

**A Conversation with Ernie Johnson, Jr.,  
Author of *Unscripted: The Unpredictable Moments that Make Life  
Extraordinary***

***Q. First of all, congratulations on Unscripted. Have you always wanted to write a book?***

**A.** I think there comes a time in your life when your accumulated experiences kind of get you thinking about a book—or you have friends who say, “Man, when are you going to write a book?”

It’s been in the back of my mind for a while. Now, the time was just right. I decided to write it after some people had become aware of my family’s story through the “[E:60](#)” [installment ESPN](#) did on us.

My wife and I were reluctant to do that “E:60” documentary at first, to tell you the truth. We prayed together and came to the conclusion that if the piece was going to speak to and encourage somebody on any level—on father-son relationships, cancer, adoption, raising a special needs child—then we needed to do it.

The book felt like the logical next step. “E:60” showed you kind of what our lives are like, but there is more to the story. The only way for me to share the other layers was to write a book, and write it myself. “Unscripted” is from my soul, and writing it was an experience.

***Q. You know, it’s one thing to have compelling stories to share, but it’s another thing to be able to write them well. And this book is beautifully written. Do you enjoy writing?***

**A.** I grew up with two older sisters, and they are both really smart. They were the ones who were bringing home straight A’s all the time, and I was the one trying to convince my mom and dad that a C+ isn’t all that bad.

Even though we had different strengths, when it came to the written and spoken word, my parents were sticklers. If you made a grammatical error at our dinner table, it was caught immediately. You’d think, “Well, I’m not going to do *that* again.”

So I really grew up with a love for language. Originally, I wanted to grow up to be a baseball player. When that fell through, I said, “I’m going to be an English teacher and a baseball coach.” That’s where I thought I’d land the plane, but then I started doing radio and TV, and that career took its course.

But I've always appreciated great authors, the men and women who can write in a way that makes you can't wait to turn the page. That's always kind of been there.

***Q. In *Unscripted*, you share that you write poetry as well.***

**A.** Yes, the whole poetry thing started because of one of my dad's old broadcast partners, Pete van Wieren. When I was a bit younger, I was at a dinner listening to Pete speak. He got up there and read a poem he'd written about the Atlanta Braves.

And I just thought, "Man, that's cool. That's not just another guy making a speech." He put some thought into it—and it was entertaining and touching. So, I started writing poems too, while working at Turner Broadcasting. I must have 50 or 60 different poems now that I've written for various events.

Writing is just a wonderful outlet. I think it helps you deal with stuff, whether you're penning a book or poem people are going to read, or journaling privately. Just putting a pen to paper is very therapeutic. It certainly was in this case.

After I'd written a few chapters, I told my sister Kris—one of those straight-A sisters—that I was going to send her over a chapter to read. I wanted to know what she thought. She got back to me later and said, "Man. When did you learn to write so well?"

I thought to myself, "Okay. I guess this might be the right direction, because she's the most honest critic I have. If she likes it, I'm going to keep on barreling through."

***Q. One of the most touching dimensions of the book has to do with fatherhood and what you share about your own close relationship with your dad, beloved sportscaster and pitcher Ernie Johnson, Sr. How did your father shape who you are today, as well as how you parent your own kids?***

**A.** I think the greatest thing about my relationship with my father was that he kind of let me make mistakes and was there guiding me but not preaching to me or looking over my shoulder every second that I turned around. It's like he was trying to point me in the right direction, then would look back from around the corner like, okay, let's see how he handles this situation.

A lot of the time he taught me when he didn't even know he was teaching me. While he was watching me from a distance, seeing how I'd handle things, I was watching him.

I had the wonderful opportunity to tag along with him to work. A lot of kids go to school while dad goes to work, then everybody comes home and meets up at the dinner table. The next day you do it all over again—maybe you hang out on the weekends.

But a lot of the time, I could just go to work with my dad and watch him do his thing at the ballpark. I watched him interact with people—watched how he treated everybody he

met. Everybody at the ballpark loved him. He said hello and knew something about every single person who worked there. By watching him, I learned that everybody deserves respect. Just because you have a high-profile job like my father did doesn't mean you're better than anybody else.

He just felt fortunate to be able to do what he was doing, and that kept him humble. He had no idea I was taking mental notes every step along the way.

***Q. And that's how you try to parent your kids now?***

**A.** Yes, I think that's my message to fathers now. Look, you have no idea how the smallest moment can impact your child. You'll be amazed by what they remember. So, any time you can create what I call blackberry moments - those unexpected moments that make life extraordinary - in their lives, you must take advantage of it. You just don't know what is going to stick with them.

Be on the lookout for these moments all the time, along with the opportunity to make them happen. Create memories. That's what my dad taught me. I can't even tell you how many times just over the course of a normal day or week or month that I sit here and think, "Man. I wish he were still here. I'd love to ask him about this."

That's the tough part about losing your best friend.

***Q. I want to talk about blackberry moments in a minute, but first, while we're talking about parenting: something that really jumps out about your kids is the way you've juggled it all. You have special needs children, including Michael who requires around-the-clock care. How have you balanced parenting your other children well when there is one who specifically requires so much from you?***

**A.** That's a great question. Believe me, my wife Cheryl and I have had many discussions about this. There are times when we stop and say, "Today, let's do something special just for Carmen. Let's do something with just Eric and Maggie, or just with Allison and Ashley."

We have to be intentional about that. Because we know Michael's situation is demanding. Even in the *E:60* piece, Michael got the lion's share of the attention—that's just the way it is. He needs help all the time.

But here's the great thing about my kids: they've been right there, too. They're caregivers for Michael as well. He and his oldest brother Eric, who is a father himself now, have brother days. Eric will come up with his son and they take Michael out for lunch. Eric gets Michael out of bed, takes him to the bathroom, gets him ready. Maggie does the same thing. Carmen does the same thing.

We have had to pay attention to make sure home isn't all about Michael. But at the same time, we also make sure we tell our kids how much we appreciate them being wonderful teammates in this situation.

It is a little bit of a juggling act. I hope that our kids know how loved and adored they all are. I think they do. And they have had to sacrifice some for someone who is not able to do what they can physically.

**Q. Before we stop talking about the kids and move on to other topics, let's talk about adoption. You adopted four of your six children. Why was it so important to you and your wife to go down this path in the first place?**

**A.** My wife Cheryl gets the credit as far as where the idea came from. She opened my eyes to a lot of things. Look, I was one of those guys who was very career-driven. I thought, "Let's do things by the book. Okay, we're married. Let's have a couple of kids. Okay, that's good—we have a boy and a girl. I've got a job. We're good."

I was living a scripted life, and I'd written the script. I was playing it safe.

Cheryl has always been the one who says, "Let's look outside of ourselves and what we have. We've been pretty blessed here. Let's see what else is out there." So she saw a documentary about Romanian orphans, and her heart just broke. She came to me and said, "You know what we need to do?" I said, "No, what?" And she told me, "We need to go to Romania and adopt one of these special needs kids."

She was giving me—the scripted guy—a glimpse into the unscripted world. Once you open your eyes, it changes your whole outlook. Once we saw the impact Michael—the Romanian orphan we brought home—had on us, we saw another side of life. And our kids saw that life isn't always Toys-R-Us and going to McDonald's. Sometimes life is a Romanian orphan who didn't know if he was ever going to eat again.

Once you get a heart for adoption, you look around for someone else to help. So we found ourselves going to Paraguay to get a little girl named Carmen.

That urge to look around and see how you can help never really leaves you. We were adopting first in 1991 and 1993, and then in 2010, we found ourselves doing it again at age 50, adopting two girls, Allison and Ashely, out of foster care in Cleveland, Ohio.

I wish I had an easy explanation. Some things just get inside of you and never leave. You feel a nudge—feel compelled to give somebody else another shot. And what you find is they're doing more for you than you're doing for them.

Cheryl opened my eyes to this, and now, there's no closing them to it.

**Q. What a beautiful explanation of you becoming open to the unscripted moments when you were such a scripted guy. You explain blackberry moments in the book, but while we're talking, what are they?**

**A.** People always think “blackberry moments” has something to do with a mobile device. [laughs] I think we have entirely too many of those, by the way—people are way too tied in to what’s on their phones. They’re just walking around with their heads down, walking past people.

Blackberry moments are the opposite of that. You see blackberry moments when your eyes are wide open and your head is on a swivel. They’re not on your calendar. Maybe it’s somebody unexpected who you meet or have a conversation with. Maybe it’s someone you’re able to help, out of the blue. It’s not something you schedule: you just walked by, and here was this beautiful, juicy moment that you could stop and take a break from your busy day to enjoy.

The name “blackberry moments” goes back to a little league field where I was playing when I was 8 years old. Some teammates became more interested in a blackberry bramble in the outfield than the game. Really, blackberry moments are just those unexpected moments that make life extraordinary.

They take so many forms. You can help someone, take five extra minutes to listen to a person who wants to talk, witness something beautiful. Maybe a blackberry moment comes when you don’t rush out to the car first thing in the morning, worrying about being late for a meeting. Instead, you take a second to watch a hummingbird at a feeder, and you gain a moment of peace.

Since I came up with the term, I can define it any way I want, by golly. [laughs] We’ve been talking about them in our family for so long that sometimes, my daughter will send me a text while she’s out somewhere with her husband and my little granddaughter Katie that just says, “blackberry moment.” I love the fact that long after I’m gone, our grandkids and even kids we don’t know yet, stretching far into the future, will refer to something as a blackberry moment.

It’s part of leaving a legacy. The way my kids have accepted it and embraced the idea is pretty cool.

***Q. Your family is obviously so important to you. But you’re dedicated to your career as well. You didn’t miss a single episode of Inside the NBA during your fight against Non-Hodgkin lymphoma. Why was that consistency important to you?***

**A.** I watched my mother and oldest sister both survive cancer. One of the things I wanted to do once I’d been diagnosed with cancer—and this was before I had any treatment—was to send a message that said, “Look. Just because you have cancer doesn’t mean you have to go into hiding.”

My appearance was changing. I looked kind of funny on the air. You could see the swelling of my lymph nodes in my face, and people were wondering what was going on. Staying on the air was my way of saying, “I am not going to run and hide. I’m going to meet this head on.” Once my chemotherapy started, I missed a couple of assignments doing golf in the summer of 2006. But while I felt good enough to work, I was going to work.

When I was getting one of my early scans, someone told me, “You may have cancer, but it doesn’t have you.” Don’t let cancer steal your heart and soul or beat your personality. You’ve got to fight it. You’ve got to remain yourself.

That’s the first thing I tell anybody I come in contact with who’s going through that—it’s part of being in the cancer club. You’re going to get advice from people who have been there, and then it’s your responsibility to pass it on to others.

The folks at Turner were great because they wanted me to get better. They said, “Don’t worry about the PGA this year or the British Open. Just take the summer to get better.” And that’s what I did.

It felt very good to return to the NBA set the next year on opening night with my bald head and no eyebrows, looking kind of like a manikin. But I was back. It’s my chair, and I was back in it.

***Q. As dedicated as you are to your job, anyone who knows you will testify that your family is your number one priority. How have you balanced those two things, along with the spotlight, which is this weird wrench in the mix?***

**A.** That kind of morphed over time. I think I’ve become better at it through the years. Early in my career, I talked a good game about how I was a father and husband first, but deep down inside, my identity was tied to what I was doing. I was a sportscaster—and a pretty important guy, I thought. I was so hungry for someone to say something nice about me or to praise my work.

The entrance of faith into my life changed me. When my identity became tied to my creator and savior, my life worked itself out. Then, my broadcasting job wasn’t who I was. It was what I did. Then, I truly believed that being a father and husband was number one. Work could just take another spot.

What was amazing was the less I emphasized my work as my identity, the better I got at it. I don’t know exactly how that works. But I do know that once I got my foot off the accelerator a little bit and enjoyed and focused more on being a dad and husband, work became better. I became better at my job.

***Q. You just gave some really soulful advice a few minutes ago for people diagnosed with cancer that will prep them for the fight. How did your experience with cancer shape how you live today?***

**A.** You hear people say that cancer makes you appreciate every day, and there really is something to that. At a time like that, you go through so much uncertainty. You get scared. Especially early on, when you don't know how far the cancer has spread and what treatment you'll undergo, you can't keep from thinking: am I going to be around for when my daughter gets married? Am I going to be around for this graduation? Will I make it to another anniversary?

You don't know. Then, once you get a clearer diagnosis and discover how you're going to attack, you put your head down and go.

When you come out on the other side, yeah: you linger a little longer on the patio with your wife and a cup of coffee. I decided I was going to linger a little longer, to take time away from work, to enjoy a sunset or a summer. I decided to enjoy reading stories to my kids. All of these simple activities take on added significance.

Then, when you're having a bad day and things are just getting under your skin—it happens to all of us, where one thing after another isn't going right. Traffic is horrible. You have too many meetings. Whatever it is. Once you've had cancer, you can sit and say, "Well, think about where you were once in your life. Is this really that bad?"

Then I'll think about the people I saw when I'd pull into the infusion center to get my chemo—folks who were worse off. And they weren't complaining.

I think surviving cancer does crystalize a lot of things. Any time you can wake yourself up and say, "Look. You're here. Look at what you've been able to enjoy since getting through that." For example, I walked my daughter down the aisle and was the best man at my son's wedding. I've had so many blackberry moments since then.

I don't begrudge the fact that I had cancer. Because I really do appreciate a lot of things that maybe I would have taken for granted otherwise.

***Q. A lot of readers are going to love the parts of Unscripted where you talk about Inside the NBA. You're a preparer. You take notes. You're that guy. So how do you navigate the show so well as the planner when you're working with decidedly off-the-cuff guys like Shaquille O'Neal, Charles Barkley, and Kenny Smith—and the whole point of the show is to go off script?***

**A.** That's the thing: they're the guys who played the game. I'm the TV guy. I'm the one who has to get us from point a to point b and then point c. I also have to be the guy who has done homework and research on the numbers so that if Charles, Kenny, or Shaq say something that's not accurate, I can call them out on it.

Last night on the show, Charles said, “Man, if you call me out one more time about one of my picks, I’m going to reach across and slap you.” And I said, “It’s what I have to do!”

He’d just looked at me and said, “You know, this team ought to be a lot better. The Washington Wizards ought (?) to be the number five seed in that conference.”

Well, they *are*. I have to point that out.

There’s a lot of that that goes on. The key is knowing my role. These guys are the players who know exactly what every situation in an NBA game is like. My role is to get the best out of them that I can. I think that’s why it all works. Nobody is really concerned about who’s getting airtime. We just want the show to be good.

Once we get out there, there is no telling what might happen. And that’s the wonderful part about it—the unscripted part of the show. We don’t rehearse. We’re just talking. It’s up to me to prepare as best I can for any eventualities that may come up.

I think that’s why it resonates with fans: if you’re wondering what’s going to happen next, get in line. I’m the same way. A lot of the time I’m wondering what the heck is going to happen next—and that’s what makes it fun.

***Q. You really pioneered a new TV format, which takes great instincts and guts. What advice do you have for young people—or anyone, really—with a big, different idea?***

**A.** Charles had a tremendous amount to do with that. He changed the landscape of studio shows by being a guy who is not afraid to talk about something other than the game. For a long time, shows like ours were simply highlights and talking about highlights. “This team won, okay, now on to the next game.”

Charles came along and is the same guy he was as a player—a guy who is not afraid to speak about social issues or anything that’s going on in the world. He brought that same dynamic to our show. Suddenly, we found ourselves talking about what everyone else in the world was talking about—as long as it could be done with some degree of intelligence and knowing what we were talking about.

When I talk to broadcasting students, I say, “Look. Don’t be tied to a teleprompter, forced to read everything off a screen. Be ready to communicate. Know how to express yourself clearly and concisely. And listen.”

Listen—that’s the biggest one, especially for someone in my position. Don’t be so focused on what you want to say next that you miss what the other person just said, which is crying for a response from you.



My dad's greatest advice to me was to always be myself. It's very simple, but it's very valuable. Just be yourself. Don't feel like because you're on TV there has to be a TV persona and a home persona. You're the same guy. When people talk to me about my dad, they say he was the same, no matter where he was. "We played in a charity golf tournament with your dad, and he was just the same on the golf course as he is in the broadcast booth." Yes—that's who my dad was.

You never got any phony baloney stuff out of him, and that's what I've tried to do. This is the guy you get, and hopefully, you keep watching.

***Q. That's one of the things people love about you. They feel like they know you, so when you do write or talk about your faith, it's even more powerful because they already have a deeper connection to you. You say your mantra is "Trust God...Period." How do you live that out every day?***

**A.** I think "Trust God...Period" means never losing sight of the fact that every moment, every day is part of a bigger picture that I have no concept of—I don't know how everything fits together.

Going through cancer was really when that mantra was galvanized. If you're trusting God with your life, are you trusting him only because things are good? Because you've got a great family, a great job, and life is just good? Or are you trusting him in the valleys, too? Because you're going to have those knock-down moments when you're walking through a valley and wondering if you're ever going to come out.

I decided I'm going to trust him in all circumstances, good and bad. I've tried to pass this idea on to my kids as well—they really can't avoid it, since it's at the bottom of every email I send. It's a way of life, how you go from one day to the next: trusting that you're not alone on this journey. Trusting that there's a reason this prayer seems unanswered. Trusting that your picture of your life is going to have some bright colors and some dark colors, too.

When you're struggling, are you going to turn on God or to God?

***Q. Your faith came into play recently when [some comments you made about the presidential election went viral](#). Can you talk about the decision to share your thoughts?***

**A.** The nature of *Inside the NBA* is to talk about social issues. Sometimes, we're going to talk about what you guys at home are talking about. That day, it was the election—Donald Trump beating Hillary Clinton.

We each had two minutes to talk in the pregame show. In my office during the day, I'm thinking, "Am I going to go on air and say what I'm thinking? Honestly share how I'm

processing these election results? Or will I take the easy way out, and just say, ‘Yes, this was a very surprising outcome. Boy, let’s just hope everything turns out okay.’”

I decided in my office that afternoon that I wasn’t taking the safe way. I decided the only way to be totally honest was to share that this is where my mantra “Trust God...Period” comes into play. I may not know who’s going to be in the Oval Office, but I know who’s on the throne. Trust God...period.

Nothing is happening while God’s got his back turned. It’s not like God turned around and said, “Oh, Ernie’s got cancer? Doggone it, I shouldn’t have been on a break.” This is all part of my story. It’s all something I have to go through, even though I may not understand it.

When it came to the election, I decided to talk about who’s on the throne because look, I’m a Christian. I follow this guy Jesus—you may have heard of him. Well, here’s what I do in a situation like this: I pray for our leaders. I love everybody, or try to. So there you go. The election just happened, and this is how I’m dealing with it.

Two days later, my wife and I were at the breakfast table, and she had her computer out. She was looking at Facebook and the grandkids, and she said, “Geez. Your comments about the election have like 15 million hits.” There were 14.5 million views on Facebook. People are still reacting. I was in Las Vegas last week, and people came up to me out of nowhere saying, “Hey, I appreciate what you said about the election.” It’s been amazing. Pastors, friends, total strangers—I’ve heard from so many people. I’ve also heard from people who say, “Stick to sports. We’re not interested in that—quit talking about God.”

The thing is, I’m not going to get on the air on a nightly basis and say, “Turn your bibles to Romans 8.” That’s not the time or place. But in a situation like this historic election, the only way I can be honest is to show you that my faith helps me through times like this. Speaking openly about it was also part of trusting God—spending two minutes on the air talking about Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and Jesus? I had to trust God and hope that the next week I’d still be coming back to the studios at Turner. [laughs]

***Q. The country needs some wisdom and kindness right now. So thank you.***

**A.** We need some positivity! We need some good energy. We need some hope. It drags me down sometimes when I see the way social media is used, especially when I think about how it could be used—how good it could be. It could be used to lift each other up and help each other through hard times.

Instead, it’s used as a way to put people down and show how funny you are by placing yourself above somebody else. That’s frustrating to me. People in the public eye are just used for target practice.

In my comments about the election, I said, “How can I be a fountain and not a drain?” How can you encourage somebody rather than whine or put others down? Can we use social media to lift others up instead of trying to crush them?

***Q. It’s not social media, but your book is going to lift people up. What do you hope readers walk away feeling, learning, or just experiencing from “Unscripted”?***

**A.** It’s interesting: because this is my first time writing a book, I have had no idea what to expect along the way. I had no idea what it’d be like to pour out all these feelings into a book. And once it was written, what then? What do I hope happens now?

I actually talked to Mark Batterson, a pastor in D.C. who has written a bunch of books. He was really helpful. He said, “Look. All I do now when I publish a book is pray that it gets into the hands of somebody who could use it.”

That’s kind of where I’m at. I don’t think I’ve got all the answers. I’m a struggling dad and husband just like a lot of folks are. All I’m doing is sharing how we as a family have navigated some of these waters. I think this book can speak to folks on a number of levels, whether it’s fathers and sons, cancer, or adoption. Maybe you’re at the end of your rope, caring for your special needs child, wondering if you’re doing the right thing. Maybe you’ve had wrestling matches with God before. “Unscripted” grapples with all of that.

I hope readers walk away more mindful of blackberry moments, and how they can center us, calm us down, and give us renewed appreciation for what we have.

I go in with no expectations, but I know there are a lot of possibilities. If “Unscripted” can help anyone in any of those areas, it’s worth every moment it took to write.

### **About Ernie Johnson, Jr.**

Ernie Johnson, Jr. is one of sport’s most respected and loved personalities. The three-time Sports Emmy Award winner and host of TNT’s *Inside the NBA* with Charles Barkley, Kenny Smith, and Shaquille O’Neal has helped audiences break down games and belly laugh for decades. Ernie is also the studio host for NBA TV’s popular *Fan Night* and a studio host for Turner and CBS’s NCAA Division I Men’s Basketball Championship coverage. He is the lead play-by-play announcer for Turner’s coverage of Major League Baseball and the PGA Championship, and has also covered the National Football League, The British Open, Wimbledon, and the Olympics. In addition to numerous professional accolades and lifetime achievement awards, Ernie has earned honors recognizing his incredible actions off-camera, including the first-ever John Wooden Keys to Life Award and a Musial Award, both of which salute characteristics such as integrity, faith, and good sportsmanship. Ernie lives in Braselton, Georgia, with his wife, Cheryl, and their six children, four of whom are adopted.