

Embracing emotions with honesty and integrity

Velma Swartz

A morning in March

I remember the day well, even though it is now more than twenty years ago. It was late March, and two days prior to this one my mother had died unexpectedly. She had been ill off and on her whole life, and the past year had been particularly difficult, but death was not expected. She had signed her living will only eight hours before her death, stating that she did not want to be taken to the hospital one more time. She was ready for whatever came. The question became for me, *Am I ready?*

My mother was a strong woman with leadership gifts. She was also a frustrated woman who I believe never grew into those gifts, as she was not understood or valued for those gifts. As the middle child of seven, I experienced her frustration deep within myself and often wondered about my own giftedness.

I moved into my own life journey, marrying at twenty-four and, in the course of time, birthing four children. We were a busy family with



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commitments to school and all its activities, helping to pastor a church, and staying in touch with and helping my aging mother. (My father was quite healthy until his late 80s.) What I became aware of over time was my deep desire for affirmation from my mother. I wanted to

know, first and foremost, whether she liked who I had become. Was she proud of me? I knew she loved me, but I wanted to hear her say and affirm that I was a good mother, a supportive wife, an attentive friend, and, yes, a helpful daughter. I discovered later that what I wanted was my mother's blessing. This naming was discovered as I grieved her death.

That morning in March I was on my way to my father's house where we siblings were gathering as we prepared for a visitation that afternoon and evening. I needed to pass my home church on my way to Dad's house, and I knew that Mother's body was already there. I had not planned to

stop there as I left home that morning, but as I got nearer to the church house, I thought, *I'm going to stop in and talk to Mom*. I wasn't quite sure what I would say, but I knew instinctively that I needed and wanted to do this.

There was one other car in the parking lot, but I saw no one in my hour with Mom. I wonder now if they observed me. I stood quietly beside my mother's casket and then carefully opened it, removing the napkin from her face and folding the linens out over the edges of her casket. I pulled up a chair and sat beside her. I sat in silence for a while, beholding the face, the image of the one who birthed me, gave me life, but being fully aware that this beholding held no life. The breath had been snuffed out, the life had been drawn—it was now the before and the after, and I was painfully aware that I was entering into the after. Grief surrounded me, my questions bubbled to the surface, and I asked my mom the *whys* of my pain. I named the groans of my desires for affirmation and asked why they weren't named. My anger, frustration, and longings spilled out into that casket, and I wept—not so much that she was no longer living, for I knew her body was worn and not functioning well, but for what I had longed for but now knew I wouldn't receive.

After a time, I did one of the most difficult actions of that hour, and that was to again fold in the linens and place the napkin on Mom's face—an ending, a finality, a letting go.

The journey of healing from grief

I could not have known how much that beginning of grief would also be the beginning of healing from my grief. I affirmed again during that hour my belief that what I can name I can also work with. What was sitting deep within my soul, causing pain, doubt, and frustration, was now named out in the open, no longer holding me captive. It was given air. It had room to move. It could begin to heal.

It wasn't that my mother was negligent. I think my mother did her best to raise us seven children as faithfully as she knew how. She gave us many gifts of her presence and care, teaching us valuable lessons. We are human, and we fail each other. I'm keenly aware that I have failed my four children, and they will in some ways fail their children. It is as Kate Bowler says in the title of her book: there is *no cure for being human*.

I experienced my mother differently in some ways than my siblings, although we identify many commonalities. My grief journey thus has looked different from my siblings'. I need to be willing to walk this journey in my

way and not insist on others walking it the same way. It wouldn't work for me to do it their way. I have a particular place in the family, a different personality, with different giftings, so we each need to make room for our unique journey and give room for the unique journey that is each of theirs. Valuing each other's journeys is a gift we extend to each other, and we learn from each other.

Part of my healing journey included asking the hard questions: What does it mean to live with honesty and integrity as it relates to my emotions? Where and with whom do I process my emotions? Does my spirituality allow me to be honest? Does God care about how I feel? Have I learned to deny my feelings because I was taught they are bad?

If the essence of God is in each one of us (as creatures formed in God's image), then it seems to me that all of who and what we are—all of life experienced in that fundamental essence—is good. We do not need to run from or hide from life—all of life, whatever it may bring. God is not threatened by our emotions, questions, or doubts. We can trust that God is with us in times of pain or pleasure. To explore all of life is a gift, a learning leading to a fullness of living.

Living honestly with our emotions

Living honestly doesn't begin when we are old. I believe I was able to name my emotions around my mother's death because I had already learned something about naming what is. I do believe that that experience helped me affirm that naming and that living into the reality of what was true continued to give me motivation to be open and honest. I don't always live into this truth well. There are people and situations that I shy away from, not giving who I am in the moment. The question then becomes this: Why or why not be honest?

While I believe it is important to name my emotions, whether they are negative or positive, I also need to remember that they are not permanent. They have a life span, so I don't need to deny or claim anything other than what they are. Intensity of emotions comes and goes.

"If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it," writes Richard Rohr.¹ To be able to transform my pain I needed to be willing to face it, to hold at bay the desire to run from it or blame someone else for it. As I named the pain, I also became stronger in continuation of the naming. Strength didn't come quickly, but it did come over time.

1 Richard Rohr, *A Spring within Us* (Albuquerque, NM: CAC Publications, 2016), 119.

I needed to be willing to live into the pain, to let it be and believe that in the willingness healing would come—and indeed it has. It may mean living in the dark of the pain for a season, but while I can still get in touch with

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the pain of that day twenty-some years ago, I think of my mother with different emotions now. I have had times of feeling my mother's blessing, encouragement, and love, and I am grateful.

Allowing our emotions to give us information about ourselves is the work of honesty. Trying to fix our pain, to hold it down, or to deny that it exists can liter-


ally make us sick. Deep emotions and pain let us know there is something going on that needs attention. Instead of trying to rid myself of the pain or emotion, I can let it open and teach me something about myself or the situation.

As a verbal processor, I have often found that I gain insights into my own feelings as I'm willing to explore them. Hearing myself talk or observing my strong emotions as I talk gives me information about how to let them work for me. I have observed myself at times and thought or said, *I didn't know I believed this so strongly*, or *That seems really unbalanced as I listen to myself*. That could also be the case for those who process by journaling. Choosing honesty and integrity as a primary focus rather than perfection, control, or pleasing someone else has the potential of healing—maybe not in the moment but over time.

In my work as a chaplain and pastor to senior adults, I have learned much from listening and attending to those who are grieving. I have watched the progression of cancer take the life of a loved one and heard the deep anguish, loss, feelings of betrayal, and bewilderment of being left alone. But I have also seen the deep love and commitment of couples who were able to name their feelings of loss and love amid dying. Being open and honest about the process has been helpful as they journey through the grief process in the wake of the death. This is not easy work, but it is so helpful for the one left behind, the one who will experience the grief.

While there are almost always some regrets (another sign of being human), being able to live honestly with what one feels and experiences is essential to healing. A regret I heard was from a spouse who did not explore or ask any questions as the other was dying and now wishes they had.

It is also important to choose wisely those to whom you will give your emotions. Our emotions and feelings speak of our essence. They are windows into our souls, and we open those windows carefully. Having one or two close friends with whom I can be who I really am at any given moment has been a game changer for me. I am so grateful for those people



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I can trust with the realities of life—whether I’m experiencing deep grief or great joy—people who walk beside me, hearing and caring but not taking over and trying to fix me.

I remember years ago complaining to a friend about something trite my spouse had done that annoyed me, and at one point she started to get angry with

him. I stopped and looked at her and said, “If you get mad at him, I can’t tell you what I’m feeling.” This was my way of saying, *Yes, hear me but don’t take it from me. Don’t let my emotions at this point dictate how you feel about me or my spouse. I’m giving my emotion an airing, a naming, and then I will move on, deciding how I will respond to the event.*

Our lives from beginning to end give us many opportunities to experience many and varied emotions. Some are fleeting and felt in passing; others are profoundly deep and painful. We all experience losses; life is far from being perfect. We hoped and planned for something other than what we received through our own failings and the failings of those around us, but we do have choices. Every loss, however large or small, asks for a response from us. We can choose to live in anger, blame, resentment, or we can choose to let the losses and emotions lead us to something new, something deeper, something that is life-giving and productive. We will not avoid the pain and loss that life gives us, but we can choose to transform the pain so we will not transmit it. Living with honesty and integrity with our emotions gives us the freedom to live fully, with both delight and suffering.

About the author

Velma Swartz is a retired chaplain and pastor serving mostly senior adults, both in a nursing care facility and at Waterford Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana, where she is a member. She has a passion for accompanying the aging and the dying. Her training at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, and clinical pastoral education at St. Joseph Medical Center in South Bend were formative and life changing.