



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: No More Secrets – Part 1

Guest(s): Dennis Swanberg

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Dr. James Dobson: Hello, everyone. You're listening to Family Talk, the radio broadcasting ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Dr. James Dobson, and thank you for joining us for this program.

Roger Marsh: Well welcome to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. Today, Dr. Dobson sits down with his longtime friend, Dr. Dennis Swanberg. Now, usually when we have Dr. Swanberg on the program, we'll talk about his hilarious impersonations and heartfelt humor. Dennis has brought laughter to millions through his ministry, spanning more than four decades. But behind the comedy lies a powerful story of pain, redemption, and healing. In his book called *No More Secrets*, Dennis courageously shares how he and his wife, Lauree navigated their son's struggles with addiction. On today's edition of Family Talk, you'll hear how God worked through their family's darkest moments to bring restoration and hope. Dennis Swanberg reminds us that we're all recovering from something and none of us is exempt from life's painful seasons. His testimony demonstrates how God can transform our deepest wounds into sources of ministry to others. Here now as Dr. James Dobson with the always entertaining and profoundly insightful, Dr. Dennis Swanberg.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, hello everyone. This is James Dobson and you're listening to Family Talk, which is a radio ministry supported by listeners like you. You are in for a real treat today because I'm joined by my very good friend. Now, that's a phrase that's often used, but in this case, it's for real. I'm talking about Dr. Dennis Swanberg, and I'm sure many people in the listening audience have lit up just a little bit hearing his name because you followed him and enjoyed his work for years. I've known him for 29 years, and in fact, Dennis, I think the first time I ever heard your name, somebody had given me a cassette recording of one of your very, very funny speeches. I tell you, I could hardly see where I was driving because I was laughing and the tears were in my eyes. That was in Pomona, California, where Focus on the Family was where I was then. As I drove along, I just said, our audience needs to hear this guy. I didn't know you, but I loved what you did and talked about your family and everything. And I put that on the air and everything lit up, man.

Dennis Swanberg: It was something wasn't.

Dr. James Dobson: Oh my goodness. It really was an unbelievable experience. And then, let's see if you remember this. Shirley and I were in Sarasota, Florida, and it was Sunday

morning, and we went to a Baptist church there, and you were the primary speaker that day.

Dennis Swanberg: I was up on the platform and I look out and I see Dr. Dobson and Ms. Shirley and I went, Lord, Lord, help me be real good, or Lord take the shallow stuff and make 'em think it's something, or let me be like a Billy Graham or something. I'm up. Oh, and afterwards I'm down at the pulpit ready to shake some hands, but there ain't nobody shaking my hand. They're shaking Jim and Shirley Dobson's hands in the back, and finally when they finished, they came up and gave me a hug, and Doc you said, I want everything you got. And I hated to tell him, that's the only cassette tape I got.

Dr. James Dobson: It turned out not to be.

Dennis Swanberg: No.

Dr. James Dobson: You did very many recordings and...

Dennis Swanberg: You guys encouraged me. You encourage me.

Dr. James Dobson: I believed in you, Dennis.

Dennis Swanberg: You did. I asked you one time. I said, "Doc, why have you been so good to me?" And he said, "Well, I like opening up the door for somebody in a big way." And I went, "Man, you opened up the door as a garage door." I mean, it was unbelievable.

Dr. James Dobson: I mean I was selfish because I was sharing you and people love me for it. You are a Baptist minister. You have a doctorate in ministry.

Dennis Swanberg: I sure do. Southwestern Seminary. Went to Baylor, majored in Greek and religion, and here I got all these degrees. I got full 30 hours of Greek and 30 hours of religion. Then I got my master's, my doctorate, and I'm going, and here I am out here making people laugh a little bit. But you know what I tell my boys and my loved ones, you better be standing on the solid rock of Jesus Christ no matter what you do. If you're a singer, engineer, teacher, humorous, that's important. So I'm thankful for my education.

Dr. James Dobson: Dennis, when did you first discover that you could make people laugh?

Dennis Swanberg: I had fun at home. I had fun at school, but in high school we'd won our third state championship, Johnny H. Reagan High School, Austin, Texas. We beat Odessa, Permian, the Friday night lights in football.

Dr. James Dobson: Football.

Dennis Swanberg: And it was our third state championship. And my coach asked me to come up and speak at the banquet. It was a little nervy because they were going to have a politician speak that was under indictment, but they didn't want to uninvite him because of politics. So the mamas were upset, I can't believe we're having this speaker. And coach didn't want to ask him or rescind and say, you're not coming to speak. So he was there. And so I think my coach was pretty smart. He said, I'm add a little humor. So when he was introducing all of us, he came to me, he said, Dennis Swanberg, here he is a center and defensive end. Dennis does impersonations. Dennis, could you come up here when I finish introducing everybody and do a few for us? So, I hopped up there.

Dr. James Dobson: Just spontaneous.

Dennis Swanberg: Spontaneous, got behind that microphone, and I did Howard Cosell, no doubt about it. Monday night football, Lenny Dawson, back to pass. I did Muhammad Ali, I'm the greatest. I did Barney Fife. Anybody see Thelma Lou? And before, I hadn't done Billy Graham at that time, but I was doing all these and it was like, people just need an excuse to laugh. It broke the ice and people just lost it. And all of a sudden at that time, the way they responded, I thought, I can make people laugh. I didn't understand it.

Dr. James Dobson: What an epiphany. Your life changed on that night.

Dennis Swanberg: I didn't grasp about being a speaker. The next day in the Austin American Statesman newspaper in big, big, bold letters, it said "Swanberg Steals the Show.

Dr. James Dobson: No kidding.

Dennis Swanberg: And that I upped the politician who was a big politician in Texas, and I knew I had something. Shortly after that, March 15th, 1971, I gave my life to Christ on a Monday night. I was 17, and all of a sudden, I had these evangelical preachers coming up to me going, "Hey, why don't you come speak to our youth? You can do these voices." I went, is that appropriate in a church? Is it okay to be funny at church or humorous? And they went, oh yeah, yeah. And then you could end up talking about being an imitator of Christ. I went, is that in there somewhere?

Yeah, that's how it got started. And one thing led to another pastor ended up pastoring in the local church 22 years. And then in 1995, I resigned from First Baptist Church, west Monroe, Louisiana. I love those people. And to do this full time. Well, doc, that was 25 years ago. And here's an interesting story. When I resigned the next day, y'all had replayed one of my cassette tapes. It was like a Billy Graham movie, and I just couldn't believe it. So I've had a great life. The Lord's blessed me.

Dr. James Dobson: I've got to ask you about that because the standard understanding, or maybe a cliché about comedians is that they came out of pain. In fact, lemme tell you,

Jonathan Winters, one of the funniest men that ever lived was talking candidly on television one time, and I heard him, he talked about the fact that he lost his father. His dad ran off when he was just a little kid, and the kids teased him because he didn't have a dad in those days, everybody had a dad. And they would make fun of him and he would beat him up. He would fight. And when they weren't watching, he would go behind a tree someplace and cry. He said, "All my humor is an expression of pain." And I've heard many people say that. Apparently, that is not true of you.

Dennis Swanberg: It's true in the sense that my pain wasn't because of my parents. I had great parents, great grandparents, I mean family. I was a little bit of the ADD and we didn't know about ADD back then. And so I wondered about myself. I wondered if I was smart or not smart. I didn't do well on tests. And so how I would cover for that would be with my humor and what have you. But here's the deal, doc.

Dr. James Dobson: It's the same thing, really.

Dennis Swanberg: Yeah, it's the same thing. But now, after my boys graduated from college, but after they graduated from college, no one's exempt from pain. And Lauree and I, we experienced some pain and some hurt. Sometimes it comes early in the day, sometimes pain comes late in the evening. But we experienced some pain.

Dr. James Dobson: I don't know anybody that doesn't experience pain.

Dennis Swanberg: Everybody does, but not everybody always wants to talk about it. When I'd go out and speak and entertain, I'd preach and then entertain, and I believe I was effective. I care for people. But when after I experienced and went through, Lauree and I did with some bumps in the road with our boys, all of a sudden I had a new sensitivity to people that hurt because I remember I'd be out there at Dana Point speaking at one of those big hotels for a big faith-based group to raise money and they didn't know it, but I knew it that my youngest son, Dusty, was just down the road in San Clemente in a rehab, and yet I couldn't go see him.

Dr. James Dobson: He was drinking

Dennis Swanberg: Yeah. And I'd have to be up on that stage and laughing. But deep down in my heart, I love my Dusty and boy, that was tough. I can flash back to you guys. It's in our new book called *No More Secrets*.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah, we're going to talk about that.

Dennis Swanberg: We're very open about it. But I remember it was after Christmas in 2008 and Lauree and I and Chad, we came back to Louisiana to Monroe, but Dusty was going to go from Fort Worth down to Austin to see his cousins. Well, later that night, we're trying to text him, but he doesn't respond. We can't find him. And it's a tough thing when you have your nieces and nephews and everybody and

you're just calling police stations and sheriff's departments trying to find your son. And my niece, she found him in Georgetown, Texas. He was in jail. And so first of all, Lauree and I, we look at each other at one in the morning, and you know that with your kids, you look at each other and that ache in your stomach, that hollowness and like, what'd we do wrong? And I'm supposed to be America's minister of encouragement. And I'm thinking, well, I guess I didn't encourage my own son.

So my Chad and I, we got in the car and we drove all through the night. We got down there about 7:30 in the morning. I went in, paid his bail, we walked outside and God said to my heart, "If you love him, leave him." And I went back inside. I've never heard God speak in an audible voice except through my wife Lauree. My honey love, my sugar babe. But I went back in and I said, "Well, y'all just keep him. I don't want him. I want y'all just to keep him." Well, long story short, rest of it's in the book but they kept him. I come outside, Chad said, "When's Dusty getting out?" I said, "He's not. God told me if I love him, I needed to leave him this time." So we got in the car and we're driving all the way back to Monroe, Louisiana.

Lauree calls me on the phone. She says, "Do you have Dusty? You got Dusty?" I said, "Baby, I left him." "You left him?" I said, "Yes. God told me if I loved him, I needed to leave him. So I left him." She said, "Okay." I got home and he called collect call from jail and "When are you going to come get me?" I said, "When God tells me to come get you, I'll come get you. But Dustin, I left you there because He told me, if I loved you, I needed to leave you. So I'm leaving you now." The one verse that I knew in my heart was out of Joshua 1:9 and out of Hebrews, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." When I was at Baylor majoring in Greek, I'm not a scholar, but sometimes we translate that in the voice of O Billy Graham. I'll never leave you nor forsake you. But actually, if you translate those five negatives in that verse, it really is translated I'll never, never no, never leave you nor forsake you. That's a forever never. And I knew that my Lord was with him. All he had was a Gideon's New Testament.

Dr. James Dobson: Let give you another scripture that's maybe applicable. The story of the prodigal son jumps out of this here because he was a wealthy farmer representing God himself who owns everything. And he could have gone and rescued his son who was eating with the pigs and was destitute and with prostitutes and every evil thing. He could have sent his servants to find him and bring him back, but he did not. In fact, the Scripture, I think it's the Living Bible says, "And no one gave him anything." When he came to his senses, those two things are back to back huge. No one bailed him out. And then he came to his senses. You apparently had a similar situation.

Dennis Swanberg: That's right. Probably should have been in a hospital but I didn't know anything about detox. But after nine days, I went and got him, put him on a plane, took him to the rehab. And about two or three days later up there, he said he came to the place in his life, he said, "I am helpless. I need you, Lord." And ever since then, Dustin has been making changes. We all fall and fail and falter. 80% of

people relapse, addicts. Well, we all relapse from something. But now Dustin is married. We have a little grandbaby, Andrew James Floyd Swanberg. He put Floyd in there for my daddy, Floyd Leon. I thought, good night, will all that fit on a birth certificate? But he's the best little fella and they're going to have another child in April. Giver, thoughtful, spiritual, worked at Celebrate Recovery, First Baptist Dallas for a year.

Now he serves our government in a lot of ways I can't say, but I'll say this, he's a light. He shares the light of Christ with his life, and he does interventions. He goes to meetings and helps people. And when people that I know call and they're hurting, they want to call and talk to Dustin, or likewise, my oldest son, Chad. Both of them have been in recovery, and it's my oldest son. He's gone through some tough times, and I'm so proud of Chad. He wrote the epilogue of this book. Can I just read a little bit? Chad's a good writer. He said, "One of my greatest secrets was my own deception, although I was very good at deceiving those around me. I was even better at fooling myself. I kept secrets from myself. I avoided responsibility by playing the victim, blaming, justifying, rationalizing, so I didn't have to take credit or accountability for my part and my problems, the actions, behaviors, and choices that I made, however, gave me the life that I had.

Yet I was still unwilling to pull the curtain back on that secret. Never would I be willing to confess that I was the reason for my difficulties or responsible for my struggles. I could not admit the secret truth that the answer to my problem stared at me in the mirror every morning. Every secret that I kept had to be protected." And that's just a little bit of what he says, but you feel his heart. But I've learned, doc, I don't have to shame anybody. They feel plenty of shame already. I need to encourage 'em. I don't need to enable 'em, but I've got to encourage 'em all the same.

Dr. James Dobson: And they need encouragement. I've found that good, godly, Christian parents suffer more when their kids run into trouble than those who have no faith. Isn't that amazing?

Dennis Swanberg: It is.

Dr. James Dobson: It's even more painful to be a believer in a moment like this because the Scriptures in some interpretation blame you, the parents for it. But the truth of matter is we all have a free will and your kids can choose. And after all, God had a little trouble with Adam and Eve, and He was the perfect father and they went wrong.

Dennis Swanberg: I tell people that.

Dr. James Dobson: So you can't afford to blame yourself for what your kids do. Everybody makes mistakes. As parents, we all look back on what we did, which we could do it over because none of us is perfect and we don't have perfect kids.

Dennis Swanberg:

I told Lauree, I said, "I may have gotten this from Doc and Ms. Shirley, but Adam and Eve, they had a perfect father. They had a perfect world, but they had a mind of their own. And our kids have a mind of their own, and we have a mind of our own. We're all in this together." Sometimes I have had to admit that too often my thought has been, as long as your sin is bigger than mine, I'm fine. But isn't it funny how we are? I didn't do this or I didn't do this. Well, I didn't do that. So I feel pretty good about myself. I remember one time, Dusty came home in 2012, so he'd been sober a good while. I always wanted to go to one of those meetings, the AA meetings, and my wife, Lauree, my honey love, she said, You don't go unless he invites you, okay? You just wait. You just always so bold. You just wait and let him ask you."

Well, finally, one Saturday, he said, "Dad, you want to go with me?" So I went with him. We went over there near ULM campus there in Monroe, and man, there was a hundred people in there. Well, I've been out of the pastorate. I left First Baptist, west Monroe in 1995. I'd been out 17 years. We still lived there in Monroe, west Monroe. So I know everybody. I walk in there, doc, I see some old church members. I have my coffee in my hand. I'm going, "Hey, hey, I'm waving. Hey, hey, hey, there's a hey, how you doing?" And then I saw the guy that sold me my truck, and I'm thinking, Lord, good night. I don't know how this thing operates, but I hope they'll come by where I can introduce myself and say, "I'm Dennis Swanberg. I'm fine. I'm with my son. He's the one with problem." But when I did that, the Lord Jesus said to me, "You self-righteous preacher. Who do you think you are? Sit down and drink your coffee and learn something. Well, that didn't phase me. I thought, 'I'm America's minister of courage. I got to keep clean. I can't be. I mean, what's this going to do to me? And people are going to walk out and say, we saw Dr. Swanberg at an AA meeting.'" Then the Lord said, "It's AA Swan, it's anonymous." He said, "Drink your coffee, eat your donut and listen, maybe you'll learn something." And what I learned that day in 2012 more clearly was we're all recovering from something. We all need a savior. And I need to encourage my boys. I need to encourage others. I hurt with them. I hurt. We all hurt and have pain. And how much more so our heavenly Father, I mean, how did He feel then? Adam and Eve had two boys and one of 'em killed the other one. I mean, you'd be tempted to say, "God, you ain't got a good track record right now."

But I'll tell you this, what I think. He sure knows how we feel as parents, doesn't He? And He loved them so much. He made them some clothes which took a sacrifice, and he clothed them. He covered them with his love. I said in my book, sometimes we're pretty good at pointing sin out, but sometimes I'm not as good about helping them confess it. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. And it's not that I have to, everybody has to be as bold as Dennis Swanberg today on the radio. Tell the whole world, you tell the Lord and a significant somebody because if not, it's like a beach ball underneath the water. If you're not careful, it's going to come up and pop you in the face. Why not let the air out of it?

Dr. James Dobson: Dennis, you and I today are talking to some very specific people. I can feel their pain coming back through these microphones because they gave everything they had to their kids and they turned out wrong. Some of 'em are in prison and worse. And they look at that Scripture, the proverb that says, "Train up a child in the way he should go. And when he's old, he will not depart from it." That sounds a whole lot like parental guilt, that if you'd have done it right, he would've turned outright. But that is not a promise of God. That is a probability. And Proverbs are not promises. I mean, there are all kinds of proverbs that you say, well, I didn't get wealthy when I did everything right. The Proverbs are not promises, they're probabilities. And I think that Scripture has been misinterpreted to turn around and bite good godly people who did the best they could and it wasn't good enough.

Dennis Swanberg: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: And we need to put an arm around them today and say, you give that to the Lord.

Dennis Swanberg: And you know what? You can't fix it. You can pray for them. You can encourage 'em, but you can't fix it. But they have to find the answer. You know what both my boys tell me all the time? They say, "Dad, you and mom are great parents." Well, Lauree and I know we failed here. We failed there. We failed here. We failed there. But isn't it something, they think we're the greatest? But I'm going to tell you what, there's a time when you need to have a catharsis. You've got to have an emptying of yourself and a cleansing of yourself so that you can be free. When my boys look at me in the face, say, dad, you know what? Our real problem is the addict. You know what the real problem is for us, selfishness. We are some of the most selfish people in the whole wide world. It hit a note with me because I'm selfish too. We're all selfish. But there is an answer to that selfishness.

Dr. James Dobson: Dennis, we're really just getting started on the theme of this book. *No More Secrets*. And you have flown out here from Dallas, Texas to be with us today, and I want you to sit right where you are, and I want to continue this conversation. We'll let our listeners here it tomorrow the next time. But I love you, brother. I appreciate you, and you want other people to benefit from what you have learned in letting go of secrets and sharing them with others. We're going to pick that up next time. We're going to start by talking about your grandparents who've learned some things about this issue. Dennis, thanks for being with us, and it's always a pleasure to work with you. We'll pick it up right here next time.

Dennis Swanberg: Good deal.

Roger Marsh: The weight of secrets can feel overwhelming at times, but true freedom comes when we bring our hidden burdens into the light of God's grace. You're listening to a special edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, featuring an honest conversation between Dr. Dobson and comedian pastor, Dr. Dennis Swanberg

about family struggles, addiction, and finding hope through life's valleys. Now, if today's program really resonated with you, I encourage you to share it with someone who might also be carrying similar burdens. You can easily find this program along with a link for Dennis's book, *No More Secrets When You* visit drjamesdobson.org/familytalk.

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Well, I'm Roger Marsh inviting you to join us again next time when Dr. Dobson continues this important conversation with Dennis Swanberg. They'll explore the healing power of confession and why Christ remains our ultimate hope in times of struggle. That's coming up right here on the next edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer:

This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.