

## Out of the shadows

*"One out of three girls, and one out of seven boys, are sexually abused by the time they reach the age of eighteen"*

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

**The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse**, by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis (Harper & Row, 1988).

Ellen Bass and Laura Davis make their convictions clear on the cover of their new book. Women who have lived through sexual abuse are "survivors," not "victims." And survival only shows up in the subtitle. This book is really about what comes after survival — it is about healing, about the courage, hope and resilience demanded from any woman who turns the cover and glimpses her life in its pages.

In the last ten years, media attention in the form of books, talk shows and television docu-

## Health

dramas has begun to strip the shadows from the subject of child sexual abuse. Several books published since 1980 have documented the frequency of incest and sexual abuse and given survivors the opportunity to voice their stories. Other books have trounced Freud's seduction theory and presented feminist challenges to myths about sexual abuse. Women looking for peer support can now find groups based on the 12-step model for sexual-abuse survivors.

But until now, there has been no single book to usher survivors through each slow step of the healing process, from recognizing the impact of abuse to believing it happened toward resolution and the gradual process of change.

Although *The Courage to Heal* can inform and help partners and friends of sexual-abuse survivors, counselors, social workers and teachers, it speaks most powerfully to women who have survived. The authors address readers as "you," and they begin at the beginning: "If you have been sexually abused, you are not alone. One out of three girls, and one out of seven boys, are sexually abused by the time they reach the age of eighteen."

The introduction contains a checklist, headed "How can I know if I was a victim of child sexual abuse?" This list of questions makes it clear that children who were touched in sexual areas, forced to pose for seductive photographs, raped or told their only value was sexual may now suffer the effects of abuse. For women who know they were abused, the following chapters answer the question: "Where do I go from here?" in a voice that is knowledgeable, gentle, honest and thorough. From the preface, the authors' message is one of unflinching love, admiration for women who have struggled to heal from sexual abuse, and hope for the thousands of women who are just beginning that process.

Ellen Bass has worked for ten years with hundreds of sexual-abuse survivors, leading workshops for women, their partners and professional counselors. She co-edited *I Never Told Anyone*, an anthology of personal stories by women who were abused, and she is the partner of a survivor. In the preface, she explains that her workshops, like the book, stem from her belief that "everyone wants to become whole."

Laura Davis, a writer, radio producer and survivor of child sexual abuse, writes that she was motivated to work on the book "for probably the same reasons you are picking it up now — I felt a tremendous amount of pain in my life and I wanted it to stop."

The authors' differing experiences with abuse — professional and personal, wide-ranging and intimate — along with material gleaned from 50 interviews give the book a richly balanced tone and content. Bass and Davis

write with clear, direct, conversational language, not psychological jargon, and they repeatedly pin concepts to real-life situations by giving specific examples and suggestions. In a section on coping, for instance, they describe survivors' tendency to minimize abuse this way: "Minimizing means pretending that what ever happened wasn't really that bad. It means saying, 'My dad's a little pissed off,' when in fact he just smashed an armchair to bits." In a section on feelings, they suggest women write lists of activities that help them calm down. A sample list of "Things to Do When I'm Desperate" begins with: "1) Breathe; 2) Get my teddy bear; 3) Put on a relaxation tape; 4) Get in my rocking chair; 5) Call Natalie. . . ."

While Bass and Davis impart valuable, concrete information, they repeatedly stress that they are not gurus of healing, nor is the book a definitive bible of help. The text is peppered with references to other books, to groups and associations that help survivors and, most important, with reminders that each woman is an authority on her own healing.

"Often the knowledge that you were abused starts with a tiny feeling, an intuition," they write in the introduction. "It's important to trust that inner voice and work from there. Assume your feelings are valid."

The authors stress that healing is not a linear process — some women repeat phases of recovery numerous times over a period of years; others skip some stages — and *The Courage to Heal* is not intended as a straight-ahead read. Rather, the clear table of contents and succinct, well-identified chapters make it easy for each reader to find information that applies to her *right now*.

The book is arranged in five large sections. "Taking Stock" helps women identify themselves as survivors of child sexual abuse and look at the effects of that experience in their present lives. "The Healing Process" charts the stages of recovery from the decision to heal through breaking silence to resolution and moving on. "Changing Patterns" offers concrete information about recognizing and naming feelings, altering perceptions about the body and working through sexual fears. "For Supporters of Survivors" advises family members, partners and counselors how to behave in ways that take care of both themselves and the survivor. "Courageous Women" contains the personal stories of survivors. Finally, a detailed list of resources and an extensive bibliography point readers toward other supportive books, organizations and groups.

While Davis and Bass go out of their way to present a range of women's voices and many possible reactions to abuse, their work has left them with some unshakable convictions, and they state these clearly: Abuse is never the child's fault. You can't heal if you are addicted to alcohol or drugs. Counselors who believe women must forgive their abusers in order to heal should not be working with survivors. These beliefs provide the comfort of a steady heartbeat beneath the text; to survivors who may doubt every instinct and feeling, it is helpful to hear that some things are simply unequivocal.

The authors weave short quotations, poetry and stories from survivors, as well as personal statements from themselves, throughout the text. They wisely reserve a whole section at the book's end for the lengthy personal stories of 15 women. These accounts, read singly or as a group, provide deep, emotional testaments to the power, resilience and faith of the human spirit. One survivor, who was beaten and molested by her father and was diagnosed with cancer a year and a half after the interview, wrote,

Cancer is the ultimate test of survival. . . . I've learned what safe hugs are all about. It was important for me to keep fighting. . . . Compared to what I survived all those years, this was a piece of cake. Last month the doctor told me the cancer was entirely gone.

I am a survivor, and I'm going to live to dance on my father's grave.

From the arrangement of the table of contents to the placement of the survivors' stories at the end, the design of *The Courage to Heal* reflects the authors' commitment to clarity. Bold headings, different type to highlight special information and a format with plenty of space around the text all combine to keep this nearly 500-page book from looking scary or overwhelming.

Finally, unlike many books about recovery, Bass and Davis do not stop with the process of personal change. In a cogent, sensitive discussion at the end of a section on "The Healing Process," they answer the question, "Why

should I do all this hard work?" with an expansive sense of the power that survivors could wield to change their lives and others':

As you heal, as you feel more nourished, balanced, and whole, you will find that you have energy available to direct in creative and life-affirming pursuits. No longer struggling just to cope day-to-day, you can begin to make an impact on the world. . . .

It is you — who know something about both justice and injustice, about abuse and respect, about suffering and about healing — who have the clarity, courage and compassion to contribute to the quality, and the very continuation, of life.

More than any other feeling, this book is suffused with both authors' unshakable faith that healing is worth the difficult path it entails. If you are on a journey of recovery from child sexual abuse, or you know a person who is, take this book along. It will prove a wise, faithful and gentle companion. •

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