



SURVIVORS

Modern-Day Slave Narratives

OF SLAVERY

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THE LISTENING ABOLITIONIST

EARLY ABOLITIONISTS UNDERSTOOD THAT THEY were working toward a revolution. When the first antislavery movement began in 1787, slavery was perfectly legal and had been a stable and pervasive part of most societies for thousands of years. It was supported by religion and was a key part of national economies. Leaders assured populations of its legitimacy and importance. The argument was made again and again that slavery, like the turning of the seasons or the growing of crops, was simply part of the natural order of things. It is hard for us, people of the twenty-first century, to grasp this fundamental acceptance—the popular understanding that, like death and taxes, slavery was a permanent part of the human condition.

In trying to convey and justify the revolution of abolition, writers in the nineteenth century would sometimes point to a Bible verse that illustrated a world turned upside down. It spoke of the last days when things were to be made right and illustrated that transformation by stating, “In those days I will even pour out my spirit on my slaves, men and women, and they will prophesy” (Acts 2:18 and Joel 2:29). The idea that slaves could have voices and use those voices in powerful ways was—and is often today—revolutionary. In the past, it was an idea so radical that it required the authority of a religious text in its support. Today, people still find it hard to hear the true and powerful voices of slaves. That is why Laura Murphy’s careful attention to their words and stories is critically important.

The current antislavery movement, the movement that we hope will be the last such movement in human history through its eradication of slavery, has emerged at a time that is confused and troubled. Humanity, largely through its own activities, has created a profound crisis shaking the global economy and society and spinning off conflicts in the way a great thunderstorm seeds tornados. But the first abolitionist movements were also born in a time of great upheavals, national revolutions, devastating and long-lasting wars, violent colonial expansion, and the enormous and genocidal crime of the transatlantic slave trade. Yet in that time of militarism and inhuman commerce, the new movements, in opposition to the moral economy in which they evolved, valued the voices of the powerless and honored those who had suffered.

But as antislavery movements grew, their revolutionary fervor could fade. Gradualism could challenge immediatism, and earnest concern and discussion could replace liberation as the primary activity of abolition. For some parts of the contemporary antislavery movement, there is a similar threat of incipient stultification. While liberators and survivors risk their lives to help others to freedom, some “antislavery” groups and international organizations spend their time focused on the circular activities of awareness raising and fund-raising, harvesting through sensational pleading the means to continue their plea. It is in this context of a maturing movement that the guidance and voices of those who have been enslaved are most needed. As the power of the antislavery movement grows, there is a need that truth will speak to and guide that power.¹

In this book, Laura Murphy provides the channel by which the voices and the lived experiences of slaves and former slaves might reach us clearly² and convey their truth and guidance. This is important because slaves are silenced in slavery, often brutally and finally. In freedom, two other forces work to mute slaves. The first is a social context that resists the challenge of freedom. Around the world, the majority of slaves live where enslavement receives at least partial support from local elites. Systems of oppression and discrimination, gender suppression, ethnic violence, religious prejudice, and bias according to caste, class, or race are the weft into which the warp of slavery is woven. To end slavery it is necessary to change the systems that allow slavery to exist. Freed slaves understand the calculus of oppression perfectly and will condemn its constituents. But these systems of hierarchy and oppression serve the powerful well, and speaking against them carries

a risk. In the countries where slavery is most prevalent, local elites and government officials often prefer that freed slaves simply move away, but if they must stay, then they should be grateful, obsequious, and silent. Yet, remarkably, this social pressure and suppression are less effective than the second force at work that mutes former slaves: the sense of shame and dislocation that wells up from within the slave's own being.

Those who have been enslaved share many of the psychological sequelae of those subjected to sexual violence. Like a victim of rape, the former slave often feels shame. In both cases, the shame is irrational; neither victim has done anything wrong—indeed, both have been very seriously wronged. But the stigma of enslavement, the products of long-term denigration and abuse by slaveholders, press upon the mind and emotions of freed slaves and stifle their voices. The voices in this book have risen above that shame or, just as likely, have spoken even as it has tormented them. Is it any wonder that there might be clumsiness of expression or disjointed phrases when we know a former slave is speaking in spite of his or her pain? The hurt that sometimes bursts through survivors' words simply reflects the ache they still feel. Overcoming this shame can be a long process, but the very act of speaking and writing can be restorative. As Toni Morrison put it, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another."³ That fact adds a special dimension to this book. These voices, these narratives, are both the truth of slavery and a way to resolve and vanquish the pain of slavery for freed slaves.

Vanquishing the pain of enslavement is an act that is sometimes sabotaged by the modern antislavery movement—an important theme that Murphy addresses in her discussion of the narratives and that Minh Dang makes clear in "Letter to the Antitrafficking Movement" in this foreword. If those who benefit from the systems that support slavery want their freed slaves absent or silent, modern "antislavery" groups that feed on publicity and sensation want their slavery victims to be attractive, pathetic, and grateful.

When survivors are manipulated and groomed for public presentation, the result is that our ears are stopped and muffled by our preconceptions. In our imagination, we "know" what slavery is like, we feel we understand the lives of slaves, and we apply our certain but deeply imperfect knowledge to all slaves. When we do so, we make a serious error. Slavery is a multilayered relationship. To become enslaved usually involves *social* relationships

determined by power differences that make a person vulnerable to slavery. Once someone is enslaved, slavery is also fundamentally an *economic* relationship; a slaveholder's primary aim is to profit from his or her control over the slave. And between the slave and the slaveholder, taking a form marked by dependency and manipulation, slavery often becomes an *emotional* relationship. Each case of slavery is a unique expression of these layered relationships that is then further shaped by the culture, time, and place where it is found. The result is that no two cases of slavery are the same, and the range of variation in slavery is as wide as it is in other human relationships.

When we typecast freed slaves as pathetic victims, however well meaning that action might be, we deny the unique truth of each lived experience of slavery. We once again steal the individuality of the person who has been enslaved. If we do so to make slavery meet our own emotional, social, and economic needs, then we are not serving freedom—only ourselves. The antidote to this hubris is to be guided by those who know slavery best and appreciate freedom most: the survivors of slavery.

The guidance given us by freed slaves is not always comfortable. We want our slaveholders to be beings of pure evil, but freed slaves will tell us that slaveholders are people, too. We want our former slaves to be wise and patient, even though they are confused by freedom, angry at injustice, and dismissive of our slow and inadequate response to slavery. Our current antislavery movement still waits for its Frederick Douglass or Harriet Tubman, for a survivor with a true voice of great power. But it is important for us to remember that however we may honor Douglass and Tubman today, the previous antislavery movement often found these figures difficult and controversial. The voices in this book will push us to go faster than we are going, to give more than we are giving, and to be as radical and forceful in achieving freedom as slavery is powerful in its brutal practices.

If we listen, we'll be better abolitionists.

Kevin Bales
St. Saviours, Isle of Guernsey

JULY 2012

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE ANTITRAFFICKING MOVEMENT

MARCH 2013

Dear respected members of the anti-human-trafficking movement,

As a U.S. citizen and survivor of child abuse, incest, and domestic sex trafficking in the United States, I write to you to communicate my deepest wishes for how we approach our antitrafficking work. Over the past three years, I have publicly shared my story of slavery and freedom in venues large and small across the United States. I have met college students, teenagers, mothers, fathers, clergy, professors, service providers, and many others working to fight modern-day slavery. Through my presentations and conversations, I have developed a working set of **guiding principles for the antitrafficking movement**. I urge all of us to take heed of these principles because our adherence to or refutation of them will deeply affect the work that we do and the impact we have.

Principle Number 1: Rehumanize Survivors. I have often described my experience of trafficking as being like that of a caged animal at a zoo—an exotic creature that people could see from afar but could not touch. People who paid my owner were given special privileges to use my body for their entertainment. My movements were restricted and monitored, and my environment was not native to me. I was isolated from others in my own species. Although this simile fits, I have come to find that I also often felt like an alien. I always knew that I resembled human beings because of my two eyes, two arms, two legs, and same general body shape; however, it appeared as if I were not thinking or living like other human beings I witnessed.

The majority of my healing work thus far has focused on reconnecting with my humanity and the humanity of others. I have had to learn (or relearn) that I am human, that I was always human, and that the people out there—you as well as those who hurt me—are also human. My basic relationship to who I am, what I can expect of others, and what is possible in the world was damaged. As we incorporate survivors into the antitrafficking movement and encourage them to be at its forefront, we need to recognize their humanity. In a recent training, one of the participants asked me, “How do we as allies in this movement love survivors the way they need to be loved?” I responded, “How do you love yourself? I do not need you to love

me any differently than you love yourself, and if you do not love yourself, then you cannot love me.”

When people hear the stories of survivors, they oftentimes separate themselves from the survivor. Thoughts pass through their head such as, “Wow, I could never have gone through that. That person is so amazing. My life is nothing compared to that. My trauma was not *that* bad.” It is these thoughts that often lead to actions that further isolate and alienate survivors from common humanity.

Survivors are *no different* than you are. You are no different than I am. Just because I have stood on the street corner soliciting sex does not mean that I cannot understand you and you cannot understand me. If you were born to my parents and put in the exact same situation, you would be writing this letter right now. Find a way to relate with survivors. You do not need to have gone through what they went through to imagine what they might experience. Also, share your own story—your own story of learning to love and trust, to cope with shame, to experience joy, and to discover your life’s purpose.

One last thought on this point: when asking survivors to share their story publicly, pay attention to how this process may contribute to their continued dehumanization. What are your plans for the story? Are you merely curious and want to hear their story for personal consumption? Why must you see a survivor to believe the issue exists? Other than his or her story of slavery, what other knowledge and expertise might you ask the survivor to share? Are you compensating the survivor for his or her time and incidentals, just as you might a conference keynote speaker? What would you need or want for yourself if you were sharing your own story?

Principle Number 2: Get Out of the Box. As I was growing up, my prized possessions fit into about four shoeboxes. These shoeboxes contained report cards, notes from friends and teachers, pictures, choir concert programs, and magazine clippings. These items were pieces of my identity that were not celebrated by my parents while they were busy abusing me. I had to hide essential parts of my identity. What did not fit in a shoebox or could not be represented by an object, I buried deep inside my soul, hoping to reveal it someday in my unknown future. My parents and perpetrators forced me into the boxes of bad daughter, prostitute, whore, hurtful child, and on and on. In order to fit those boxes, I was made to contort myself into unfamiliar forms and to put on a mask as disguise. In my healing process, I have come to adorn new masks and to hide in new boxes, primarily those of victim and

survivor. Today, about seven years after my escape from slavery, I am learning that I need to let others know about the hidden parts of myself and the parts of me that do not fall under the label *survivor*. I am a lover, an artist, a social scientist, a friend; I love poetry and peer-reviewed articles; I enjoy being physically active and going to street fairs. Through sharing all parts of my story and who I am, I can free myself from a life confined to recycled shoeboxes.

I invite our movement to join me in breaking down the boxes that we live in. I invite us to challenge the restrictions we put on our ways of being and thinking. Let's think outside the box about how we do our work. What is *not* being said? Whose story is *not* being told? Right now, awareness of domestic-minor sex trafficking, also known as commercial sexual exploitation of children, is growing in the United States. We need to remember the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth and the boys who are also subjected to sex trafficking. We need to remember that women as well as men are buying and selling children. Many people associate trafficking with people in Southeast Asia or abroad working in brothels or being sold into factories, but we need to remember the international citizens who are sold into slavery in the United States—those who were promised a legitimate job as a nanny or a restaurant or farm or garment worker and instead were tricked into debt bondage. Unable to speak English and not knowing anyone or anything about their new environment, survivors of debt bondage don't talk to people about what has happened to them because of immigration concerns. Once these individuals are able to escape, they may be permanently dislocated from their home country and families. We need to remember that U.S. citizens are perpetrators of slavery, just as foreigners are.

What is human trafficking about when we look beyond sensationalized stories? How is *human trafficking* less fit a term for what is truly slavery? How is "modern-day slavery" different from historical slavery? Or is it different at all?

Principle Number 3: Sing a New Song. Many of us know what it's like to have a song stuck in our head. For survivors, the song is often one of humiliation, shame, and degradation: "You slut! Who do you think you are? You're good for nothing, only to be used. You think anyone will believe you? You asked for it. You liked it. Why didn't you just leave? Shut up! I don't want to hear you. You mean nothing. No one will love you. You should be grateful." And on and on.

It is time for us to sing a new song—to raise our voices in unison and drown out the old verses. Let’s sing songs like the following: “You were born an innocent child. It wasn’t your fault. I am so sorry. You were mistreated. You are strong and resilient. How are you feeling? It’s okay to feel angry. It’s okay to cry. You deserved better. I love you.”

However, as we all know, songs are not easy to uproot from our memories. They are deeply engrained as neuropathways in our brains, and though it is possible, it takes many new experiences to rewire our brain. After nearly twenty-one years of slavery, I have lived only 25 percent of my life in freedom. That means that 75 percent of my life was spent hearing lies and insults. On April 16, 2026, the balance of my days on this earth will finally reach 50 percent in slavery and 50 percent in freedom. As I write this letter, that is more than thirteen years from now.

For every interaction that communicated to me that I was worth nothing, I need to practice and surround myself with experiences that breed self-worth. I cannot take self-worth for granted. I must work for it. I am learning that self-love in adulthood does not come from the outside. As a child, I needed my parents to love me so that I could feel loveable. Today, I find that love from the outside goes only so far. Although it is helpful to experience the love of others, no matter how many times I am told that I am beautiful, intelligent, loveable, and wonderful, self-love does not just seep through my skin via osmosis. I must work for it. I must see these qualities and own them for myself.

Until the balance of my days tips toward freedom, the words and songs of others bring comfort and shed doubt on my false beliefs about who I am. They help me see myself when my vision is clouded by the images laid out by my perpetrators. They are whispers in my ear as I develop my own voice. I am as worthy as any other being on the planet just because I am. I am a human being, not a human doing.

In the “doings” of our movement, we now have our own recycled song—that of the three P’s: *prevention*, *protection*, and *prosecution*. Although I do not minimize the importance of these three P’s, I suggest that we transition to embracing three additional P’s: *preparation*, *partnership*, and *promise*.

Preparation. People from all walks of life are entering the antitrafficking movement. Prevention efforts include training of law enforcement and service providers, but I also argue that preparation goes beyond learning statistics and warning signs. Preparation must include a self-reflective and emotional component. How prepared are people to hold the horrors of

human trafficking? How prepared are people to hold the horrors while celebrating the joys? How informed are people of their motivations? Are we here to “save” participants because we think they have sinned? Or do we see our own futures as intertwined with the futures of survivors of human trafficking? What stereotypes do we bring to this work? What stereotypes are we reinforcing? As a former service-learning professional, I am adamant about training and supporting those who serve in communities and those who work for social justice. How will we sustain this movement for the long term? How will we ensure that those who do this work do not succumb to their despair but find ways to embrace it, share it, and move on?

Partnership. I already witness service providers coming together to share best practices. I see law enforcement working with service providers to ensure survivor safety. I see survivors coming together to provide support to one another and to assert their voices in our movement. I urge all of you to continue to partner with survivors—to ask survivors not just about their stories, but also about their policy recommendations, their ideas for improved intervention, as well as their hopes and concerns for the movement. I also ask that members of our movement do not seek to divide and separate survivors by focusing only on sex trafficking or on labor trafficking or to overemphasize international survivors or domestic survivors; rather, I ask that you face the complexities of this issue, refrain from reducing diverse experiences into a neat package, and portray both the similarities and differences in survivor experience. Partnership is defined as having joint interest—I ask that you build relationships with survivors and find joint interests with them.

Survivors are critical to the movement because every successful social movement is guided by those directly affected by the injustice. I urge the movement to invest in the training and leadership of survivors of human trafficking. Survivors have much to contribute, and we must support their healing and autonomy as they take center stage in antislavery efforts.

Finally, as we lift up survivors, I ask that we work to avoid entrenching a divide between survivors and nonsurvivors. Just as I am weary of a movement led only by service providers, I am weary of a movement led only by survivors. I know so little about freedom that my experiences are limited. How can I expect to know the *true* boundaries of what is possible? Nonsurvivors similarly have a limit to what they can know about the experience of slavery. By working in partnership, however, we can utilize our individual strengths and account for the gaps in our partners.

Promise. I speak not of a contract or agreement that one makes with another, but rather of *potential*. Prevention, prosecution, and protection do not address much about the future for survivors of human trafficking. If survivors successfully put their perpetrators in jail and then sufficiently feel safe in their homes and communities, what comes next? What about the rest of their lives? What about their hopes and dreams and their potential to live life beyond their years of slavery? After more than thirty years of imprisonment, the character Brooks in the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) committed suicide shortly following his release from prison. He did not know how to live in freedom. He had adapted to a restricted form of living. How does this apply to survivors of slavery? They must consider long-term support and services to ensure (re)acclimation to freedom. We must consider the potential for thriving, not just surviving.

Principle Number 4: Address Emotional Poverty and Profits. By now, we all have heard that human trafficking is a multi-billion-dollar industry. It thrives because it is a business—because traffickers can make monetary profits by selling human beings again and again. Although laudable efforts have been made to interrupt the financial gains from human trafficking, it appears that money can't be the only problem. If it were really an issue of money, just as if world hunger and poverty were merely an issue of money, we would throw our money at the issue and end human suffering.

Why does human trafficking persist? I argue that we are at a time of extreme *emotional poverty* and that traffickers receive *emotional profits* from their deeds. It is *gratifying* for traffickers to feel a sense of domination. I understand that for most of us this idea is hard to grasp. Why would a human being enjoy dominating and inflicting pain on another person? It is because by inflicting pain and dominating others, traffickers can deflect their own pain, pass on their own history of trauma, and avoid their own emotional suffering.

This happens every day among “regular” people. It is rooted in our society and our biology that we seek to harm those who have harmed or wish to harm us. We carry an eye-for-an-eye mentality. When we've had an emotionally rough day at work, we come home and argue with our families. We yell at the dog, we rage while driving, we hate people of a particular faith or race or sexual orientation, and so on. We displace our own pain, and so do traffickers. So let's not put traffickers into some subhuman/nonhuman category of people. We all are seeking some emotional release. We feel emotionally

empty, and so we use others to fill us up. We use drugs, sex, food, TV, and, yes, the enslavement of others to fill an emotional need that we don't think can be gratified otherwise. Emotional poverty does not just happen—it is developed over many years. How have we deprived our children and ourselves of love, connection, empathy, and freedom? How does this deprivation sustain itself through our family dynamics, schools, communities, businesses, and institutions? If we do not fill our emptiness through harmful ways, what do we do with it?

I have had to learn to sit with it. To grieve that the emptiness I carry is from the past and cannot be filled. Now I must create fullness in my present and my future. I am very troubled by the fact that my parents made hundreds of thousands of dollars from exploiting my body. However, more than troubled, I am plagued by the fact that they completely disregarded my humanity. It was the fact that another human being, let alone my parents, refused to have a relationship with me—with my humanity—that caused my psychological, emotional, and existential wounds. My humanity was sacrificed for other people's emotional gratification. Financial gratification is only temporary. Money doesn't buy happiness, so a trafficker may seek to earn more and more money, hoping that it will fill that emotional hole. It won't. And while they are on an impossible quest to extinguish their feelings of emptiness by using other people as objects of gratification, many people's basic human rights are robbed, spit on, and disrespected.

Principle Number 5: Peace Is in the Pain. In my weekly therapy sessions, I am reminded of my need to grieve for the losses of my childhood. Like my perpetrators, I will seek to regain my irretrievable losses if I do not grieve for them. Grief acknowledges that there *is* emptiness—that there is loss. I recently heard the term *disenfranchised grief*, and it resonated with me. Though I know nothing of its origins and definitions, I have used this term to name the unacknowledged and unwitnessed sorrow that I experienced as a child. Enfranchisement is the empowerment of a vote. Disenfranchisement is a silencing. Disenfranchised grief is a silenced pain that I walk around with. I try to hide it, I face it in small and large doses, and time and time again I am surprised at the depth and the quantity of grief that I experience.

How *do* I grieve for my losses? I have lost *so* much. I lost parents. I never truly had parents. I had slave masters. I lost an entire childhood and all of the appropriate developmental stages, countless hours of playing and relaxing, years of sleep, an experience of the basic goodness of human beings, and an

experience of my own basic goodness. The loss brought about by the trauma I endured cannot be regained. Because I missed so much in my childhood, I am often living from a place of scarcity—scrambling to “get” as much out of life as I can. When I’m trying to “get,” however, I’m not really being in my life or enjoying it much. Days come and go, and I don’t feel fulfilled. So no matter how much I do now and how full I fill my days, more does not make up for the less, the lack, the loss.

Grieving for my losses will help me pursue goals that are possible rather than goals that are *impossible* (like making up lost time). Grieving frees me of the pain and burden I’ve carried alone for so many years and opens up space for new adventures and joys. Grieving brings me true peace with what I have suffered and where I am now. In our movement, how do we sit with the grief of survivors? Or do we even sit at all? Are we too eager to “take action” that we forget that sitting and listening are actions? Are we too afraid to feel the depth of our own pain and thus try to avoid the depth of another’s sorrow? So often when I share the pain of my experience, people remind me of how great my life is now. They tell me great things about myself. Some unique few cry with me. They cry for themselves *next* to me. They do not cry *for* me, but *with me*.

Grieving is not just for survivors. Grieving is for all of us. We all live in a world where violence pervades our everyday ways of relating with each other. We have experienced violence, and we have enacted violence—whether big or small. What losses does the antitrafficking movement need to recognize? What sorrows are we avoiding?

Principle Number 6: Survivor Stories Are Not Enough to Sustain This Movement. The first time I shared my story publicly was in April 2006 at a poetry reading in Berkeley. I was taking “Poetry for the People,” a course designed and taught by the late June Jordan, a scholar, activist, and writer. It was my last semester of my undergraduate degree, and I was in the midst of emancipating myself from my slave masters. When I finally broke free, I felt liberated, and poem after poem about my years of enslavement began to flow out of me. The poem that I read nearly seven years ago seems an appropriate ending for this letter and my final guiding principle. In that poem entitled “My Name Is Revolution,” I end with this:

this poem is about revolution
 because even when I write these words
 I am not supposed to be alive

I am not supposed to be free
I am not supposed to be anything
but my parents' slave

this poem is about revolution
this poem
these words
my stories
must continue
or
I will not exist
I write
so
I exist
I write
so
I claim a life that was stolen from me
my name is Minh Dang
every time I speak
I speak a history
of incest
I speak a history
of slavery
I speak a history
that generation after generation after generation
continues to overlook
chooses to ignore as something rare
child abuse is not rare
slavery is not rare
I will not be silent
I will not
be silent
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I write so that I exist. I write for myself, and I speak for myself. I have learned that in sharing my own journey, I empower others to do the same. From my own experience of doing social justice work, I have come to believe that fighting for others is *not* enough. I am adamant that any pursuit of social justice must coincide with our own pursuit of personal justice. Individual healing and community healing *must* go hand in hand. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” If we tolerate a lack of self-love in our own lives, how can we truly promote self-love in the lives of others? If we enact micro- or macroaggressions on the people nearest to us, how do we also enact these aggressions in the world at large?

My story is not enough to sustain this movement. It is surely not enough to sustain you. I hope that each of you finds a way in which you have been dehumanized. Then you can begin to empathize with the survivors of human trafficking. I hope that each of you also takes the courageous step of looking at how you have dehumanized others, whether in big or small ways. Then you can begin to empathize with perpetrators of human trafficking. Empathy and understanding is *the* difference between surviving and thriving. Empathy counteracts the severe alienation that a human being feels when he or she is treated as an object. Empathy counteracts an “us” versus “them” mentality.

In the words of aboriginal activist Lilla Watson, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time, but if you have come here because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

With deep gratitude and a fire in my belly,

Minh Dang

Berkeley, California