

ESSAY

By Bill Becker

Let's all work for day when abuse is ended

HOPEFULLY, our children will see the day when Los Angeles psychotherapist Barrie Levy's guide for teens in abusive relationships, "In Love & In Danger" is of interest only to historical scholars. Until then, it should be required reading.

Take Felicia, for example: confused, afraid, battered. She was 18 when she told her social worker at the health clinic about the abuse. She was happy that the social worker didn't judge her for being pregnant. It helped, too, that the social worker didn't blame her for her boyfriend beating on her. Even though it hurt a lot to talk about it, it was a relief, because no one else believed it was happening to her. Talking about it made it real — she finally realized she was being abused.

"What helped," she said, "was a lot of counseling and a lot of friends telling me I was not a bad person. I had to hear it a lot of times, lots of times, but then I heard it."

No matter how we parse the statistics for America's women, we find thousands with a story like Felicia's: When their partners become abusive, and tell them it is their fault, they believe it. Did the approving looks Debbie got from the other guys at last night's party lead to a beating from her boyfriend? It just shows how much he loves her. Don't wear that sexy dress next time, he says, and it won't happen again. Better yet, maybe we shouldn't go to parties anymore.

Did Elaine serve her husband overcooked spaghetti after he came home from a hard day's work? Did Melanie neglect to put the kids' toys back on the shelf? Maybe some slapping around will teach them to take their household responsibility seriously.

This isn't the guy I fell in love with, Janet says to herself. Jack was really nice. In fact, he was super-nice. He didn't come to the door with a bouquet in one hand and a baseball bat in the other. (She quickly dismisses the thought that super-nice might be a danger signal in itself.) That's the guy she remembers, the guy she loves. So she tries hard to entice him back. She doesn't want to give up on the relationship, she just wants the beatings to stop. Besides, he's the kids' dad, she doesn't want to break up the family. She has great capacity for love and forgiveness, but it's hard to forgive herself for screwing up. Of course, she'll try harder.

But trying harder doesn't work either, she learns. The cycle of violence that now dominates her life persists in spite of perfectly cooked meals, a spotless home, "yes, dear" to his every whim. No matter that she took to looking dowdy and that she abandoned her old friends. The tensions build anyway and she still walks on eggshells. And she knows that sooner or later she'll make a mistake — a new infraction, something that didn't raise an eyebrow yesterday, will provoke another beating.

After a while, he makes no pretense of being sorry. Instead of the remorse he once showed, instead of the promises he once made never to hit her again, she hears self-righteous threats that if she doesn't shape up, the next beating will be even worse. Now she's really afraid, and with good reason.

Guys don't usually mean to kill their wives and girlfriends in anger, but the percentage of slain women killed by intimates remains at the 30 percent level nevertheless.

Maybe Felicia succeeded in getting out of the abusive relationship. Maybe she convinced her boyfriend to enter a counseling program. Maybe she now enjoys a stable and fulfilling relationship with the father of her child. I don't know.

I do know that when any woman has to hear "lots of times" that she doesn't deserve to be beaten by her boyfriend or husband, there is something seriously wrong with the messages we were given as children, and are still giving our children. We should all be working harder to ensure that "In Love & In Danger" will someday be read only as an anachronism.

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