



Listening to the Reality of Slavery

A Review of

Survivors of Slavery: Modern-Day Slave Narratives

by Laura T. Murphy

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Reviewed by

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Survivors of Slavery: Modern-Day Slave Narratives by Laura T. Murphy is a collection of first-person accounts of people enslaved in the 21st century. The book presents, across nine chapters, a progression of themes, from the conditions that led to bondage, to the psychological tactics used by slavers, to strategies for pursuing and attaining freedom, to activism to free enslaved people and eliminate the inhumane culture of poverty that supports slavery. Each chapter opens with an explanation of its theme and a humanizing introduction to each contributor of the narratives in that chapter. Although the narratives are combined into chapters with common themes, most of the narratives address multiple issues. Murphy is very clear that the word “slavery” best describes the condition of “people who are trapped in inescapable forced labor, being paid nothing or only enough to keep them alive to work another day” (p. 16), no matter what form that labor might take.

Readers will gain an appreciation for the global extent of slavery (Walk Free Foundation, 2014) as the book includes narratives from Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America. As noted by Kevin Bales in the Foreword, “To end slavery it is necessary to change the systems that allow slavery to exist” (p. x). A combination of severe poverty for many people and greedy control of resources by a relative few leads to a terrible dehumanizing of the needy into what Bales has called “disposable people” (p. 13). People enter slavery through deception, kidnapping, and inheritance, while governments and law enforcement ignore or actually benefit from slavery. In 2014, there are more enslaved people around the world than at any previous time in human history, but, at the same time, the percentage of enslaved people is lower than it has been for centuries, perhaps reflecting the illegality of slavery in all nations.

Many U.S. states have laws that essentially criminalize escape from slavery. As many slaveholders steal identification documents from enslaved people, escapees are at risk for arrest and deportation as “undocumented,” despite federal laws designed to protect people

who are actually refugees. "We need the immigration law to provide victims of this horror with permanent legal residence" (p. 105).

In the chapter on psychological chains, "Slaves in the Family," Murphy refers to the romanticized rhetoric of 19th century racialized chattel slavery, but without acknowledgment that legal U.S. slavery did involve, albeit often denied, blood relationships due to rape of enslaved women by their slavers. As a result, some enslaved people really were the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of slavers (Roberts, 2010). The language of family continues to be used in modern-day slavery even where no blood relationship exists; pseudofamilial power relationships serve as psychological chains, especially for enslaved people who are separated from their real families through death or kidnapping. Paradoxically, the level of physical and emotional violence perpetrated to ensure compliance with slavery is consistent with intimate partner violence (Bent-Goodley, 2011). There is additional hypocrisy in the use of family-oriented language, as rape would involve "incest," and women who are impregnated through rape are forced to have abortions.

Spirituality and collectivism are critical to creation of the circumstances in which people can escape slavery. Even in the midst of spiritual abuse used to keep some people trapped, hope gained through healthy spirituality and remembered religion motivates people to pursue freedom. Escape from slavery is best accomplished through group collaboration among enslaved people and support of abolitionists. The power of collective strength is reflected in the narratives as people describe their plight in the first-person singular and empowerment in the first-person plural.

In the chapter "Becoming an Activist," Murphy writes,

All of the authors represented here have made a life out of protecting, liberating, and rehabilitating people who have been enslaved and of defending countless others from the prospect of enslavement. . . . Because they are among the lucky few survivors of modern-day slavery who live to tell a tale of freedom, they have dedicated themselves to ensuring that others can do the same. (p. 207)

This book is important for clinicians, of all disciplines, who must be prepared to provide relevant treatment and collaborate with abolitionists and advocates to assist people in escaping from slavery and ensure that people who have attained freedom from slavery remain free. Graduate and undergraduate students can benefit from inclusion of this book as a text through which they can understand slavery in the voices of people who have experienced it. Peace centers will find this book useful for educating participants about the intersections of various types of violence and the urgent need for multidimensional nonviolent solutions. In addition, this is a resource that should be made available to adults who are in positions to protect vulnerable children and youths—parents, grandparents, teachers, religious professionals, and community leaders. This is a difficult book to read because it includes the real pain of slavery. However, it is a critical book because no one who reads it will be unaware of the extent and depth of slavery; few readers will be unchanged.

Survivors of Slavery concludes with an Epilogue and appendices of resources. These include practical suggestions for what potential abolitionists can do, full contact information for advocacy groups around the world, books and films, and, most importantly, signs and symptoms of slavery.

As one of the formerly enslaved abolitionists writes, "My perspective on life is that it's important to value each and every human being because we are all special in one way or another" (p. 139). Read and go forth to abolish slavery in all of its forms.

References

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