AMANDA AND THE WOUNDED BIRDS
Colby Rodowsky

It's not that my mother doesn't understand, because she does. In fact, she understands so well, and so much, and so single-mindedly, that half the time she goes around with a glazed look in her eyes and forgets to get her hair cut, and go to the dentist, and that we're almost out of toilet paper or tuna fish. She makes her living understanding, which may make more sense when I tell you that my mother is Dr. Emma Hart. Now, if that doesn't help, then probably, like me until my consciousness was raised, you've always thought of radio as the place to hear the Top Forty or sometimes the weather report when you're heading for the shore in a summer Friday afternoon. But just try twiddling the dial and you'll find her, way over to the left on the band, next to the country and western station.

Maybe what I should do is go back a little and explain.

You see, my mother is a psychotherapist, which means that she counsels people and tries to help them find ways of dealing with their problems. She's also a widow. My father died when I was a baby, and sometimes I try to imagine what it must have been like for her, taking care of a baby alone and trying to establish a practice all at the same time. One thing I'm sure of is that knowing Mom, she handled it gracefully, and stoically, and with that funny way she has of biting her lower lip so that for all her hanging-in-there attitude she still looks like a ten-year-old kid - the kind you want to do something for because she's not always whining or sniffing. I guess you'd have to say that, (IS) much as possible my mother is in charge of her own life, which is the way she tries to get the people who call in to her on the radio to be.

The way the radio program got started was that several years ago the producer was looking for something to put on in the late afternoon when people were mostly fixing dinner or driving carpool or just sitting with their feet up. It wasn't exactly prime time. Then he remembered how he'd heard Mom speak at a dinner once and had thought at the time that putting someone like her on radio would be a real public service. Besides, the ratings couldn't be any lower than they had been for the Handy Home Fixit show he'd had on before. Anyway, he tracked her down, arranged for a test, and then Mom was on the air.
I never will forget that first show. I mean, there was my mother’s voice coming out of our kitchen radio, sounding slightly frantic and giving those first callers more than they bargained for. I guess she was afraid if she let them off the line there wouldn’t be any more. That day even the producer cajled with a question. And the boy in the studio who went for coffee. But mom hung in there, and calls continued to come in, and then they started backing up, and it wasn’t long before people opened by saying, “I didn’t think I’d ever get through to you.” After only a month on the air the Elinira Hart Show went from one hour to two, and the way I figured it, a lot of people were eating dinner later than they ever had before. Including us.

Mom really cared about the people who telephoned her, and almost right from the beginning she was calling them her “wounded birds.” Not on the air, of course, and never to anyone but me. I got used to her looking up in the middle of dinner or from watching the late news on TV and saying, “I hope my wounded bird with the abusive husband will get herself into counseling” or “The wounded bird with those children who walk all over her had better learn to assert herself before it’s too late.” And I sure learned not to joke around: once I referred to one of her callers as a fractured canary and almost started World War III.

Not long after this, things really started to happen. First, Mom’s show was moved to a better time slot. Then it was syndicated, so that she wasn’t just on the air here but in a bunch of other cities, too. The way “Doonesbury” and “Dick Tracy” are in a bunch of newspapers. Now, I have to say that for the most part my mother’s pretty cool about things, but the day she found out that the Emma Hart Show was being syndicated she just about flipped. She called me from the studio and told me to meet her at the Terrace Garden for dinner, to be sure and get spiffed up because we were going all out.
who were downtrodden or misunderstood. More stories about people who had been abused or who had kids on drugs or dropping out, or ne'er-do-well relatives moving in. But when I tried to say that, Mom was suddenly all attention. "Don't be silly, Amanda. It's the same amount of time and the same number of calls — you'll hardly notice any difference. Only now I'll have wounded birds in Phoenix and Pittsburgh and Philadelphia."

In one way she was right: the show sounded pretty much the same. (Except that I found out that when your husband/lover/friend walks out on you it hurts as much in Peoria as it does in Perth Amboy.)

In another way she was wrong: she was busier than she had ever been before, what with traveling and lecturing and doing guest shows from other cities for a while there, it was as if I was spending as much time at my best friend Terri's as I was at my own home. Then eventually Morn decided I could stay at our place when she had to be out of town, as long as Terri stayed there with me, which wasn't as good or as bad as it sounds, because Terri lives right across the street and her mother has X-ray eyes. I mean, we can hardly manage to reach for our favorite breakfast of Twinkles and Oreo ice cream with an orange juice chaser before her mother is on the telephone telling us to eat cornflakes instead - and to wash the dishes.

Sometimes I felt that life was nothing but a revolving door. Mom going out while I was coming in. I know there are some kids who would've thought I was lucky, but the thing about my mother is that she's okay ... And I wanted to see more of her. Besides that, I needed to talk to her. I don't know why, but all of a sudden it seemed that things were piling up around me. No major crises, you understand. Nothing that would exactly stop traffic.

I'll give you an example.
Take my friend Teni. I have a terrible feeling that she has a secret crush on my boyfriend Josh. If she does, it would be a disaster, because how could we really be friends anymore? But then again how could Teni and I not be friends? I'm not sure why I think this, unless it's because she gets quiet and acts bored when I talk about him a lot—the way you do when you don't want to let on about liking someone. I mean she couldn't really be bored. Could she?

Then there's Miss Spellman, my English teacher, who has this really atrocious breath and is forever leaning into people as she reads poetry in class. Imagine somebody breathing garbage fumes on you as she recites—Emily Dickinson. If something doesn't happen soon I may never like poetry again.

Now, maybe these aren't world problems, any more than the incident with the guidance counselor was, but it bugged me all the same. Our school has an obsession about students getting into good colleges a.s.a.p. and knowing what they want to do with the rest of their lives. (Teni and I call it the life-packaging syndrome). Anyway, this particular day I was coming out of gym on my way to study hall when Mr. Burnside, the guidance counselor, stopped me and started asking me all this stuff, like what my career goals were and had I decided what I wanted to major in in-college.

What I said (only politer than it sounds here) was that how did I know what I wanted to major in when I didn't even know where I wanted to go to college. Mr. Burnside got a wild look in his eyes and started opening and closing his mouth so that all I could see was a shiny strand of spit running between his top and bottom teeth while he lectured me on how I was going about this whole college thing the wrong way. He said I should come into the guidance office someday and let him feed me into the computer—well, not me exactly, but stuff like my grades, extra curricular activities, and whether or not I needed financial aid.
"And what does your mother say?" he asked as he rooted in his pocket for a late pass to get me into study hall. "You'll certainly have it easier than anybody else in your class, or the school either for that matter - living with Dr. Emma Hart." He laughed that horselaugh of his and slapped me on the back. "She'll get right to the Hart of it." Another laugh. "Anybody else'd have to call her on the telephone." His laughter seemed to follow me all the way to study hall. I even heard it bouncing around in my head as I settled down to do my Spanish.

"Anybody else'd have to call her on the telephone," he had said.

... Why not? I thought as I was walking home from school. Why not? I asked myself when Josh and I were eating popcorn and playing Scrabble on the living room floor that night. And pretty soon why not? changed to when? The answer to that one was easy though, because spring vacation was only a week and a half away and that would give me the perfect opportunity. The funny thing was that once I'd decided to do it, I never worried about getting through. Maybe that was because I'd heard Morn say plenty of times that they always liked it when kids called in to the show, and I guess I figured that unless everybody on spring vacation decided to call the Dr. Emma Hart Show, I wouldn't have any trouble. Besides, I practiced in the shower making my voice huskier than usual and just a little breathless, hoping that it would sound sincere and make an impression on Jordan, the guy who screens the calls and tries for just the right balance of men, women, and kids, with not too much emphasis on busted romances as opposed to anxiety attacks. The next funny thing was that once I'd made up my mind to call Dr. Emma Hart, I began to feel like a wounded bird myself, and I was suddenly awfully glad that she cared about them the way she did. I had a little trouble deciding what I wanted to ask her on the show, and even before I could make up my mind I began to think of other things that bothered me too. Not problems, but stuff I'd like to talk over with Molli, like Vietnam, for example. I'd watched Apocalypse Now on TV and there was a lot I didn't understand. And what about the sixties? - was Mom ever involved in sit-ins or walkouts or any of that? - I somehow doubted it, but it would be important to know for sure.
Finally it came to me: what I wanted to ask Dr. Hart about was not being able to talk to Mom because there she was all wrapped up with her wounded birds. Only, the whole thing got confusing, one being the other and all.

Anyway, I did it. I put the call in just before eleven on the Monday morning of spring vacation and almost chickened out when Jordan answered. I had met him a couple of times down at the studio, and I could almost see him now, looking like some kind of an intense juggler who is trying to keep everything going at once. I heard my voice, as if it were coming from somewhere far away, giving my name as Claire . . . (it's my middle name) and outlining my problem. When I got finished, Jordan said that he was putting me on hold and not to go away, that Dr. Hart would be with me shortly.

And all of a sudden she was. I mean, there I was talking to my own mother and telling her how I couldn't talk to my mother, and how the things I wanted to talk to her about weren't actually big deals anyway, but still —

Dr. Hart let me go on for a while and then she broke in and said that it was important for me to know that my concerns were as real as anybody else's and it sounded as if my mother and I had a pretty good relationship that had just gotten a little off the track and what I had to do was be really up-front with her and let her know how I felt. Then she suggested that I make a date with my mother for lunch so that I could tell her (Mom) exactly what I'd told her (Dr. Emma Hart), and that I should be sure to call back and let her know how it worked out.

After that I said, "Okay," and "Thank you." Then I hung up. The only trouble was that as soon as Mom got home that day I knew it wasn't going to work.

She was sort of coming unglued. It had been a bad day, she told me.
One of her private patients was in the midst of a crisis; the producer of the show was having a fight with his wife and wanted to tell Mom all about it. She had a dinner speech to give Saturday night and didn't have a thought about what to say, and my uncle Alex had called from Scranton to ask Mom to try to talk some sense into his teenage son who was driving them all crazy.

Then she looked at me and said, "Thank heavens you've got it all together."

Talk about 'guilt. Right away I knew I was going to break rule number one: I wasn't going to be able to be up-front.

The thing was, I knew I couldn't take what was already one rotten week for Mom and dump all my problems (which seemed to be getting bigger by the minute) on her. Even though I felt like I was going to explode.

By Friday I knew I needed another talk with Dr. Hart. After all, she'd said to call back, hadn't she?

Getting through Jordan was even easier the second time. All I had to say was that I'd spoken to Dr. Hart earlier in the week and that she'd said to let her know what happened.

"Oh—good: a success story," Jordan said right away, jumping to conclusions. I guess he knew what kind of a week it had been too. "Hold on; Dr. Hart will be with you soon," he said.

And there was Dr. Emma Hart again. And suddenly there I was, unloading about how what she had suggested wasn't going to work.

"Why not?" she wanted to know. "Did you try?"

"Yes—no," I said. Then I was going on again, all about Bad-breath Spellman, the guidance counselor, and how maybe my best friend had a thing for my boyfriend. She kept steering me back to the subject of my mother and why I hadn't arranged to have lunch with her.
I said that my mother had had a bad week. That she was swamped, preoccupied, distracted, and running behind. And then it happened. I mean, I heard the words sliding off my lips and couldn’t stop them. I said, “The thing about my mother is that she has all these wounded birds who have really important problems and they take all the time she has.”

A silence ballooned up between us and was so loud I couldn’t hear anything else, and if you know anything about radio, you know that the worst thing that can happen is silence. It lasted forever, and while it was going on, I gave serious thought to running away from home, or at least hanging up.

When Mom finally spoke, her voice sounded choked, as if she had swallowed a gumball.

“We’ve been talking to Claire this morning, who is really Amanda,” she said. “And one of the things we talk a lot about on this show is saying what you have to say, even if that’s not always easy. Are you still there, Amanda?”

“Yes,” I squeaked.

“If I knew Amanda,” my mother went on, “she would rather have run away, or hung up, but instead she did something harder. She hung on.”

I gulped.

“Amanda is my daughter, and it seems we have some things to talk about, so what I’m going to do is ask my assistant to make a reservation for lunch at the Terrace Garden.” Then it sounded as though Mom had moved in closer to the microphone and was speaking just to me. “If you hurry, Amanda, I’ll meet you at 1:30. So we can talk.”

And we did: about Bad-breath Spellman, and Teni, and how it’s okay not to know now what I want to do with the rest of my life.

We talked about saving the whales, and our two weeks at the shore this summer, and how some day we’re going to Ireland. About books and movies and the time in fourth grade when I got
the chicken pox and Mom caught them from me.

And we talked about how we had missed talking to each other and what we could do about it.

We ate lunch slowly, and took ages deciding on dessert, and ages more eating it.

We sat there all afternoon, until the light streaking in the windows changed from yellow to a deep, burning gold and the busboys started setting the tables for dinner.