flavour and sense of identity.

I do hope that, after today, you will continue to nurture these healthy rites of passage at your schools, and develop new ones, through ever-vigilant eyes, and of course remorselessly excise the cancers of initiation and codes of silence when you find them, and be inspired to not just protect the unique characters of your schools, but also strive for a little more of the humanity, humility, empathy and kindness of “Alpha High”!

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