

## *Interview with Father Heyward Ewart*

### **Am I Bad?: Recovering from Abuse**

*Heyward Bruce Ewart III*

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Reviewed by *Lori Plach* for Reader Views (6/07)

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Father Heyward Bruce Ewart III, who is here to talk about his new book “AM I BAD? Recovering from Abuse.”

*Father Heyward B. Ewart, III, Ph.D. has devoted more than 24 years of his professional life to the protection and treatment of women, children, and the family. During the Carter administration, he served the White House Conference on Families, and such leadership continues to this day. He is not only a veteran clinician in the mental health field, but also a distinguished teacher at the university level and an active chaplain. Through Zoe University in Jacksonville, Florida, his video lectures have been used by distance-learning students across the United States and in some 41 foreign countries.*

**Tyler:** Welcome, Father Heyward. I’m glad you could join me today. Many books about abuse already exist in the marketplace. What made you decide to write “AM I BAD?” and what makes it stand out from those other books?

**Fr. Heyward:** Thank you, Tyler. The main difference is that my book describes the life-long impact of each type of abuse and how the abuse leads to a grossly distorted self image. In addition, a new model of personality development is presented which is based on reality rather than an ideal. My premise is that all of us grow into adulthood with a distorted sense of self that I have named the “adopted self.”

**Tyler:** When you say “all of us” grow into adulthood with this distorted sense that is the “adopted self” do you mean everyone, including people who are not abused? Is the abused person’s “adopted self” just a more intensive creation?

**Fr. Heyward:** Yes, even people who have not been abused enter adulthood with a second-hand opinion of who they are. Their self image is derived from what others have said about them all of their lives, positive or negative, plus the results of their experimentation with “trial selves” during adolescence. Therefore, opinion plus experimentation add up to the adopted self. Most people go to their graves without ever knowing who they really are.

**Tyler:** The book’s focus is recovery from abuse. I don’t think most people realize how abuse can affect a person during his entire life, not only from traumatic memories of the abuse, but in the choices he or she makes in the present. Will you talk a little bit about why abuse drastically affects a person’s choices and whom they choose to associate with?

**Fr. Heyward:** Abuse at any stage in life produces a “less than” self view. Victims will tend to choose friends, if any, who seem no better than what the victim deserves. Just as water seeks its own level, victims will choose a partner or mate whom a non-victim would never consider.

**Tyler:** Father Heyward, why is that? Why, just because you were abused, would you pick someone who would probably abuse you, or at least, would not provide a healthy relationship for you?

**Fr. Heyward:** Both males and females, teens and adults, abused or not, seek out friends and even partners who are no better than what they think they deserve. In the case of abused people, they do not do the choosing. They are pursued by predators who can spot wounded prey. Then the victim simply settles.

**Tyler:** With all respect, many people don't understand "Why can't you just get over it?" Will you answer that question?

**Fr. Heyward:** First, that question is the most hurtful and damaging of any you can make to a victim. It drives the existing wounds deeper. Secondly, a victim cannot get over the abuse until he or she understands exactly what the abuse did both to self image and world view.

**Tyler:** What do you feel is the best way for a person to understand what the abuse did?

**Fr. Heyward:** I think all people should take a look back and ask themselves how they got their ideas about who they are. For example, when we look in the mirror and do not like what we see, we should ask whose opinion this really is. Where did we derive the ideas we have about ourselves. While this kind of practice is generally good, people who have been severely abused need the help of a trauma therapist. The problem is that there are far too few people who understand that abuse is trauma and that the treatment of abuse is the treatment of trauma.

**Tyler:** Father Heyward, why did you choose the title, "AM I BAD?" Isn't the abuser the bad one? Why would the abused person question whether they are bad?

**Fr. Heyward:** Victims of abuse tend to blame themselves for the punishment they endured. Children virtually always believe the abuse is their fault, that there is something deep, dark, and bad inside of them that caused the abuser to inflict the punishment or neglect. And this lie intensifies as life goes on. Predators can spot them a block away, and each abusive encounter confirms the lie once again.

**Tyler:** What kinds of abuse are discussed in "AM I BAD?" Is it physical, sexual, verbal, or emotional abuse?

**Fr. Heyward:** All four are addressed, plus neglect. In my experience, the various types of abuse have roughly the same impact and same consequences for the victim. Abuse is the strongest form of communication there is, and the most damaging.

**Tyler:** Father Heyward, I understand "AM I BAD?" contains tests and questionnaires to help people determine whether they are suffering from post-traumatic stress as a result of abuse. Why would a person need to take a test? If a person were abused, wouldn't we naturally assume they have issues, or wouldn't a person know if he or she has recovered from the issues?

**Fr. Heyward:** Victims are aware of their suffering but almost never aware of the fact that they could have PTSD. The recognition of the fact that PTSD is very often a consequence of abuse is still not widely recognized even by treatment professionals. Judith Herman, M.D., wrote a treasure of a book called "Trauma and Recovery" to address this issue. She won an award by the American Psychiatric Association for this pioneering work. It has been a very major influence on my thinking.

**Tyler:** What are signs that someone may be suffering from post-traumatic stress as the result of past abuse?

**Fr. Heyward:** Avoidance behavior, hyper-vigilance, hyper-arousal, flashbacks, and nightmares are some of the main signs.

**Tyler:** Obviously, we hear about abused people who turn to drugs, sex, alcohol, overeating, or becoming physically abusive themselves. Why are these outlets the ones often chosen for dealing with one's past abuse? Why would an abused person become fat from overeating for example?

**Fr. Heyward:** My experience goes against the literature in that I find abuse victims are rather docile and prone to further abuse rather than being abusive themselves. It is true that victims overindulge in various substances and that is because they can find no peace through natural means. Substance abuse and overeating give them a very temporary feeling of comfort that is unattainable any other way. About 90 percent of women in drug and alcohol

recovery groups are victims of childhood sexual abuse, and with about half of them, it has been incest. With men, about 80 percent have been physically abused as children or teens. As I explain in my book, there is no normal way to react to being immersed in craziness.

**Tyler:** Father Heyward, what if someone has gone to therapy, or attended support groups and worked through his or her issues? Is it possible such people may still have abuse issues they've repressed and don't realize they still need to deal with?

**Fr. Heyward:** Sadly, many victims go through years of so-called "therapy" without even getting close to the source of their suffering. It is difficult to find a therapist who understands the issues I discuss in my book. I once treated a patient who had been in "therapy" for thirty-one years before she got to me. Ten of those years were with a single psychiatrist who finally told her he didn't think he could help her. In that length of time, she could have become a psychiatrist herself!

**Tyler:** Who is the book's audience? Will "AM I BAD?" help anyone who was abused or knows someone who was abused, or is it aimed primarily at the therapist who will help the abused person?

**Fr. Heyward:** It has a dual purpose; that is, a self-help book and a book for professionals. I have received very encouraging responses from both groups.

**Tyler:** Father Heyward, what made you first decide to become involved in counseling people who have been abused?

**Fr. Heyward:** My earliest training was in family therapy, where there is the concept of the "identified patient." He or she is the one appointed by the family to bear their malfunctioning and to seek treatment as the one who needs help. My first teacher, Dr. James L. Framo, always said that there is no such thing as a disturbed child who does not come from a disturbed marriage. I came to expand upon that idea and assert that there is no normal way to react to craziness, whether it comes from one's parents or from some other source. As the years went by, my experience was that every patient I had ever treated had been mistreated by someone. Being exposed to craziness produces symptoms of some kind.

**Tyler:** Can a person ever fully recover from being abused? Do you have a success story you can tell us that will encourage any of our readers who may have suffered from abuse?

**Fr. Heyward:** Yes. I often treat victims by group therapy. One woman in my group had been so abused all of her life that she had become crippled with physical pain as well as mental and even thought she had multiple sclerosis. A psychiatric nurse by profession, she became so empowered that I made her my co-therapist.

**Tyler:** Father Heyward, is there one thing particularly important you would say to people who have been abused and need help?

**Fr. Heyward:** Yes. Look for a therapist who has had success in treating abuse. Do not rely on public agencies such as women's shelters or mental-health clinics. If you can't find or can't afford a therapist, start a support group of your own with other people you know who have been abused. As you share information about your suffering and hear others share, you will increase your understanding and begin to get a sense of security and power from the group.

**Tyler:** Are there any well-known resources where a person can start to look for help, similar perhaps to groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, but for those who have been abused?

**Fr. Heyward:** Not that I know of, other than internet discussion groups. But I see no reason why suffering lay people could not advertise the formation of their own support group. A few women or a few men gathering together could share their own experiences and learn a great deal about themselves by what the other members contribute. I would greatly encourage such activity. Abuse is a pandemic, and there would be little trouble finding people to attend.

**Tyler:** Thank you for joining me today, Father Heyward. Before we go, will you tell us about your website and what additional information might be found there about “AM I BAD? Recovering from Abuse”?

**Fr. Heyward:** My website still has the old domain name <http://child-to-adult-victim.com>, even though it now serves another purpose: St. James the Elder Theological Seminary, of which I am the president and academic dean. We offer programs through the doctorate for clergy preparation and for other religious capacities. Our most popular program, an M.A. – Ph.D. in Christian Counseling, requires candidates to study my book and Dr. Herman’s book as well. There are links to other sites on abuse, and we welcome more. Our mission is to educate servants at the lowest possible cost through distance learning.

**Tyler:** Thank you, Father Heyward, for your time today and all of your information. I wish you much luck with “AM I BAD? Recovering from Abuse” and your continued work to help abuse victims.

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