

# conversations with Charles

## We only have one life

*I have been struck how Charles always reacts adversely to the mores that demand the separation of private and working life. I had imagined that in his varied and unpredictable career, effectively living on his wits, he had found this separation so impracticable as to disdain it. I was to find that there was much more to it than that when I last saw him looking thoughtful and possibly a little upset.*

'Is there anything the matter, Charles?' *I asked.*

'Yes I have just come back from my younger brother's funeral,' *he replied.* 'Strangely, and in contrast to the final committal, the requiem mass proved to be an almost joyful occasion for my mother and myself and I wondered why. Was it because the end was relatively quick and peaceful with all his family round him? Perhaps, but not entirely so, I thought.'

'I am so sorry to hear about his death, but he did have a reasonably long life and we all have to die. Wasn't it because the funeral was a celebration of a life fulfilled?'

'Yes I am sure that was the reason for the majority of those present but for me there was more.'

'Go on Charles,' *I said wondering what was to follow.*

'I grieved for my brother when he died, but I also found myself grieving for my father in a way that I had not done since the time of his death 40 years ago. Then I realised that the source of both my joy and grief was the exceptionally happy childhood that we had experienced, tempered by the fact that my father did not live to see the next generation.'

'What was so happy about your childhood, surely it was in the deprived times of the war and its aftermath?' *I asked.*

'That's true, Coe, and as I think you know my father was a single-handed country general practitioner on call 24 hours a day. The surgery was in the house. The household was the practice so we were all in it together, the life of a doctor and the war. We suffered the difficulties of both together and

everyone, my mother, the children and the cook did their bit towards the practice. Work may have always come first but life was one.'

'But surely you must have been resentful of the constraints!'

'Not really as there were compensations, when there was no work to do my father was there to be with us when other dads were at work and we enjoyed going with him on his country round to see the 'chronics'. Perhaps best of all was being given cookies by the guards as we went through the gate of the American airbase, which, as it transpired, was supplying the French Maquis. However my point is that we were a truly united family in a way that was only possible because work and play were not compartmentalised and thought of as separate lives.'

'Were all such families so successful?'

'I am sure they were not and that some families succumbed to the pressures, but like saplings exposed to the weather the stresses that blew some asunder strengthened the remainder.'

'Come on, Charles I still think you are living in the past or at least looking at it through rose-coloured spectacles!'

'Perhaps,' *he replied.* 'But nevertheless there is truth in what I say. Let doctors be doctors, and spouses be spouses the whole time, and be proud of it. It may be that it is no longer practicable for doctors to run their medical practice solely with the help of their spouse, their under-age children, the cook and the gardener handyman, but I still think there are lessons to learn. Like my brother we all have only one life to live and I believe to try to divide it into strictly defined compartments may be counterproductive in terms of contentment, particularly when the pressures to do so come from others rather than one's self.'

*As so often is the case I do not entirely agree with Charles, but it is difficult to argue absolutely against his eloquently and sincerely expressed case. Perhaps the nearest extant model to his family doctor household is the residential corner shop. Are these families, as Charles might predict, usually strongly united but with the occasional one finding life impossible?*

Coemgenus