



## Women in Leadership: Dr Heather Evans

### Description

#### Listening to Trafficking Survivors: Lessons Learned on the Journey

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**An excerpt from *Understanding Complex Trauma and Posttraumatic Growth in Survivors of Sex Trafficking: Foreground Women's Voices for Effective Care and Prevention***

Human trafficking is a global human rights violation, enslaving men, women and children. Human trafficking is defined as the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of labor or a commercial sex act, which is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform is under the age of 18 (U.S. Congress, 2015).

More than ten years ago, my journey of being a student of human trafficking and advocating for its survivors was just beginning. While attending a community event, I had a life-shaping encounter. A woman came to greet me. We began talking and throughout the conversation, she learned that I was a therapist. The conversation shifted when she said "I was sexually trafficked for 12 years of my life." Trying to come to terms with what she just said, she proceeded to share details about her story as well as her strong burden for the vast issue of human trafficking around our world. She told me her country of origin, her location of the exploitation, and how she was rescued and reunited with family.

I told her there was a reason that we had met because I had been spending time learning about this issue and those involved and was considering how to take action. I told her there was a group of people who were working to start a coalition in our region in order to raise awareness and be trained to provide aftercare services to victims. Her response was full of emotion. She seemed burdened and desirous of action but overwhelmed with fear and hopelessness. That night, and several forthcoming visits, she would have much to share and I would have much to learn.

Among my many lessons learned from this woman, she taught me that ***understanding is not enough***. She was concerned that awareness efforts focusing a spotlight on human trafficking would not move to action and felt hopeless that the community would not respond, stating "People don't want to know. They don't want to believe it's true and they deny that it is happening." I agreed with her

emphatically yet did not relent in my confidence that we must still try to educate.

She taught me about the hopelessness and brokenness that results from the trauma of sex trafficking. **We will never be whole.** She has been successful as an educated entrepreneur, but fragmented. In order to live and survive, she has had to distance herself from this other part of her identity and her life.

A vital lesson I learned from her that has become an ongoing reality in this work is **the importance of listening.** She described it as **breaking the silence.** “Do you know what we need? We just need someone to listen—someone who cares without a face of disgust and without a look of blame that says there must have been something you did to cause this.”

Meeting her brought to life the hundreds of pages of stories and information that I had consumed over the previous years. These were humbling moments. In spite of all that knowledge, I put it on the shelf, to listen, learn, and be a student of one who directly knows and needs to be heard. It caused me to question any ideas or plans—not necessarily in a hopeless way, but in a cautious way. In weeks and months after this first encounter, I was compelled to return, to relate to her, to listen, and learn.

She would be the first of hundreds of women our coalition leaders have met in our work over the last ten years. The coalition was formed simply because there was a need. Sex trafficking existed in our region, and we were ignorant, passive, unprepared, and complicit in the midst of its prevalence. Our initial vision included a basic goal of raising awareness and seeking to coordinate efforts for a unified response that would comprehensively address this form of modern-day slavery through prevention, awareness, advocacy, and aftercare. As we educated all community members from civilians to frontline service providers, law enforcement and prosecutors, we would aid our area in eradicating this form of exploitation of women, men, boys and girls.

The work would be tedious, mundane, discouraging, and full of obstacles. Any assumptions that this included glamorous, rescue efforts would be quickly squashed with the reality that the work was challenging and largely non-rewarding. **However, the work is necessary.** It just challenges one to evaluate their motivation and their perception of those who are the recipients of this work.

Awareness efforts soon led many trafficking survivors to us. Statistics and stories were replaced with personal, local faces that would need our help and in turn, would change our lives. **Interacting with trafficking survivors is a cross-cultural experience.** They represent backgrounds that are layered with diversity including ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and family history. Many of their stories are riddled with addiction, abuse, neglect, out-of-home placement, loss, rejection and suffering. This does not begin to address the culture of the commercial sex industry. The language of “the life,” the rules of “the game,” and the many nuances of a relationship with a trafficker, also known as daddy, boyfriend, boss, abuser, and lover, are only a few of the cultural differences of a woman coming out of the commercial sex industry.

**This cross-cultural experience requires one who will humbly engage, listen and bear witness.** As I sit with a woman who has secrets, stories, and experiences that are much different than my own, what can I offer? Some view her as dirty and as choosing this lifestyle. Others view her as to be pitied and a cause to be rescued. What does she need? What do we need to understand about women who have a history of prostitution or sex trafficking? **Listening well acknowledges her value and dignity.** Effective listening magnifies her strengths, resilience, courage and capacities to survive, which will in turn enable her to be restored. Listening well revives a voice that has been silenced. Listening honors

her. Listening teaches and changes the listener because through listening we *enter into* suffering, evil and darkness.

To enter in is to bear witness. To bear witness is to testify to, give or afford evidence of something that has happened, usually something unfair, unjust, or in some way problematic. Sandra Bloom (Bloom, 1997) states that in this century of genocide, totalitarian control, mass oppression and torture, **bearing witness has become one of the most potent and nonviolent methods for transforming experienced and witnessed traumatic experience.** Bearing witness changes both the one who is bearing witness **and** the one who is being witnessed. Witnessing the perpetration of an unjust act elicits a desire for justice. Judith Herman explains: “to study psychological trauma means bearing witness to horrible events” when the traumatic events are of human design, those who bear witness are caught in the conflict between victim and perpetrator. It is morally impossible to remain neutral in this conflict. The bystander is forced to take sides” (Herman, 1992, p.7)

Bearing witness is a crucial component for supporting survivors of sex trafficking. We cannot underestimate its value or the value of offering relationship to a survivor. When asking a group of survivors what was their greatest need and greatest source of healing after separation from the trafficker, the main repeated theme was relationship: someone who believed in them, was committed to walking with them for the long journey of healing, and those who were present through the victories and challenges. Relationships were what helped them to reduce shame, reform their shattered identity, and find hope and inspiration for their future (Evans, 2022).

Working with survivors or in any capacity of advocacy for human trafficking is challenging work. The commercial sex industry is lucrative, meeting a global demand for power, pleasure and money. Therefore, there is often resistance to see change because so many benefit from it. It can often be difficult to define and measure success and includes many barriers. While it may begin on the day we saw traffickers successfully prosecuted, but this is only the beginning of a long journey of healing and restoration. For me, success comes in seeing a survivor find her voice and power, and use them to make a difference in this world. It comes in seeing a survivor pursue her goals and dreams for education, advocacy, or even just living a simple, “normal” life, but one that she chooses, one that includes reclaiming *freedom*, a core aspect of humanity that was one stolen by the exploitation.

Besides bearing witness, understanding trauma is a critical entity in understanding and responding to trafficking. Without understanding it, we will misinterpret, wrongly label, and potentially reinjure those we are serving. Whatever your discipline, it is necessary to have trauma-informed lenses and to be ongoing students of trauma and those we serve. This includes not assuming we know what they mean when they use certain phrases, but taking time to understand what they mean. It includes empowerment by offering choice. It includes giving voice to their experiences, feelings, needs, wants, goals, and dreams.

As we listen and learn, we will discover a light in the darkness of human trafficking. There is evidence of posttraumatic growth in survivors, stories of hopes, dreams, depth, courage, resilience and much more. This gives pause for curiosity, celebration and much admiration to the survivors.

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[www.voicesofsurvivorsproject.com](http://www.voicesofsurvivorsproject.com)

<https://www.routledge.com/Understanding-Complex-Trauma-and-Post-Traumatic-Growth-in-Survivors-of-Evans/p/book/9780367621285>

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### Date Created

October 5, 2021

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evans

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