

## **A Conversation with Debra Gwartney**

### **What made you select the title, *Live Through This*?**

One day a year or so ago I walked into an office at the university where I teach and I saw a Hole poster from the early '90s hanging on a wall—the one with the sobbing beauty queen holding those half-dead flowers. It was for the band's album, *Live Through This*, and I realized in that moment that I'd found the title for my book. Hole's music was potent for Amanda and Stephanie: they discovered Courtney Love, and Kurt Cobain, at the very beginning of their attraction to the grunge-punk street scene. The beauty queen poster hung on their bedroom wall for a few years. That music led them to bands such as the Ramones, the Pixies, the Dead Kennedys, and to a bunch of grrl bands like Bikini Kill. Music, in other words, was a huge part of the girls' identification with a movement that eventually got them on a freight train headed out of town. So using the album title seemed tremendously apt.

On a deeper level—as I explored the reasons *Live Through This* felt right as a title—I realized we certainly did reach a point as a family where our situation wasn't going to be fixed. In the middle of our trouble, there was no way I was going to suddenly be a mother my runaway teenagers could relate to, nor would I discover a cure that would instantly retrieve Amanda and Stephanie from the streets. Our difficulties had been set in motion years before, and by the time the girls were deep into the punk/street scene we simply had to live through the manifestation of those troubles, with Amanda and Stephanie gone for stunningly long periods of time and the younger girls waiting frantically at home with me. We had to do whatever we could to make it to the other side of a long and painful experience. We did, thank God. We lived through it, everyone is thriving now, and for that I'm deeply grateful.

### **Several times in the book you say that you'd like to go back in time to do things differently. If you could go back in time, what would you change?**

In writing the book—and in revising again and again over a period of eight years—I had to face the not-so-great coping mechanisms I turned to during that time of family turmoil. One way I'd coped was by engaging in heavy denial about what the girls were up to and about what was happening to us as a family. I simply couldn't believe that my lovely, sweet, smart daughters had turned to a life I considered very dark and very dangerous. It felt to me the very opposite of our everyday life, where we made muffins and planted a garden and went to Mollie's dance recitals and Mary's band concerts and such. Even when Amanda and Stephanie were gone and I had no idea where they were or when they were coming back, I kept pretending, somehow, that this wasn't happening to us, that they were going to pop up in our house one day and we'd be finished with this running away, hard core street life business. Except that another way I coped, unfortunately, was to become emotionally withdrawn from Amanda and Stephanie—especially when they were around and shoving their dirty clothes and music and drug use and piercings and tattoos in my face. I concentrated nearly all my attention on Mary and Mollie. It took me years to recognize the destructive nature of that imbalance—hurtful to all my children. I

wish I could go back to those tense days and make myself more available to each of the four girls, to be a better listener, to try to understand why Amanda and Stephanie felt they had to push to such an extreme to get me to notice their distress. At the beginning of their disaffection, when it was about skipping school and dressing in torn black clothes and such, one of my friends suggested I find a sense of humor about the whole thing. I remember thinking, but what's funny about any of this? Now I wish I *had* seen the humor in what we were going through, and had somehow tried to laugh and have fun more often with my kids in general. To not take myself so seriously all the time, trudging to work every day and back home again to cook and clean and pay bills, and making sure the girls saw how wearying my life was.

Mostly, if I could make changes, I'd step way back and would do far more to attend to the girls while I was divorcing their father, and I'd be much more careful about noticing their behavior and feelings in the aftermath of that divorce. I didn't see myself as self-absorbed, as overly consumed with my own stuff, at the time, but I recognize it now. I was in a lot of pain and confusion, and I turned inward. I didn't care for my daughters in the way they needed to be cared for during the dismantling of one family unit and the formation of other kinds of family units--for me, single mother with four daughters in an unfamiliar town--and it set us up for terrible conflict in the years to come.

**Did you write the book to convince readers that divorce should be avoided if possible?**

No, and I hope the book isn't read as a stay-married-no-matter-what polemic. I was practically a child when I got married—twenty-one—and Amanda was born the following year. I had no idea how to manage the complications of marriage and family relationships because I hadn't taken the time yet to know myself. The marriage simply could not have lasted and shouldn't have, but, again, my ex-husband and I could have done way better learning to co-parent our children as a divorced couple, to present a united front that would have certainly helped the girls feel more stable, more protected, more able to remain in a safe realm of childhood instead of venturing into a world that offered exactly the wrong kinds of comfort.

**How have Amanda and Stephanie felt about you writing a memoir that features their choices and experiences at its center, and what do you say to those who say you've exploited your children's lives for your own benefit?**

Amanda and Stephanie, as well as Mary and Mollie, are necessary characters in the book—the story couldn't be told without putting them on the page. My ex-husband and his second wife are also important characters, though their names are changed in the book to protect their privacy, as are several others' names. It's been my intention from the beginning of this process to tell my own version of the story, and to apply the "what's at stake" question primarily to myself. It took me a long time, many soul-searching hours of revision, to even begin to see my role in the complicated dynamic I got caught in with Amanda and Stephanie. Over the years of writing this book, I've become a faithful follower of Vivian Gornick's ideas about personal narrative. In *The Situation and the*

*Story*, she writes (of the narrator), “we are in the presence of a mind puzzling its way out of its own shadows,” and I knew I had to do that if I wanted the story to be true. I had to puzzle my way out of my own shadows. Amanda and Stephanie certainly supplied tons of drama with their varied, wild, and escalating behavior, but I don’t try to explore, too much, their motivations or inner lives in the book. Instead I tried to concentrate on my stuff: that is, the necessity of finally giving up my dearest-held illusions of motherhood—for instance, that I would bear children whose central purpose in life would be to take care of me; and that my daughters’ desire for autonomy was somehow a threat to me—so I could finally allow them to grow into the bright, capable women they’ve all become. I did my best to make this book about the mother *I’d* turned into all those years ago, the woman who unwittingly helped facilitate my daughters’ decision to jump on a train and go far away, and my ultimate realization, still evolving, that if I didn’t come to terms with my own self-delusions, I would jeopardize my long-term relationships with these wonderful girls.

**Why memoir? Why not change all the names and other circumstances and call it a novel to protect your family’s personal lives?**

My own attempts at writing fiction have convinced me that it’s no easier than writing nonfiction, though the writing is hard in a different way. But, yes, there was a time when I was tempted to take the fiction route, as I’d fooled myself into thinking I’d be less vulnerable within the gauze of a novel, but that approach began to feel like a kind of gloss or avoidance that I couldn’t, finally, live with. What I was after in writing this book was a truth I had to accept about myself, and I think that would have been more elusive--it was already so darned hard to get near, slippery fish that self awareness is--in fiction.

One of the most difficult aspects of those troubled years was the judgment I felt from other parents. I was so terrified as being pegged as a bad mother, a failed mother, that I avoided meeting or speaking to other parents. I’d go to school meetings, for instance, but would try to slip out before anyone had a chance to greet me or, heaven forbid, ask about my kids. I think this is a fairly common feeling—if your children are acting out inappropriately the strongest impulse is to bury and hide that information, or at least diminish it. I have a small group of extremely supportive friends, and I turned to them constantly during the bad years with Amanda and Stephanie, but to the public I did a lot of pretending that things were better at home than they were. That self-made isolation hurt us more than helped us, and in writing the book I’ve found it necessary to push through an old wall of shame about admitting my failures. I finally started to accept what had happened to the five of us, and in fact to embrace what we’d gone through. Surviving those tough years has allowed me to build an unbreakable bond with my children, and I am thrilled at the inner strength and determination I sense in my now-adult daughters. I guess that’s my way of saying that I hope some parents might feel less alone after reading this book.

### **Who did you turn to for help once the girls were gone?**

The aforementioned friends, who were right there when I needed to talk things out. And especially my then companion, now husband, Barry Lopez, who quietly forged a friendship with the younger girls while the older ones were gone, and who has become close to Amanda and Stephanie in more recent years. He was a steady force for all of us, and was very wise to keep a step back from the fray. During the hardest times, he managed to offer a perspective that I had long ago lost.

Over the years, I tried many, many types of programs and therapy for my daughters and for myself. Some helped a whole lot; some helped not at all. I still think I had little choice other than to put the girls in a wilderness therapy program at what felt like the cusp of disaster, and in fact both Amanda and Stephanie emerged from their respective three weeks in the woods with great exuberance and a willingness to rejoin our family—the time of concentrated therapy did some good. It didn't last long, that happy aura, but the wilderness trip was a respite in the midst of pure hell.

What's amazed me in hindsight is how many right solutions appeared precisely when I needed them—when it seemed we were on the very verge of collapse. I found out about the youth corps job when Amanda and I were most desperate for such a program, and, much later, a serendipitous moment during a conversation with an acquaintance led me to the small, fully funded boarding school where Stephanie finished high school. I don't really know how that happened, but the universe, fate, God, some power beyond me took care of us in the most dire hours. I do believe that the right help is out there if we can stay open to such possibility, and to not be afraid to accept it when it shows up.

### **What advice do you have for parents whose children have run away or are threatening to run away?**

I'm not a therapist or counselor, obviously, and I can only draw on my own experience rather than a body of knowledge about teenage behavior. But if a mother asked my advice, I'd sure urge her to talk to others about what was going on at home—to avoid denial, and I certainly know the lure of denial—it's like taking a nice warm bath while a storm outside pounds on the windows, and seek professional help as quickly as possible. I've had plenty of conversations with parents who've found out about my family's history, and mostly they've just needed to talk about what they're going through. To speak candidly about how utterly heartbreaking it is to feel separated from the people they most love. It's important to say out loud how tough it is to lose contact with your child, and how angry you are at that child for leaving you. I also think it's necessary to realize that loving parents who do their very best to create a stable environment for their children aren't necessarily safe from teenage rebellion—sometimes the children of good people run away, try drugs, hang with unsavory characters, or just glare at you like you're the most disgusting being on earth.

## **What can we all do, as a society, about the subculture of runaway kids living on the streets?**

First, I don't blame society for my family's problems—the difficulty we got in was of our own making. But, the fact is, if a child runs away from home, it doesn't take long for him or her to link up with other teens or young adults who are happy to provide advice about living on the streets. More disturbing, to me, are the layers of aid coming from those who believe they're helping street kids by handing out food, blankets, money, beds in shelters, etc. Sure, yes, that's helpful to the kids, but it's frighteningly unhelpful to the parents. As a culture, we've put ourselves in a tremendous bind because providing for runaways is often what keeps them on the street, and that contributes to the serious erosion of the family back home.

In perusing websites for runaway children, I've noticed that several claim that ninety-five percent of kids on the street have run from an abusive home. Where's the empirical evidence for such a number? Maybe ninety-five percent of kids who are asked why they're on the streets say they've been abused—I'm sure many of them have been and should have a safe place to turn, a place that's not the streets. But I also believe that a lot of kids are on the street because things got tough and tense at home, and because they consider the option of dropping out of school to hang around panhandling and drinking and smoking pot and sleeping in abandoned buildings a great adventure—an easy out. Running away from home was decriminalized in 1974, and part of the language for justifying this national decision was that “something in the child's home life has become too much to handle.” It amazes me that we haven't seriously questioned this legislation in thirty-five years' time, as it's led to an unprecedented number of children leaving their families, their homes, to join a dangerous subculture which is “too much to handle,” I guarantee, for any child. The police won't look for runaways because of the decriminalization legislation, and if a teenager is arrested, most times she or he is turned over to a group home or social agency, because it's assumed the child comes from no-good parents. It's time to have another look at this law and to get parents of runaways talking about the difficulty of finding their children when no authority is willing to help.

### **Where are the girls now?**

Amanda is married and has two small children. Her family is living “off the grid” in Southern Oregon, raising goats and chickens. She's also a spinner (of yarn) and a weaver, and you can see her work at [http://www.etsy.com/shop.php?user\\_id=5545055](http://www.etsy.com/shop.php?user_id=5545055).

Stephanie is finishing school in Western Massachusetts, where she also works as a landscape designer.

Mary and Mollie are also doing well, living in western Oregon, and getting through the stumbles and joys of the twenties.