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—Sandra Butler, author of *The Conspiracy of Silence*



The Courage to Heal

*A Guide for
Women Survivors
of Child
Sexual Abuse*

Ellen Bass and Laura Davis

THE COURAGE

TO HEAL

Other Books by the Authors

Ellen Bass

I NEVER TOLD ANYONE: WRITING BY WOMEN SURVIVORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE (COEDITOR)

NO MORE MASKS!: AN ANTHOLOGY OF POEMS BY WOMEN (COEDITOR)

Laura Davis

THE COURAGE TO HEAL WORKBOOK: FOR WOMEN AND MEN SURVIVORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

THE COURAGE TO HEAL

A GUIDE FOR WOMEN SURVIVORS
OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

ELLEN BASS and
LAURA DAVIS



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Workshops and Lectures

Ellen Bass and Laura Davis offer training seminars and educational programs about child sexual abuse nationally. Ellen also offers workshops for survivors, groups for partners, and training for counselors. For a schedule of upcoming lectures, workshops, and seminars, or if you are interested in bringing one to your area, please write to us at the address below.

The authors welcome any feedback or responses to *The Courage to Heal* but regret that they are unable to answer individual letters.

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Don't run away from it. Don't bury it. Don't try to produce a different reality getting all strung out on something, or eating your way through your feelings. Don't slash your wrists. Just deal with it, because it's going to keep coming back if you continue living anyway. It's painful, but you just have to keep going. It's just part of life, really.

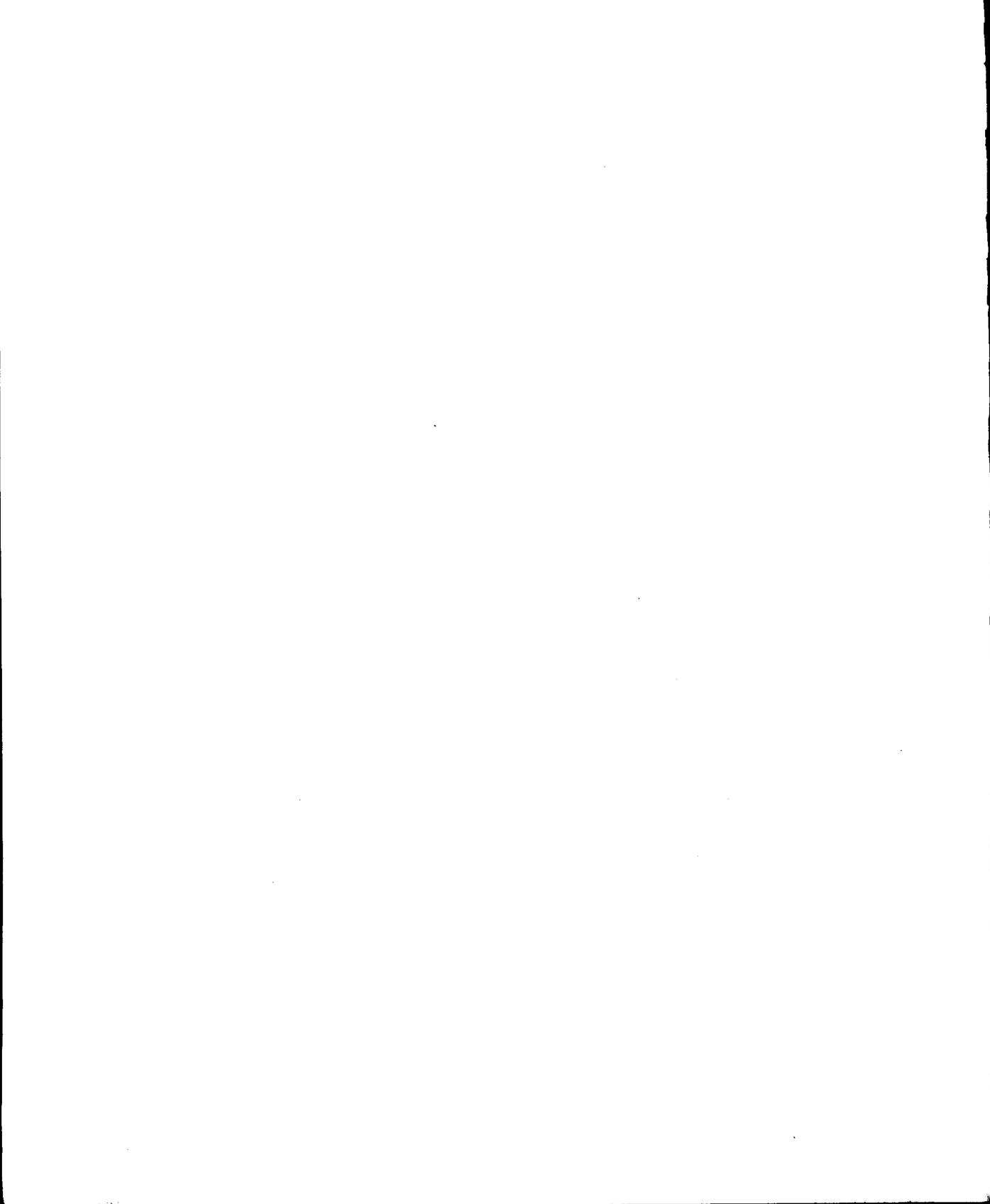
—Soledad, 28-year-old survivor

Give as much commitment to healing as you did to surviving for the last ten or fifteen years.

—Dorianne, 35-year-old survivor

There's more than anger, more than sadness, more than terror. There's hope.

—Edith Horning, 46-year-old survivor



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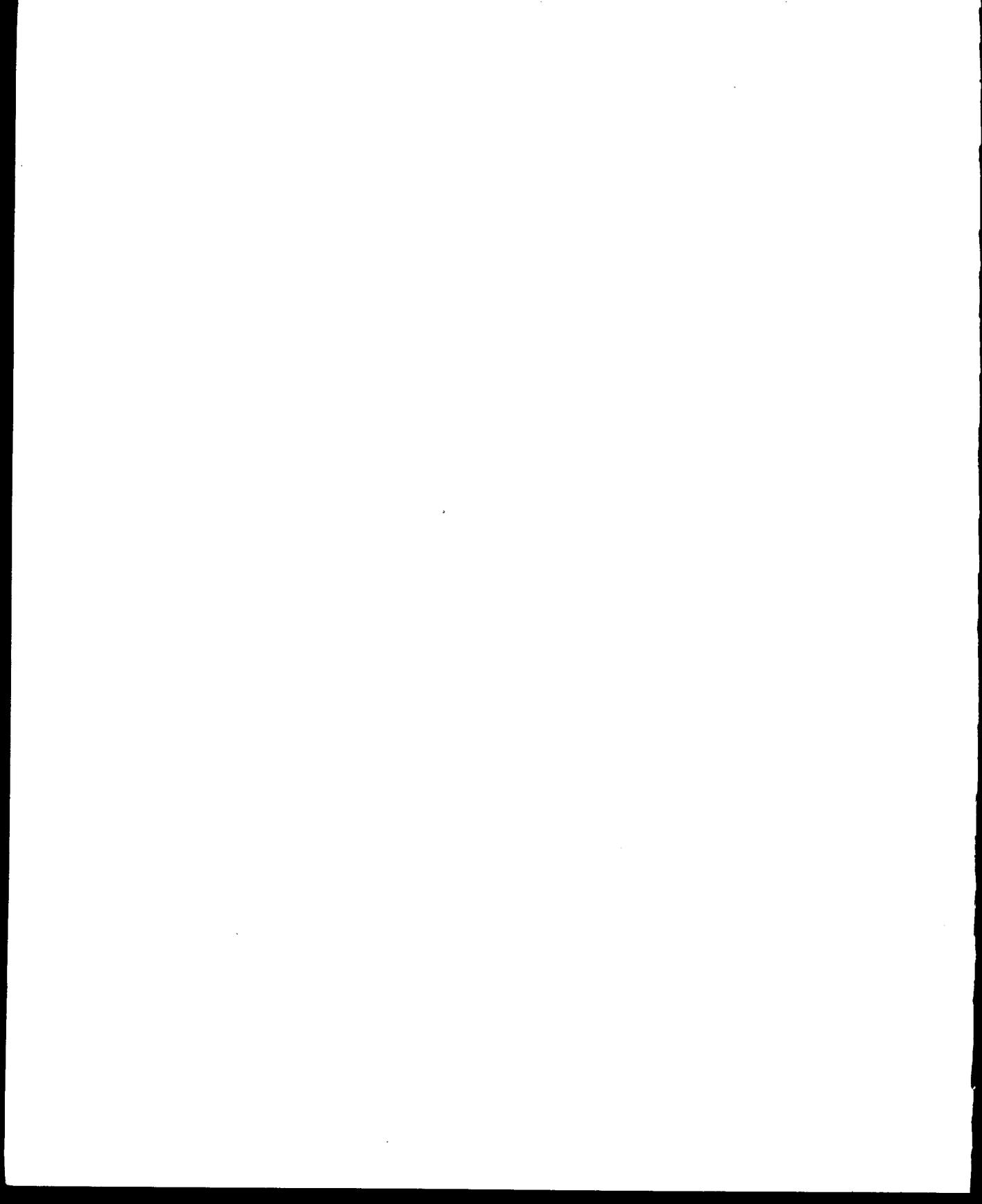
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PREFACE

Ellen Bass

I first heard that children were abused in 1974, when a young woman in my creative writing workshop pulled a crumpled half-sheet of paper out of her jeans pocket. Her writing was so vague, so tentative, that I wasn't sure what she was trying to say, but I sensed that it was important. Gently, I encouraged her to write more. Slowly she revealed her story. In pieces, on bits of paper, she shared the pain of her father's assaults, and I listened.*

Shortly afterward, another woman told me her story. And then another. And another. There were no groups for survivors of child sexual abuse then. The word "survivor"

* This woman, Maggie Hoyal, went on to become a fine writer, and her story, "These Are the Things I Remember," is included in *I Never Told Anyone* (see the Bibliography).

was not yet in our vocabulary. But as they sensed that I could understand their stories, more and more women shared them with me. The psychologist Carl Rogers once said that when he worked through an issue in his life, it was as if telegrams were sent to his clients informing them that they could now bring that subject to therapy. Once I became aware of child sexual abuse, it was as if women knew that I was safe to talk to.

I was stunned by the number of women who had been sexually abused. I was deeply moved by the anguish they had endured. And I was equally impressed by their integrity, their ability to love and create through such devastation. I wanted people to know about this, about their strength and their beauty.

In 1978, three months after my first child was born, five women from my workshops and I began collecting stories for *I*

Never Told Anyone: Writings by Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse. By 1983, when it was published, I had learned a great deal about the healing process. One of the things I learned was that writing itself was healing.

I decided to offer a group for survivors and designed the I Never Told Anyone workshops. I tried to create an environment safe enough for women to face their own pain and anger so they could begin to heal. At the first workshop, I mainly listened. I wanted to learn what survivors needed to talk about, what they needed to hear. Women wrote about their experience of being sexually abused, and read what they had written to the group. The simple opportunity to share with other survivors was profoundly healing.

The women who came to the workshops had no historical reason to trust. As children they had learned that their trust would be taken advantage of. And yet in the groups, they trusted.

This book, like the workshops, is based on the premise that everyone wants to become whole, to fulfill their potential. That we all, like seedlings or tadpoles, intend to become our full selves and will do so if we are not thwarted. People don't need to be forced to grow. All we need is favorable circumstances: respect, love, honesty, and the space to explore.

Since I began the I Never Told Anyone workshops, I have worked with hundreds of survivors across the country. I've facilitated workshops for partners of survivors and offered training seminars for professionals who work with survivors. I have solidified my understanding of what it takes to heal from child sexual abuse. This is the knowledge I want to share with you here.

I am not academically educated as a psy-

chologist. I have acquired counseling skills primarily through practice. Since 1970, when I began working as a counselor and group facilitator, I've had the opportunity to train with a number of excellent therapists. But none of what is presented here is based on psychological theories. The process described, the suggestions, the exercises, the analysis, the conclusions, all come from the experiences of survivors.

I am also the partner of a survivor. In the beginning of our relationship we struggled with issues of trust, intimacy, and sexuality common to many couples and exacerbated by the effects of sexual abuse. Now, several years later, the problems that caused us both such anguish are no longer wrenching. Sexual abuse no longer overshadows our relationship. I want to tell you this because when you are in the thick of the pain, it's hard to believe that it will ever change. Yet it does. And it does not take forever.

As my grandmother used to say, "No one gets cheated from trouble." I was not sexually abused as a child, but I too have had pain to heal from. In the three years since beginning this book, I have made major personal changes. I live in the same house, with the same family, doing the same work. But I am not the same. Inspired by the survivors I worked with, I followed their example. Slowly, repetitively, step-by-step, little by little, my old fears, my desperate places, my limiting ways of coping, have receded. After saying "Healing is possible" to hundreds of survivors, it occurred to me that it was possible for me too.

Sometimes people ask, "Don't you find it depressing always to be thinking about child sexual abuse?" But I don't think so much about the abuse. I think about the healing.

The opportunity to be a part of women's healing feels a little like assisting at a birth. It's awesome to touch the miracle of life so closely. When women trust me with their most vulnerable, tender feelings, I am aware that I hold their spirit, for that moment, in my hands, and I am both honored and thrilled.

I want to see us all become whole—and not stop there. As we become capable of nurturing ourselves and living rich personal lives, we are enabled to act creatively in the world so that life can continue—the eucalyptus trees, the narcissus, the sunfish, the squirrels, seals, hummingbirds, our own children.

—Ellen Bass

Laura Davis

I remember calling Ellen one day a few months after I'd first remembered the incest. I counted the rings—two, three, four—she had to be home! She had to be! Five, six, seven—if I didn't talk to her right now, I knew I couldn't last through the afternoon. Eight, nine, ten—well, maybe she was outside folding the laundry and was just slow getting to the phone. Eleven, twelve, thirteen—I cannot stand another moment of this pain. My heart hurts and I can't take any more. Fourteen, fifteen . . .

"Hello, this is Ellen," she said, cheery and calm.

"Ellen, this is Laura. Look, you've got to tell me just one thing. Will I ever get through this? Is there ever an end? I can't take it anymore, and if you'll just tell me I can get to the other side, I'm sure I can last through the week." I was talking fast, my sentences piling up on each other.

"Hello, Laura. I'm glad you called." Her voice was smooth, reassuring. "And yes, you can make it. Healing is possible. You're already well on your way."

"Well on my way? How can you say that? I can't sleep, and when I do, it's all I dream about. I can't think about anything else. Every child I see on the street reminds me of incest. I can't make love, I can't eat, my whole body feels like a giant piece of rubber. I'm crying all the time. My whole life is flashbacks, going to therapy, and talking about incest. Half the time I don't even believe it happened, and the other half I'm sure it was my fault."

"It did happen, Laura. Look at what you're going through. Would anyone willingly choose to go through this torture? Why would you ever want to invent something this bad? You were just a little girl, Laura. He was what—seventy years old? You were a victim. You were innocent. You didn't do anything. It wasn't your fault."

Over and over, Ellen repeated those simple phrases: "It wasn't your fault. I believe you. Healing is possible. You're going to make it. You're going to be okay."

I expressed every doubt I could think of. Then I made up some new ones. I knew other survivors didn't make up this sort of thing, but I was the exception. I'd always been the exception, all my life.

"You can fight it all you want, Laura," she said finally, "but the door's been opened, and you're in the healing process whether you like it or not."

There was a long silence. Then I said, "Isn't there any way out?"

"The only way out is through, honey, I'm sorry."

I was quiet for a long time. "But it hurts, Ellen. It hurts so much."

"I know, Laura. I know. But there's a way through this stuff, and I know you're going to find it."

I wanted to write this 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. Six months be-

fore I approached Ellen about collaborating, I had my first memories of being sexually abused by my grandfather when I was a child. Since that time, my life had fallen apart. My lover was leaving me. I was becoming increasingly estranged from my family. I was sure I was going crazy. I needed to understand what was happening to me. I needed to talk to other women who had been through it. Out of that need, my desire to write this book was born.

During the first year of our collaboration, it was my task to gather other women's stories. Ellen and I placed ads in papers, wrote to the women who'd come to her workshops, put out the call by word of mouth. I screened hundreds of calls and spent days on the phone listening to the stories of survivors, some of whom had never told anyone about their abuse before they read our ad, saw our poster.

Even though many of the women I interviewed had been actively healing for years, our conversations were never easy. One woman came to my house with a bag of food and ate from it for the whole three hours we talked. Another had to get stoned to tell me her story. A third burned sage and cedar, cleansing the room to make it safe. Sometimes the women cried. Sometimes we both did.

The honesty and courage of these women continually gave me hope. When I found it impossible to make love because of flashbacks, I'd ask a woman I was interviewing how she had healed her sexuality. When I started to wish I could shove the memories back where they came from, a woman would tell me that healing was the greatest miracle in her life.

As the months went by and the number of interviews grew, it became clear that there

were tremendous similarities in the stories. The black ex-nun from Boston and the ambassador's daughter from Manila described the stages of their healing process the same way. A pattern started to emerge. What I was going through made sense.

As I moved along in my own healing, my relationship to the book changed. The acuteness of my own needs began to fade. It became increasingly important for me to communicate what I was learning. I began to talk more freely about the book with people I met. Within the first few minutes of any conversation, I'd be asked why I was writing it, and it would all be out on the table: "Because I'm a survivor myself."

Many people quickly changed the conversation or turned away. But an astonishing number responded with stories of their own: "It happened to me too." "My best friend says her swimming coach used to touch her." "My neighbor's kid reported her father just last week."

There are many phases involved in writing a book. For me, they have felt just like the stages of the healing process. With each new juncture I'd freeze, certain that I couldn't possibly jump over the next hurdle. I couldn't confront my family. I couldn't begin to write. Then I'd take that first terrifying step forward, and be set in motion again.

Throughout the first year, I wrote nothing about my own experience as a survivor. Ellen began the first draft while I kept busy transcribing and editing the interviews. Underneath, I knew that this book was as much about my life as it was about theirs, but I successfully avoided the inevitable moment when I, too, would have to speak my truth.