

# The Courage to Heal

A Guide for Women Survivors of Sexual Abuse

by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis

(New York: Perennial Library, Harper & Row, 1988)

reviewed by Robert Sheaffer (July, 1994)

Among rational persons this book has rightfully acquired an aura of infamy, like that of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, or Senator McCarthy's list. Few books of modern times have resulted in so much harm. Most of us have seen a few outrageous quotes from it like "if you are unable to remember any specific instances like the ones mentioned above but still have a feeling that something abusive happened to you, it probably did" (p.21), and "demands for proof are unreasonable" (p. 137). There is absolutely no solid research to support the view of "recovered memories" promoted in this book, and a great deal of evidence against it. [1] The approach being used by the "survivors" movement is much like that traditionally employed by fundamentalist Christian churches: convince someone that they have a serious problem of which they previously were unaware ("forgotten abuse", "original sin", etc), then proclaim that you alone can offer them the solution to the problem, and subsequent misery, that you have created.

The psychology underlying this book is, at best, exceedingly dubious: "The human mind has tremendous powers of repression. Many children are able to forget about the abuse, *even as it is happening to them*" (p. 42). The authors likewise seem to have no qualms in violating what is known about medicine and physics as well. Among the consequences of sexual abuse is said to be arthritis ("Thirty-seven years of denying my father's abuse sexual abuse has taken a toll: massive deterioration of all my joint tissue" p. 165); migraines and so-called "environmental illness" (p. 213); cancer (p. 366); out-of-body-travel ("you literally leave your body" p. 209); and even ESP ("Other survivors have developed psychic abilities from their sensitivity" p. 46). The reality of widespread "multiple personality disorder" is taken as proven, based on a paper published by the *Institute of Noetic Sciences*, an organization which promotes belief in ESP, and we are told that "virtually everyone who is diagnosed as being multiple has been severely abused - sexually, physically, or psychologically - as a young child" (p. 424).

No tale seems too absurd to be believed: "Both her parents were community leaders, active in church affairs. Secretly they were involved with a group that performed ritualized abuse according to a satanic calendar... that included sexual abuse, torture, murder, pornography, and systematic brainwashing through drugs and electric shock" (p. 417). Even the bizarre fantasies in *Michelle Remembers* (Michelle Smith claims to have been restrained by Satan himself during hideous ceremonies, resulting in a "body memory" of Satan's "burning tail wrapped around her neck") are taken seriously by Bass and Davis, although they add that "some survivors have objected to her spiritual interpretation of her experiences" (p. 468). Given that Michelle claims to have personally encountered not only Satan, but the Virgin Mary and Jesus as well, it would be difficult to interpret her experiences any other way, without denying them completely. What they mean is, of course, is that survivor-stories ought to tell of being abused by one's male relatives, not by the Devil himself.

But how did *The Courage to Heal*, this abomination of the intellect, come to have such enormous influence? Why did it sell hundreds of thousands of copies, and produce major crises for tens of thousands of families? Is this book the work of prestigious or famous authors, whose past accomplishments and accolades have allowed new and unfounded theories to bask in the glow of previous triumphs? Absolutely not. Both of the authors base whatever reputation they have almost entirely upon their work with supposed "survivors." Laura Davis is a lecturer on alleged child abuse, and a facilitator of workshops. Ellen Bass admits that she has no academic training in psychology, and that "none of what is presented here is based on psychological theories" (p. 14). Rather, they ground their hypotheses squarely in *Womens' Intuition*: "Often the knowledge that you were abused starts with a tiny feeling, an intuition. It's important to trust that inner voice and work from there. Assume your feelings are valid" (p.22).

Seldom has any author so directly declared the unreliability of what she has to say, and yet seldom has any author's controversial message been embraced with such uncritical fervor. Did someone bestow upon these authors a "Get Out of Critical Scrutiny Free" card? The ideas in this book seem to have enjoyed an astonishing exemption from the critical evaluation one would have expected such an unfounded and controversial doctrine to receive in various areas: psychology, academia, and among the educated public at large. This is all the more remarkable given the authors' complete candor about the lack of any solid intellectual foundation.

The real reason that *The Courage to Heal* has enjoyed such an astonishing exemption from critical scrutiny for so long is that it has sailed under the banner of Womens Studies, that most sacrosanct of contemporary Sacred Cows. In many universities, any public opposition to or even criticism of a "womens issue" is career-limiting, sometimes career-ending. This has given feminist writers complete license to promulgate foolish theories, inaccurate statements, even outright falsehoods, with little fear of being compelled to defend anything they say. The consequences to society have been enormous, with the tragedies caused by the "recovered memories" movement being merely the most obvious and visible.

It is not at all surprising that so many women have eagerly embraced the "survivor" role that Davis and Bass hold out to any woman who wants it. To be a "survivor" today is wonderfully empowering. It allows her to demand that her partner "take on extra housekeeping duties" and "do more child care" (p.330). Should she behave like a raving madwoman, it is her partner's responsibility to appreciate "how fundamental her need for control is" (p. 331). It may enable her to get substantial sums of money, either directly from the supposed "abuser", or from his homeowners insurance: "I have had settlements ranging from \$20,000 to \$100,000", an attorney for "survivors" reports (p. 309). The "survivor" also gets the right to demand that the supposed "abuser" pay for her therapy (which is a bit like asking a prisoner to dig the grave he is about to be thrown into), and indeed sometimes to support her indefinitely so she doesn't have to work, since "many women find it extremely difficult to do the emotional work necessary for healing while working full-time" (p. 299). Even if your father may be an "abuser," his role as a highly-disciplined "wallet" who is accustomed to paying out on your behalf makes him extremely valuable nonetheless.

By becoming a "survivor," any woman, no matter how neurotic or how poor her social skills, can suddenly be transformed into an empowered, important person who has license to be as narcissistic, impulsive, and demanding as she wishes, without being held accountable for such behavior. The "survivor" can be 'as nasty as she wants to be', a little Napoleon, and it will be *someone else's fault* that she is behaving so badly. In point of fact, it will generally be some man's fault, not hers. In contemporary victimology, virtually all problems turn out to be mens' fault. No work on a woman's part is required to achieve this exalted "survivor" status; all she need do is "remember" being abused. And if she has no memories, but would like to jump on the survivors' bandwagon, her friendly feminist-oriented therapist will be more than happy to assist her in constructing them. Joining a "survivors" group is another easy way to acquire supposed 'memories': "If you're still fuzzy about what happened to you, hearing other women's stories can stimulate your memories. Their words can loosen buried feelings" (p. 462).

Both authors of *The Courage to Heal* are lesbians. Laura Davis describes an incident where her recovery of "memories" interrupts an intimate scene with her female lover (p. 76-77). Elsewhere she tells of being for the first time very much in love, with a wonderful woman, but "the closer we got emotionally, the more I started to shut down sexually. And I didn't really understand why, but I was spacing out all the time. We would start to have sex, and I'd have to stop. Then one day she confronted me and screamed, 'What's the matter with you?'... And when she did that, there was some really deep knowledge inside of me that was finally about to be recognized. This little voice came out of me, this small voice: 'I was molested'" Based on such accounts, Davis would appear to be exceedingly sex-phobic. She claims to have been molested by her maternal grandfather, starting from age 3, but she supposedly "blocked out" all memory of this until she was in her 20s.[2] If Laura Davis could not blame her sex-phobia on somebody else, she would have to be judged as one messed-up young lady.

Davis has also contributed a chapter to a book *Finding the Lesbians*, [3] a guide for lesbians on the go. Ellen Bass is more circumspect, but the new edition of *I Never Told Anyone* describes her as "living in Santa Cruz, California with her partner, Janet." Santa Cruz is acknowledged as one of the major centers of lesbian culture in the U.S. At the University of California, Santa Cruz, some undergraduate women jokingly describe their sexual orientation as "L.U.G", Lesbian Until Graduation, so strong are the peer pressures to conform to feminist ideology.

Bass has also written or edited several volumes of poetry, none of which seems to have gotten much notice outside of feminist circles. A number of Bass' poems deal with the subject of lesbian love. One of them is particularly startling to discover that it comes from one of the authors of *Courage to Heal*, as it suggests lesbian love between two underage girls, apparently at a Girl Scout camp:

Oh Beverly, do you remember  
how we sat together in that brook,  
touching our own bodies, wishing  
we weren't wearing navy shorts...  
we should have gone back  
back to change our wet shorts  
and dry our private, barely hairy,  
parts in towels that mother sewed our names in.[4]

Upon careful reading, it turns out that a large number of the "survivors" in the book are themselves lesbian. Many are openly so, but concerning others the authors go to some lengths to downplay this; obviously they feared that if the percentage of "survivors" who are lesbian were easily visible, their credibility with heterosexual women, who after all constitute the vast majority, would be undermined. Hence we find the widespread use of gender-neutral terms to describe many womens' sex partners.

Many will demand to know why this is relevant. The significance is that *The Courage to Heal* deals primarily with situations involving families, and lesbians are individuals who, by their own choices, have placed themselves forever outside the institution of the family. Long ago Aesop wrote about "sour grapes," and his insight into the human tendency to denigrate the unattainable is surely relevant here. The "survivors" movement describes the family not as it exists in reality, but as it is imagined to exist within the lesbian community, which is virulently anti-marriage and anti-family. In the lesbian imagination, there is practically no such thing as a happy, caring heterosexual family. That image is held to be a lie, a deception to mask the supposed "reality" of the exploitation and abuse of the women in the family by the men. Hence, fathers, grandfathers, brothers, and uncles are depicted not as loving relatives, but as sadists and rapists: "the absurdity of the American Ideal, the family surrounded by a white picket fence - with blood dripping down the painted slats where the daughters had been sacrificially skewered" (p. 46).

The percentage of women in the general population who are lesbian is extremely small, almost certainly not more than about 1 or 2 percent. One recent study placed it at 0.7 percent, which sounds plausible. However, in the "survivors" movement, and among feminist activists and leaders, the percentage is vastly higher, on the order of 50 percent or more. Indeed, the gay-lesbian publication *The Advocate* boasts that "lesbians and other feminists put the issue of incest and other child sexual abuse on the map. In addition to writing some of the first and most important texts of the survivors movement, lesbians have created incest-survivor support groups and political action organizations across the country." [5] That this lesbian-led movement is steeped in falsehood and makes wholesale accusations of heinous crimes against innocent persons seems not to be perceived as objectionable. *The Advocate* goes on to complain, however, that "the contributions of lesbians in this field went unrecognized." I agree that that injustice needs to be rectified.

The degree of anti-male venom contained in *The Courage to Heal* is truly astonishing, at least to those unfamiliar with the literature of womens studies. Some examples:

- "I have such venomous hate. I pray to God that [my father] comes down with some terrible disease. I'd like him to get AIDS. That or Alzheimer's. I can't wait for his funeral ... this hatred affects me in a positive way" [p.365].
- "I'd watch *Perry Mason* to get ideas about how to kill my father. It was really the best of times. Every day I would get a new method" (p. 47).
- "I'd like to cut off his little *huevos*. I've had offers from people who said they'd go with me" (p. 379).
- "My experience was that 95 percent of men are abusers" (p.228)
- "As a child ... you could not think about killing your father when you relied on him to feed you" (p. 35).
- "I go through real revenge periods. I imagine walking into my parents' house with a shotgun aimed right at my father's balls. "Okay, Dad. Don't move an inch. Not one step, you sucker. I'm gonna take 'em off one at a time. And I'm gonna take my sweet time about it, too!" " (p. 455).
- "If your abuser has died, you may be glad he is dead. This is a perfectly reasonable feeling to have. One woman said she couldn't wait for her father to die so she could spit on his grave" (p. 143).

Remember that all, or nearly all, of the abuse claims in this book are fictitious, and the accused are entirely innocent. These are fantasies of abuse created out of nothing by the "survivor" and her therapist, following the dictates of lesbian-feminist ideology. But psychology has a tradition of analyzing fantasies to derive underlying thoughts, and the sheer venom herein revealed must shock and revolt any decent person. Like the proverbial inkblot, whose perceived shape is said to reveal the unconscious mind, the above fantasies, originating and circulating widely in the lesbian-feminist milieu, tell us a great deal about the world as those individuals perceive it. The degree of misandry - hatred of the male sex - herein revealed is genuinely appalling. Any humane person, woman or man, cannot help but be astonished to see so much venom and hatred being heaped upon innocent persons, and must indeed be horrified by the twisted processes of thought that inspired this venom, nurtured it, and even applauded it as "healing."

Not surprisingly, many "survivors" are women who have extreme aversions toward sex:

- "Many survivors describe intimacy as suffocating or invasive" (p.223)
- "One survivor, Saphyre, had no love in her life for many years" (p. 223).
- "I became celibate for quite a long time, about nine years" (p. 397).
- "Some people have sexual feelings many times in a day, others once a week, once a month, or once a year" (p. 252).
- "I've never had a sexual desire" (p. 252).
- "It was the most disgusting, degrading thing to actually want sex" (p. 434).
- "As soon as somebody wants to be sexual with me, I get absolutely terrified" (p. 255).
- "Ugh, Genitals! If you were abused by a man, you may find male genitals scary or repulsive" (p.256).

- "In my fantasies, when I imagine having a lover, I'm making love to him and everything is going along beautifully until he takes out his penis. And then I vomit all over the floor" (p.256)

It is generally agreed today that a healthy young woman ought to have strong sexual feelings, and that the absence of such feelings is, in some sense, pathological. But the "survivor", by embracing the myth that she is a "victim of abuse," immediately changes the situation from "why am I dysfunctional?" to one where someone else is responsible (nearly always some man). The "survivor" goes at once from a pitiable woman with a neurotic aversion of sex to a powerful, blameless, healthy "survivor" whose sexual phobias are understandable and justified, resulting from the perfidy of the men in her "original" heterosexual family. What Johns Hopkins University sex researcher John Money calls "hypophilia" (an abnormally low level of erotic activity) [6] is rampant in the lesbian world. Surveys have consistently shown that lesbian couples have, on average, a level of sexual activity far below that of heterosexual ones. [7] Indeed, one well-known lesbian author laments that "whatever it is that lesbians do that (for lack of a better word) might be called "sex" we apparently do damned little of it." [8] By using the "survivor" myth as a cover for her own hypophilia, the sex-phobic woman - whether heterosexual or lesbian - can now posture as a model of mental health, and indeed even lecture the rest of the world for its supposed wrongdoings. To deal with sexual problems, Bass and Davis recommend the book *Lesbian Sex* as "a good read about sexuality, sexual problems, and healing for *all* women, not just for lesbians," and also recommend its sequel *Lesbian Passion: Loving Ourselves and Each Other*, which includes chapters for "incest survivors and their partners" (p. 480).

Most people, during a time of crisis, have traditionally sought solace and comfort in their families, an institution that is grounded in heterosexuality. But the effect of the "recovered memories" movement is to declare "family" to be the problem, not the solution. In fact, throughout *Courage to Heal* what are normally called "families" are termed one's "family of origin", to create the impression that they are temporary and accidental. The so-called "survivor" is encouraged to think of her all-female "support group" as her new family. It is widely recognized that enormous harm has been done to many thousands of families by false accusations arising from the lesbian-led "survivors" movement. What is not generally recognized is that this harm to families is not accidental; rather, it represents an ideologically-based attack. The "survivors movement" may be seen as a lesbian firebrand tossed into the heterosexual family, intended to cause maximum damage by hitting the family at its weakest point: the widespread uncritical acceptance of lesbian- feminist slander against the heterosexual male. So accustomed are all contemporary college-educated persons to regarding men as "exploiters" and women as "victims," that all critical scrutiny is abandoned for claims, no matter how absurd, so long as they fit this pattern.

Thus women seeking emotional solace for a problem of whatever origin are steered away from heterosexual families, into the all- woman, often lesbian-led "survivors" movement. From the standpoint of the evangelical Sapphist, nothing could be more welcome. Even though such "therapists" themselves may derive no personal benefit from women being recruited to lesbianism, it nonetheless does much to promote a philosophy about which they obviously have strong feelings. A number of "retractors" - women who were once persuaded that they were "survivors of abuse" but later retracted the accusation upon realizing how unreliable such "memories" are - report having come under strong pressure to change their heterosexual orientation.

Of course, most heterosexual women are quite properly wary about taking advice from lesbians on how to deal with men. Among lesbians, any degree of anti-male venom may gain general credence, and has little immediate consequence. The heterosexual woman, however, expects to live most of her life in intimate relationships with men, and is harmed quite measurably when anti- male venom and slanders render such relationships intolerable for one party or the other. To put it another way, the heterosexual woman cannot afford to adopt the lesbian's open disdain for all men, because the eventual consequences to her will be enormous. Thus the 'hidden agenda' of the "survivors movement" is kept reasonably well-hidden, and attempts to bring it into the light are met with angry ad hominem denunciations.

Martin Gardner wrote that "a father capable of raping his four- year-old daughter betrays such psychotic behavior that it is almost impossible for there to be no other records of his mental illness. Wives, siblings, and other relatives seldom have reason to maintain a state of 'denial' " [9]. I heartily concur, and if we ignore so-called "recovered memories," the evidence strongly suggests that Gardner is correct. Such crimes are rare, and are committed primarily by those who run afoul of other laws as well. But the feminist movement vehemently disagrees. According to the received wisdom among the supporters of feminism, men who are pillars of the community - doctors, top executives, men who daily handle the most weighty responsibilities and phenomenal feats of self-control in their professions - routinely go home and rape their young daughters each night without suffering the slightest pangs of conscience, often with the full knowledge and acquiescence of their wives. (After all, everyone knows that American wives invariably can be counted on to do exactly as their husbands command, no matter how distasteful or morally repugnant it may be, or how harmful to their children. What an absurd fantasy world is that one!) Gardner is, as usual, quite accurate in his assessment; it is his detractors who are steeped in fantasy.

One "survivor," hiding behind a pseudonym, claims to have been molested as a girl on the subways of New York City "almost every day." Of her "abusers" she says that "the majority were well- dressed, they were coming from good neighborhoods, they were carrying briefcases. It was never a black or Hispanic man or a man of any other race but white" (p 382-3). (Has this "survivor" ever listened to black "rap" music? That really suggests a great respect for women, does it not?) It does not take great insight to recognize this statement as a preposterous lie: whenever crimes are committed (and the "crimes" she describes are implausible in the extreme), no racial or ethnic group is so innocent as to wear a halo. As a Caucasian white-collar man who sometimes carries a briefcase, I greatly resent those who promote such false and degrading stereotypes about us. What a pity that this mendacious lesbian is not man enough to stand up and defend what she has written, but hides instead behind her pseudonym.

We miss the big picture if we imagine *The Courage to Heal* as some sort of irrational singularity that just happened to have done a lot of harm. For the simple fact is that *The Courage to Heal* is merely one of a large number of such books for "survivors", and that the "Womens Studies" establishment stands strongly behind the claims of "recovered memories". Few if any books, in the entire canon of "Womens Studies", expresses the slightest degree of doubt in the validity of so-called "recovered memories," or the slightest degree of remorse for the suffering of innocent men falsely accused thereby. Thus we are left with the unsettling realization that the "survivors" movement lies straight in the mainstream of contemporary Womens Studies, a movement with a near-Papal belief in its own infallibility.

The harm caused by *The Courage to Heal* and similar books is not that of honest error in scholarship, but rather represents a form of sexual and ideological warfare. The harm it has caused is not accidental, but rather one that is celebrated with a degree of malicious glee. This harm has been compounded by a general unwillingness to recognize the attack for what it is.

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#### NOTES:

1. Both the American Psychiatric Association (1993), and the Council on Scientific Affairs of the American Medical Association (1994) have warned against relying on the so- called "recovered memories" that are the principal cornerstone of the "survivors" movement.
2. "Healing Words," *The Advocate*, Oct. 22, 1991, p. 87.
3. (Penelope & Valentine, eds. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press)
4. "September 7", From *No More Masks! An Anthology of Poems by Women*, Florence Howe and Ellen Bass, eds. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday Anchor Books, 1973).
5. "Overcoming Silence - Lesbians Lead the Recovery Movement for Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse," *The Advocate*, Oct. 22, 1991, p. 60
6. "The canon of hypophilia includes erotic apathy or inertia, erotic revulsion, genital penetration phobia, lubrication failure, vaginal spasm (vaginismus), failure to climax (anorgasmia), and coital or postcoital pain (dyspareunia)." Money, Dr. John, *Lovemaps* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1988, p. 29.) According to Dr. Money, sexual dysfunction in men is more likely to manifest itself as some sort of compulsive fetish, while in women it is more likely to occur as hypophilia.

- 7. "lesbian couples are less "sexual" as couples and as individuals than anyone else ... 47% of lesbians in long- term relationships "had sex" once a month or less, while among heterosexual married couples only 15% had sex once a month or less." *Lesbian "Sex"* by Marilyn Frye; in *Lesbian Philosophies & Cultures*, Jennifer Allen, ed. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990)
- 8. *ibid*
- 9. *Skeptical Inquirer*, 18:224 Winter 1994

The Courage to Heal is an inspiring, comprehensive guide that offers hope and a map of the healing journey to every woman who was sexually abused as a child and to those who care about her. Although the effects of child sexual abuse are long-term and severe, healing is possible. Weaving together personal stories and practical advice, the book helps women come to terms with their past while moving powerfully into the future. The Courage to Heal is an inspiring, comprehensive guide that offers hope and a map of the healing journey to every woman who was sexually abused as a child and to those who care about her. Although the effects of child sexual abuse are long-term and severe, healing is possible. Weaving together personal stories and practical advice, the book helps women come to terms with their past while moving powerfully into the future.

The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse (first published in 1988, with three subsequent editions, the last being a 20th anniversary edition in 2008) is a self-help book by poet Ellen Bass and Laura Davis that focuses on recovery from child sexual abuse and has been called "controversial and polarizing". The intent of the book is to provide a healing experience by means of explanations, practical suggestions, descriptions and first hand accounts from women who have