

# *Heart in the Right Place*

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A Conversation with the Author  
and  
Questions and Topics for Discussion

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*A CONVERSATION  
WITH THE AUTHOR*

**What inspired you to tell your story?**

I love my little community—the culture and the dialect—and I wanted to preserve a picture of what Smoky Mountain culture was like before it was overrun by new people moving to the area and by the effect of the increasingly pervasive presence of national media in our lives. I also wanted to preserve a picture of what family medicine was like at its best—before the business people got in charge of health care and when the doctor not only knew his patient but also knew four generations of the patient’s family and all his cousins too.

**You portray people and events so vividly. How were you able to accomplish this?**

I like to jot down things I hear people say, just a remark or a snippet of dialogue. That’s what truly interests me, the way real people talk. Most of the book originated on fast food drive-thru napkins and Post-its where I’d make notes to myself of things I’d heard. I used to be ashamed of that, that I didn’t write by sitting at a desk and having deep thoughts but was inspired by listening

to anybody and everybody around me talking about the most mundane aspects of their lives. Then recently I learned that most of the great country music songs originate the same way, so I don't have to be so embarrassed anymore.

The problem with working that way was that I accumulated huge stacks of ragged scraps of paper. When my desk got covered with them, I sorted them out and transcribed them. Finally I sprang for a palmtop computer and began making notes at the reception desk so I wouldn't forget what I was seeing and hearing. My note-taking gradually escalated into serious writing. I'd get up at 5:30 and write for ninety minutes before work, because that was the only time when I could do it. And I kept doing that for several years until, eventually, I shocked myself by having a book.

**How did everyone in town respond to the book once it was published?**

Really positive. All positive. Nearly every day I get phone calls or e-mails from somebody thanking me for writing the book. I've gotten amazing letters from the families of the main characters—they write because, like me, they find it hard to talk about the events without choking up. Over and over people have told me they're pleased by the careful detail in the recollections. A lady told me she'd bought a copy of the book for each of her children because her husband, their father, had such a prominent role in it. A few months later one of the children told me they'd bought copies for each of the grandchildren too, because by reading the book they'd have a way to know their grandfather. That was nice.

**And how did you father respond? Was he surprised to find himself at the center of your book?**

For a long time he couldn't imagine that his life was anything special or that it would be interesting to other people. In his mind he just did what he did and that was his job. Now he gets it. The newest development has the whole family bemused: Hollywood has expressed some interest in making a television series like *Northern Exposure* from the book. I can share in the befuddlement over that. But actually, everyone's life is worthy and riveting if it is observed properly.

**So true, but how do you think we can observe another person's life properly?**

By listening. But we don't listen to each other. This is a really serious problem in our culture nowadays. If we're polite we take turns talking in a self-absorbed way, but we rarely ever listen to what anyone else is saying.

When you do listen, things happen. You find yourself empathizing, developing compassion. It's hard work, though. Suddenly the world isn't "all about me."

If you don't listen, you miss a lot. You fail to realize that each of us faces very different, but equally trying, life circumstances. You don't discover that each of us is so deeply flawed that it's really tough for anyone to proceed through life with any grace at all.

Our whole culture is designed to cover this over.

To me the most significant thing in the world is observing the heroism of each individual's struggle to get on with life in the face of great obstacles.

If we can ever learn to control ourselves, to get still and quiet in the presence of another person, we can see that every person's life, no matter how modest or goofy looking, is deeply heroic. This is the basis of all worthy spiritual practices, learning to occasionally give up your seat at the center of the cosmos and move to the sidelines so you can observe another person as the center.

I learned that watching the show is more meaningful than being the show.

**What was the most difficult challenge you had to overcome in writing about your experiences?**

Writing a memoir like mine is very different from writing fiction. This book deals with really tough situations involving the people I love most in the world. And a lot of it didn't turn out so great. It's emotionally wrenching, and the minute details of those things aren't fun to focus on for the many years it takes to write a good book.

For some of the stories I did a hundred or more revisions and cried every single pass through them, reading or writing. I often wondered why I was doing that to myself. I suppose it was because I wanted to try to learn what I could from my life and the lives of people around me. I didn't want to just gloss over all that experience and say, "Next!"

**Were there any surprises in the process?**

The magnitude of the success of the book and the breadth of the audience. I never considered the material regional, but I wasn't sure how an insider's take on a rural area in the Smokies would be received by people in New Jersey and California. I worried that some convoluted notion of political correctness

would make people uncomfortable with an accurate depiction of mountain folks being themselves. But they get it totally. And now it's being translated into foreign languages!

A friend of mine who's from Nebraska said, "Your work centers around the absurd, but effective, solution. And it works because you come from this community where no matter how awkward the circumstances are, nobody seems to possess the capacity to perceive humiliation." I love that. I hope that's right.

We tease each other all the time. Sick and dying people would tease each other in that office. We have a tremendous tolerance for eccentricity and ignorance. Situations that might cause humiliation or shame elsewhere are seen as a source of good-natured free entertainment in Strawberry Plains.

**I understand that your father recently retired because of health issues. Whom do people go to see now that he's not practicing?**

A young doctor who grew up in the area started a practice close by, so that's very lucky for everyone. The new guy can't get away with all the tactics Daddy employed, like improvising equipment by rooting around in a toolbox, but he's good.

**Are you working on another book?**

I try to write a little every day. I'm always working on several different things.

I've done a lot of work on a sequel that picks up where *Heart in the Right Place* left off. I just finished a small book of true bear bloopers, stories about times when tourists and bears have startled each other in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. That was a lot of fun to do, very comical.

And I'm on a third revision of an action-adventure novel about

a very strenuous chase through the Smokies. Most people don't realize it, but nearly all of the National Park is a harsh and terrifying wilderness. One step off the trail and you're in a whole different world.

### **Do you have any writing advice?**

Yes, I have formulated the Three Fundamental Laws of Writing:

1. Start the book.
2. Work very hard on the book for a long time.
3. Finish the book.

An old friend, whom I've known since I was nineteen and a student at the University of Tennessee, asked me these questions:

1. How many people do you know who want to write a book?
2. How many people do you know who've ever even started a book?
3. How many people do you know who have ever finished a book?

My friend bet me a million dollars that sheer momentum would carry any book I completed all the way through the process of getting an agent, getting published, and getting a movie deal if I would simply start and finish a book.

He was right. You don't need anything else before these two steps have been completed—not an agent, not anything.

### **What do you miss most about your life in Washington, D.C.?**

I miss the clothes a lot, but actually they were a pain to wear because I was always worried about damaging something really expensive. Now I have a sort of shrine in my closet, a mu-

seum, where I store the really expensive pieces, like the Hermes scarves.

I also miss the restaurants, the ultra-luxurious travel, my friends, and being surrounded by people who were paid large amounts of money to create and maintain the illusion that I was a really special, interesting, and important person.



QUESTIONS AND TOPICS  
FOR DISCUSSION

1. Carolyn Jourdan must leave her glamorous, fast-paced life in Washington, D.C., in order to return to her small hometown to help her parents. What kinds of sacrifices have you made for your family? In what ways did those sacrifices affect your life? Were you, like the author, surprised by how you were changed by them?

2. Jourdan reflects on the differences between Michael and Harley's lives: "Harley had a death wish. He'd been graced with an extraordinary physique, and he abused his body and sought release from the world. Michael, who'd been born with a bad heart . . . struggled heroically to stay alive day by day" (page 28). She then concludes, "If there was one thing I'd learned growing up in a doctor's office, it was that people's mood was rarely dependent on their external circumstances. Its origin was almost always internal" (page 29). Do you find that this distinction holds true based on your own experiences? Are there people you know who reflect Michael and Harley's different approaches to life, and if so, in what ways?

3. Early on, Fletcher says to the author, “Your daddy’s smart. He could’ve done anything, could’ve been any kind of doctor and got rich, but he came out here instead cause he wanted to help people” (page 45). What are the trade-offs in being a small-town doctor versus being a doctor in the big city? What is gained and lost on both sides? What would we lose if small-town doctors disappeared?

4. When Jim Garrison comes to the office with a life-threatening emergency, the author thinks, “*Somebody’s gotta do something about this*” (page 79). She suddenly realizes that her father is the only person who can help. Have you ever been in a situation where you were the only person who could help, and if so, how did you manage it?

5. How would you characterize Carolyn Jourdan’s relationship with her father? In what ways is it similar to or different from her relationship with her mother?

6. After Taylor Jackson leaves the office, the author thinks, “Every day in this place was spent viewing the most personal and critical moments of other people’s lives. . . . I was inadequate to the experience” (page 124). Do you believe that’s true? How would you respond to the situations Carolyn Jourdan faces in her father’s office?

7. During one of her telephone conversations with Jacob, the author says, “You know how we always talk about wanting to be in public service so we can help people. . . . Well, in this place I feel sometimes like I really *am* helping people. Actual people. It’s

not just an idea. I can't help them *much*. I know it's not glamorous, but sometimes I think maybe I'm doing more good swabbing up body fluids and being a friendly face here than I ever did working in the Senate" (pages 177–78). Discuss the different ways people help each other. How do you think caring for others informs who you are? Share an experience you had directly assisting someone.

8. Discuss the ways in which Carolyn Jourdan's view of her father and mother shifts over the year. For instance, early on she describes them as "stoic" and "utterly self-contained" (page 41). How does she see them by the end of the book?

9. When the author catches a glimpse of a human heart during surgery, she says to Henry, "If that's the heart, I gotta say, it don't look like much" (page 278). Henry smiles and says, "A lot of the most important things in life 'don't look like much.'" Can you think of other examples in the book for which this holds true? Does this statement reflect a situation you have experienced?

10. Near the end of the book, the author realizes the true significance of the story about performing surgery with a pocket-knife: "I'd always thought the story was about the astounding surgery. But it wasn't. It was about using the talents you had, whatever they might be, to the most constructive purpose" (page 296). Who else mirrors this sentiment and why? Historical figures? People in your own life? To what degree is this true for yourself?