

Shrink Rap Radio #520, August 25, 2016 - Life Reimagined at Midlife

David Van Nuys, Ph.D., aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Barbara Bradley Hagerty

(Transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Elly Nobbs)

Show Notes:

Barbara Bradley Hagerty is the New York Times bestselling author of *Life Reimagined: The Science, Art, and Opportunity of Midlife* (Riverhead Books, 2016) and *Fingerprints of God: The Search for the Science of Spirituality* (Riverhead, 2009). Her six-part series on how to thrive at midlife aired on NPR in March 2016. Barb worked for NPR for 19 years, covering law and religion. She has received the American Women in Radio and Television Award (twice), the National Headliners Award, and the Religion Newswriters Association award for radio reporting. Her reporting was part of the NPR coverage that earned the network the 2001 George Foster Peabody and Overseas Press Club awards after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. She has written for The Atlantic, The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times, USA Today, Vogue, and The Independent (UK) and she has appeared on the Today Show and PBS programs Washington Week in Review and the News Hour. She was selected for the Templeton-Cambridge Fellowship in Science and Religion in 2005, and for a one-year Knight Fellowship at Yale Law School in 1993-94, where she received a master's in legal studies. Before NPR, Barb covered law and economics for The Christian Science Monitor, before serving as the Monitor's Asia correspondent based in Japan. Barb was graduated magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Williams College in 1981. She lives in Washington, DC with her husband, Devin, and their yellow lab, Sandra Day.

Intro:

Dr. Dave: Today my guest is long-time National Public Radio journalist, Barbara Bradley Hagerty. Among her many accomplishments, she's the author of several books, including the 2016 book *Life Reimagined: The Science, Art and Opportunity of Midlife*, which will be the focus of our discussion today. For more information on Barbara Bradley Hagerty please see our show notes at ShrinkRapRadio.com.

The Interview:

Dr. Dave: Barbara Bradley Hagerty - Welcome to Shrink Rap Radio!

Hagerty: Thank you so much. It's great to be here, Dave.

Dr. Dave: Well, it's great to have you on the show, I must say. I learned about your work through my good friends and our mutual friends, Dale, Doctors, I should say, Dale and Gale Ironson, and I'm so happy they turned me unto you and your work. And we're going to be discussing your latest book which is titled *Life Reimagined*. I've got my copy right here, which I can maybe hold up for the camera - *Life Reimagined: the Science, Art and Opportunity of Midlife*. And what a great subtitle that is because you actually hit all three of those areas really hard. [laughs]

Hagerty: [laughs] Yes, I did. It took quite a bit of research, something like more than 400 interviews and read through something like 700 emails from NPR listeners who wanted to talk about midlife. And what you have there in your hands, as you can tell, is like this doorstop of a book. [laughs]

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Hagerty: [laughs] Way too big. But I had a lot of fun, just a lot of fun researching it. It's a rich topic, and it's one that I care about because here I am just turned 57, so these are big issues for me.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Yeah. Having read your book, it's clear to me that you just didn't say to yourself - Well what could I write about, a book about, that I'd make a bunch of money with. Rather, what's clear is that it was very driven by your own questions, about how maximizing ... how you might go about maximizing the rest of your life. And that quest led you to explore everything from exercise to brain games, to love and marriage, to economics, to generosity, to happiness research, and more - much, much more. [laughs]

Hagerty: [laughs] I should put you on to do ... pay you and put you on a retainer to do an advertisement for me "the much, much more". [both laugh]

Dr. Dave: Ok. [both laugh]

Hagerty: No, it's so true. You know one of the things, and I don't know if you've found this as well, but one of the things I've found ... I was really surprised at what happened when I hit midlife. I thought midlife would just be an extension of early midlife or late young adulthood or something like that.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Hagerty: But something, not just physically, kind of philosophically and emotionally happened to me around - for me I think it was a little bit late, kind of in my early 50s - where suddenly the things that sustained me before, which was kind of the ambition to succeed or - that was a lot of it - this ambition I might have. Those kinds of things began to mean a little bit - not that they meant less - but other things began to mean more to me, like relationships and things like that. And also I was surprised that something physically actually happens to you when you're 50 years old. You can't pull the all-nighters the way...

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Hagerty: ...you did. So I realized that I had to begin to make a change in my life. And that's how I ended up doing the book.

Dr. Dave: Well, let's back up just a little bit because you did mention NPR, which to me is a huge thing. And you confess in the book [laughs] what a huge thing for you as well.

Hagerty: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: You know, I'm so impressed by NPR and the programming and so on. I'm doing my best to be Terry Gross here. [both laugh]

Hagerty: Well done. You don't look like her, but you're doing very well. [laughs]

Dr. Dave: Thank you. Yeah and sometimes I've had the privilege of what I'll call "picking up the crumbs", that is interviewing someone [laughs] after she's interviewed them. So that's been fun. Let's just back it up a bit and tell us a bit about NPR and its role in your life.

Hagerty: Yeah, well, NPR was really kind of the place I always wanted to work. I worked for 11 years for the Christian Science Monitor and that was a wonderful place. And actually was able to be the Asian correspondent for their new television program that they had - that kind of went bankrupt after 3 years [laughs] so I ended up coming home. But you know I always wanted to work for NPR because I think that they tell stories so well and they make people care about big ideas, but kind of surrounding them, enmeshing them in stories. And so I always wanted to work there. I was lucky enough when I was 36, after leaving the Monitor, and I was able to come to NPR. And the thing about NPR is, it's a really wonderful place to work. But the other thing is, it kinda became my identity. I mean the first thing I would say to people when I met them at a party or just in casual conversation, I somehow managed to get in the fact ...

Dr. Dave: Sure. [both laugh]

Hagerty: ... that I was a correspondent for National Public Radio.

Dr. Dave: You're proud of that. Rightly so.

Hagerty: [laughs] And so it really was kind of the warp and woof of my life. It was a very demanding career. For a while, from basically the time that Clinton, President Clinton went through the House Impeachment Hearings to, right through 9/11, to 2003, I was the Justice Department Correspondent. And what that meant is I was working anywhere between 60 and 100 hours a week, especially after 9/11. And so it not only became my identity in terms of who I was, but it was also my identity in terms of how I spent my time.

Dr. Dave: Sure.

Hagerty: And I think that a lot of people in midlife ... We're peaking in our careers in midlife. So a lot of people really invest everything. It's hard not to invest a huge amount of yourself in your career at midlife, especially for me because I was married late. I was married when I was 43, so I didn't have children. I have a great step-daughter, but that was ... because I

didn't have children it became very easy to focus completely on NPR. And, and my marriage. And that was a great thing.

But you have to at some point reassess because the news business is kind of a young person's game, especially, especially broadcast news. When you're a 24 hour a day network ... yeah you get ... After 9/11, I would be at NPR every morning at 3.30 in the morning so I could do a live 2-way or interview with the host then Bob Edwards at 5.10, 9 and 11; and then I'd do Talk of the Nation at the noon hour; and then I'd do a piece for All Things Considered; and I couldn't go home til All Things Considered, the last feed of All Things Considered was over, and that was at 10. So I'd leave at 10pm and I'd be there the next morning at 3.30. And as you can imagine it's something that young people are really, really good at. [both laugh]

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Right.

Hagerty: [laughs] But when you're 45, 46, whatever, it gets harder.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Hagerty: Or 42, or whatever. A little bit more difficult. So I had to kind of rethink things.

Dr. Dave: And didn't you have a ... I'm trying to remember back to the beginning of the book now. I spent a lot of time with it. Wasn't there a medical crisis of some sort that kind of triggered ... ? Tell us about that.

Hagerty: Yeah. Yeah. There were actually two kind of medical crisis: one was my mother's and the other was my own. But I think for our purposes ... What happened in the fall of 2012 is that I got a really angry email, which happens a lot, to reporters [both laugh]. I got a really angry email and had to figure out how to answer it. And as I was trying to figure this out, and I was writing a response, suddenly I felt this kind of pain radiating up the back of me, and I became very short of breath, and I was having a really, you know... it felt like a panic attack, but I'd never had one of those before. And I didn't know what was going on, but I had this huge kind of pain all over my back, and shortness of breath, and so what did I do? I googled naturally [both laugh], googled "heart attack in women".

Dr. Dave: Wow.

Hagerty: And I saw that I had some of the symptoms of a heart attack. And so I called up my doctor, and said - You know, I'm really kind of worried. And he said - I want you to call 911 immediately and get to the hospital. And as I was saying - Ok I think I can do this, while I was on the phone with him, I fainted. And which then caused greater alarm and the next thing I knew Scott Simon, who has the same doctor I do, was coming up leading the ... you know, ambulance personnel, up to my cubicle on the 5th floor, and away I went to the hospital. Well [laughs] by the time I reached the hospital, I was feeling pretty good, you know, [laughs] I felt fine. I felt no heat radiating up my back and I ... you know, and my breath was fine, and I was actually in very good shape. I was a spinner. I'd spin every morning at 6 am.

Dr. Dave: On a bicycle?

Hagerty: On a bicycle, right. And I was in great shape. And so I wanted to go home. And they wouldn't let me go home. They looked at me, and I remember the nurse saying - Oh, well, you're 53, right? And I said - Yes. As if being 53 were like a clinical condition, [both laugh]...

Dr. Dave: Yes, right.

Hagerty: ...Type 1 Diabetes or something. And she said - Well you're 53, I think we'll keep you overnight. And that night what happened is that I had a lot of time to think because I didn't sleep a lot because of the beeping in the bed next to me. But I had a lot of time to think about this health scare, because I was so healthy. And in the middle of the night, around 4 in the morning, what happened was that my father died. He was 91 years old and I got a call from my husband, and he basically said you need to talk to David, something's happened to your dad. When I talked to my brother, David, he told me Dad had died while I was in the hospital unable to get out.

And what hit me at that moment, Dave, was that kind of ... mine was the next generation to go. In a sense. I mean, this idea that Mom was 91, Dad was now dead at 91, you know, I was 53, my brother was (what was he?) about 60 at that point. So we had to start thinking about ... I couldn't fool myself anymore. I'd entered a new stage and what it told me was that I had to think about how I wanted to live the second half or the last third of my life, however you want to calculate it. I had to think about that intentionally, because it actually matters. And matters what you decide to do in midlife. It matters for the rest of your life.

Dr. Dave: Yeah and originally you set out to investigate what's been called the midlife crisis. [both laugh] And certainly what you just described could qualify as a kind of wake-up call, crisis sort of thing.

Hagerty: Right.

Dr. Dave: But at the same time you discovered that actually midlife has its challenges, and its own call to adventure, if you will. But the idea of a crisis maybe isn't universal.

Hagerty: Absolutely and you know that was a biggest relief. That was the first bit of research I did.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Hagerty: Am I ... there was at one point I thought, after my mom had her stroke, and I thought - Gosh. I could have felt really blue, and I felt I had such a good life. And yet I felt really flat. I had a great career, great marriage - all this stuff and I felt flat. And I thought - Am I going through a midlife crisis? So what I decided to do was what any journalist worth her salt would do, I started to research - What is a midlife crisis? And what I found (This is so cool, Dave.) What I found is this whole idea of the midlife crisis, a universal midlife crisis, and by that I mean this kind of existential dread of dying before you can fulfill your dreams and have meaning, real meaning in your life, that midlife crisis, that existential dread, is actually a

myth. And it was based on a very, very small sample of people. It really came from a psychoanalyst named Elliot Jaques who wrote an article called "Death and the Midlife Crisis" back in 1965. And he studied all of these quote geniuses, and he found that many, many people died at around 40, around age 40. And either they died at their own hand, suicide, or else they just kind of ... They just died. If they lived they also felt that their creative genius was over. And so from this he concluded that around age 40 you have a midlife crisis. The trouble with that was that it was a very small sample. And eventually Gail Sheehy picked up that work. That work with Daniel Levinson at Yale. And of course she wrote *Passages* and suddenly everyone was supposed to have a midlife crisis. Right?

Dr. Dave: Yeah, that was a big must-read book. [Hagerty laughs] Everyone was reading that book.

Hagerty: [laughs] It's a great book but I think you come away thinking that - Oh my gosh, after 50, it's over. And what happened is everyone thought that they were allowed to have a midlife crisis, which I think was license to have bad behaviour, personally. [both laugh] What happened about 20 years ago is psychologists said - Ok we're going to investigate this. We're actually going to see if there's such a thing as midlife crisis. And they went out and they interviewed hundreds and hundreds of people. And what they found was about 10 percent of people have this kind of existential dread of dying. Most people, yeah, they have a hard time at midlife. Life is hard. It's complicated. There are a lot of responsibilities. But they're not having this crisis. And eventually, you know, they move on. And life gets better. And life gets easier. And so it was a huge relief for me to learn that I didn't have to have a midlife crisis.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. You know one of the things I appreciate about your book is - you just mentioned that kind of regular people and the things that you find in your quest, the kind of generalizations that could be made - you always temper them a little bit, saying not everybody's going to fit into this pattern. And life is genuinely hard for some people. While we may talk about the doors of opportunity opening up for a whole new life-script and so on, not everyone has the luxury of that. And I really appreciate that.

Hagerty: You know, this is something that as a journalist I had to be really realistic about. Because the idea that we're tip-toeing through the tulips or we're dancing on the table tops at midlife is just ridiculous. Midlife is really, really complicated, and it's hard. And in fact one of the kind of interesting things that we found is that people go through what's called a U-curve of happiness.

Dr. Dave: Yeah

Hagerty: And this is universal, so economists have been interviewing people, doing surveys in 75 countries around the world for the past 20 years and they ask them about their happiness level. And they ask people of all different ages. And what they have found is that there's a universal, almost universal U-curve of happiness, which means that you're happy in your 30s, your 20s and 30s - things getting a little harder in your 30s, maybe all your aspirations aren't going to come true. Maybe you realize you may not be the CEO of the company, or you won't do a start-up. In the 40s, things are getting hard, they're really hard actually. You have kids. You have aging parents, You have heavy responsibilities at work.

You realize that you probably won't win a Pulitzer or you will not win an Olympic gold medal, you know, in your 40s. You may not be CEO. Those aspirations probably won't happen. They won't achieve them. But then what begins to happen in the low point (in America the low point is 45). People hit their most miserable when they are 45 (40 for women and 50 for men).

And then what begins to happen as you go through your late 40s and your early 50s, and especially after your early 50s, people begin to get happier. And there are a couple of reasons for that, which is really, really cool. One of them is that our brains get happier. And scientists and psychologists have found this. They found that as we get older, especially in our 50s and 60s and 70s, we begin to dis-attend bad news - not focus as much on the bad news, and we focus on the good news. We focus on the good memories, the happy pictures that were shown in the brain scanner, not the unhappy pictures that were shown in the brain scanner. Whereas when you're younger, the opposite is true. We're focussing on the negatives because we have to figure out how to navigate the world a little bit. And so if you wait, your brain will get happier.

But there's also, if I can just mention, there's something else that I discovered that comports with the science. And I discovered this when we sent out an email to ... on NPR's Facebook page. And the email basically said - How's midlife treating you? Tell us about your challenges, your ups, your downs and everything else. Well, Dave, within about 3 or 4 hours we got something like (or 6 hours, something like that), we got 700 emails. I got 700 emails. They were gorgeous. These little masterpieces of how people were doing at midlife. And what I found was most people loved midlife. They said it was actually their happiest time. They said as they got older, got through, into their 50s, they got happier and happier. And what these people did - and what scientists have found too - is they made this pivot.

The happy people made a pivot in midlife life. And the pivot was they stopped focussing on achievement and stuff - which is the stuff which is kind of out of your control. I can't control whether I win a Pulitzer and you can't control whether you earn a million dollars next year. You can't control whether you're going to be CEO. But there are two things that you can control. And the people who focussed on these two things got happier. The two things are relationships, the tenor of your relationships, and the second - the first was relationships - and the second was causes or causes that meant something to you, or hobbies, or passions that mean something to you. And people who focussed on their relationships and their causes - those people became happier and happier.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, you know one of the things you underscore is meaning and engagement. And you have this injunction to the reader - Find the precious things and cling to them.

Hagerty: Yes.

Dr. Dave: And that's a great charge.

Hagerty: It is. You know, meaning is really ... there are two types of happiness that scientists think about. They think about eudaimonic happiness, which is the long term happiness. It may not make you happy in the moment, so think about training for a marathon or building a career or raising really great kids. In the moment when you're up all night with your kids that

may not be a particularly happy moment, but it's a meaningful moment; it's a long term investment. And the other type of happiness is hedonia, like hedonism. We say hedonism. And that's important too, you know. Enjoying having a good dinner with your family and your friends and doing things that you enjoy. But what they find, what scientists find, is that investing in the long term meaning - that will bring you happiness in both the short term and in the long term. So you're really smarter investing in long term happiness.

The other thing you mentioned just now which was huge. I really think it's like "the" secret of midlife. I really do. It's this idea of engagement. That, that, it's really easy to go on autopilot when you're in midlife. You're good at what you're good at. Right? You're competent at your job. You've had this relationship with your spouse or your partner, whatever, for a long time. Everything is kind of going along. It may not be easy, but it's familiar. The key, the thing that I learned is that autopilot is death. Literally. Like you have to engage in those things that are important to you. So instead of letting ... taking your marriage or your kids, or your job for granted, engage in them. I'm not saying engage in everything, no one can do that, but pick those two or three things that really, really matter to you, and engage. And work on it. And, and you will be really, really much happier.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, that phrase "Auto-pilot is death" is one that I underlined and really stuck with me. Also challenged me even at this point in my life, you know. Am I on auto-pilot with podcasting? And to some degree I am. And oh jeez, does this mean I have to [laughs] have to find something else of ... I'm wrestling with that a little ...

Hagerty: I would argue Dave that every podcast you do challenges you because you have to read the book. You look at the research that they've done. You think about the questions. You not only think about the questions - you think about the arc of the interview. That's hard. That's really hard. You kind of assimilate a lot of knowledge. You do this every single week.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Hagerty: That is really, really challenging. And so I would argue that you're not on auto-pilot.

Dr. Dave: Oh good. [laughs]

Hagerty: I don't think you have to change careers ok. [both laugh].

Dr. Dave: Oh good. Yeah. I did change careers two or three times, so I've had some experience with that, and could resonate with the book. In terms of my own midlife stuff, I think it was late 40s when we unexpectedly became pregnant with twins and ...

Hagerty: Oh my goodness.

Dr. Dave: ... and I was not happy about that idea. I really resisted it. But when these little beings not only came into the world but began to get to the age where they could relate [laughs] to me a little bit, well even before that, I just did a 180 and just became totally smitten and much more orientated towards what you're saying ...

Hagerty: Right.

Dr. Dave: ... with that kind of engagement with that aspect of life - of moving into this. I was more in a place ... In the earlier years I was so concerned about - Can I make a living, you know? Can I get a job? Can I make money? Can I get ahead? Can I support a family? Oh no - a bigger family. Can I support that?

Hagerty: Right.

Dr. Dave: And then somehow, around age 50. I was in more almost of a grandfatherly place of ... A lot of those issues were already settled and behind me, and so now I could tune into something that was sort of more, that was more deeper.

Hagerty: That's fabulous. And you know I did a lot ... I've talked to a lot of people who had children late in life, and often it was a little "Surprise!" [both laugh]

Dr. Dave: Right.

Hagerty: And it made such a difference; it really gave them a youth and vigour because obviously, you know, children make you see the world in a new and vigorous way. But also Erik Erikson talks about this whole idea of generativity, and obviously you had children before, is that right?

Dr. Dave: Yes, that's right. I had two of them.

Hagerty: So you'd already experienced generativity, but this notion that you ... The hallmark of a healthy midlife is that you begin to invest outward instead of inward; you invest in the next generation or in causes that will outlive you. I mean, that's what you were doing. You were investing, once again, in a very visceral way. Very hands-on way into the next generation. And so, I'm not surprised it gave you kind of a new lease on life.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Yeah. Definitely. Let's see. Where do we want to go from here? Oh. One thing I wanted to say - It seems to me that the culture doesn't very strongly support this kind of focus. Our culture seems to really have a strong focus on hedonism ...

Hagerty: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: ... rather than the long-term gratification.

Hagerty: You know it, I think you're right. And I think we see that with the media. What I actually wonder though, having done the research on this book and talking to so many people and reading so many emails, is - I wonder if actually we are the silent majority? That the media, you know ... That it is a youth culture, and the media and young people definitely dominate social media and all of that. And so maybe there, you know, I think hedonism is more for the young, or let's not say hedonism, let's say acquisitiveness. Right, when you're in your 20s and 30s and you are building, you're building a career, you're building a family, you're buying a house, a bigger house for the family, you're getting cars. Right. It's acquisitive. This is a generation that more dominates the social media. That dominates media period. So I'm wondering if they just have a really large megaphone?

Because when I talk to people, what I see is that the people who are really happy, do invest in kind of meaning and the longer term things. And actually, Dave, let me tell you something else that I've found. I think there are a huge number of Millennials who are very interested in meaning and purpose in life. And there's something called a Quarter Life Crisis which I'm sure you know all about which ...

Dr. Dave: No I haven't heard that expression.

Hagerty: Oh really? Oh it's really cool. It's ... You know in your 20s, kids have this Quarter Life Crisis - Who am I? Will anyone ever love me? Why am I here on Earth? Will I make an impact? This kind of existentialist questions - they're going through it. And I think they're going through it more than say more than Baby Boomers did because the job market is so much more insecure.

Dr. Dave: Hm Hmm.

Hagerty: They can't count on working for IBM for their entire career. Right. And they'll be safe. They have to find meaning other ways. Because the job market is not a safe place for them. And so what you find is that they grapple with these things in the midst of insecurity. And so what I have found in talking to (I mean there are a lot of Millennials at NPR) and what I have found in talking to them is that they are really looking for meaning.

They're looking for long term secure relationships. They're looking for making a difference in their lives. And you don't hear about it if you watch reality tv.

Dr, Dave: Yeah.

Hagerty: But I think it's there with these Millennials.

Dr. Dave: Ok that's a good corrective. Are you still working at NPR or did you retire?

Hagerty: No, I ended up leaving NPR because and we can talk about this at some point, but because I've got a partially paralyzed vocal cord and ... which is really bad news for a radio reporter. [both laugh]

Dr. Dave: I'll say.

Hagerty: I'd lose my voice for days or weeks at a time. But the hard part about it was the chronic pain which I'd never had before. And I developed this right, right - gosh in 2012 - my brother has it as well so there must be a genetic component, and what that did it forced me to think. It made me realize that the way I was living, these kind of long hours and constant stress, actually had taken a toll on my body, in a way that was unsustainable. A lot of people go through this, actually. I talked to a career expert who wrote a really interesting work on mid career changes. His name is Carlo Strenger. And he said to me - If you're not in quite the right job ... like for me it was extremely stressful. I'm not a kind of run to the ... Oh boy, I get to be on deadline; I get to be on air on 40 minutes, and I don't know anything about the topic. I'm not that person. Maybe I'm just slower witted, dimwitted or whatever. But I'm slower

and I like to think about the stories I do. So being under chronic stress (deadline stress) was hard on me. What Carlo Strenger said was if you're not in quite the right job, one of two things is going to happen, probably. Either you're going to leave the job and find something that is more suitable and sustainable for you, or your body will make you leave the job. And what happened with me is my body made me leave the job.

Dr. Dave: Hm Hmm

Hagerty: So I got a book contract, actually because I had this chronic pain. And I knew I wanted to do something on midlife. I got a book contract to write the book. And while I was on, and immediately, like immediately, my chronic pain started to decrease when I got off the daily deadline.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Wow.

Hagerty: It was stunning. I went from 24 pills - not pain pills per se but like amitriptyline and neurontin helped soothe my throat. I went from 24 a day to - I'm now on three a day. And those are just safety at night, just like, probably a placebo effect for me.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Hagerty: At any rate, when NPR ... when I went on Book Leave; NPR, in the middle of that, offered a buyout and I ended up taking it. Which is sad in one sense because I love my colleagues at NPR; I love what NPR does. On the other hand I can freelance for them all I want. So I did a 6-part series for them based on the book. So I have access to them but just not the chronic stress.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Yeah. Well, that's wonderful, that's wonderful. That's kind of led you into your next path.

Hagerty: It has. It has. And you know, it's scary. The thing, you know what I don't want people to think is - Oh gosh, I should just follow my Muse. I'm 50 years old and I've always wanted to be an astronaut. [both laugh] So I'm going to be an astronaut. It doesn't work that way. [dog barking] That's my dog Sandra Day.

Dr. Dave: And Sandra Day has a major role in the book . I should let people know. [Hagerty laughs] When you read the book you'll really get to know Barb and you'll also get to know Sandra Day. [both laugh] And you'll get to know other members of Barb's family.

Hagerty: [laughs] You will indeed. You will indeed. [dog barking] Sandra, that's enough. Ok. She's lying on her bed. She's 12 1/2 so she doesn't actually go to the door anymore to bark at the mailman, she just lies on her bed. [both laugh]

But you know I don't want people to think, they can just - Oh I've always had the fantasy of being a major league, a Hollywood actress or whatever, be an astronaut. It actually doesn't work that way. And it shouldn't work that way. By the time you reach midlife, you know what you're good at. You know what stresses you out. And what you really love doing. You know where you excel. And so what I think people should do (and this is what I found in the

research) you should take those things that you're really good at and try to pivot on them. So for me, the pivot is - Ok I love telling stories; I love doing research; I love talking to people. How can I use those things that I love and pivot? But to take away a bit of the stress, the chronic stress that I had of being on deadline all the time. You know, hey, I can write magazine articles. I can do podcasts. I can do books. I can do other things. It's scary.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Hagerty: You know. And I'm lucky because I have a husband who really, really wants me to succeed in this. And so I am really lucky. But I think a lot of people can pivot, even within their own company, in the company they work for. What am I good at? Can I talk to them about serving them in a way I'm really good at, and not doing as much of the stuff that I'm not good and don't like?

Dr. Dave: Yeah, yeah. As I read your book and reflect on my own life I realize how this podcasting is actually a wonderful expression of who I am.

Hagerty: Right.

Dr. Dave: You know, of my personality, my talents, my interests etc. My generativity [laughs] - going back to that. You know, my gift to the world, etc.

Hagerty: Absolutely. I mean. you do the same things that you do as a psychologist, right? When you're helping a patient. You're asking questions.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Hagerty: You're listening empathetically. You're asking follow up questions. I mean, these are ... You're kind of coming to some conclusions and to guide them. I mean, that's what you're doing with me. And with your listeners.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, and I was also a market researcher ... was part of a dual career that emerged. And that was all about asking questions and listening to people and coming to conclusions. Yeah, you spent a lot of time in the book talking about various consultants that you went to, as you were wrestling. You were kind of working at two levels the whole time.

Hagerty: Uhmm.

Dr. Dave: The level of your audience and what they need to know to sail through as wonderfully as possible through their own midlife. And you're also working [laughs] on your own issues.

Hagerty: [laughs]

Dr. Dave: And you're your own subject. Your own guinea pig. Right?

Hagerty: [laughs] That's absolutely right.

Dr. Dave: So you're reading the literature about it. You're flying off, or I assume flying off, or at least on the phone or something, talking to these world class researchers.

Hagerty: Right.

Dr. Dave: And also working with a career coach ...

Hagerty: Right.

Dr. Dave: ... to help you navigate some of this. And so, and there was that idea that you just articulated of - Don't punish, don't push yourself through the punishment, that you think you're going to do a complete start from a blank screen ...

Hagerty: Right.

Dr. Dave: ... and do something totally new. But rather do some assessment, you know - What do I have?

Hagerty: Right.

Dr. Dave: And how far do I go?

Hagerty: And you know, it's interesting you'd say that. Someone told me that all research is "me search". [both laugh] That was certainly true with my book. And you know what I kind of found is that you can't do an overhaul of yourself, right? It's just what you said. You can't do an overhaul of yourself at 50 or 45 or whatever it is. But you can give ... reinvigorate yourself and do those things that give you, give you joy and passion. And so, but what I try to do with this book is rather than just giving you, telling you - Wow you need to do X, Y and Z to keep your brain sharp. Or you need to do X, Y and Z to have some *joie de vivre*. I thought - Ok. Let me find out what the best research is. Let me talk to those people and then let me do it myself. And some of them were just horrifying. [laughs].

Dr. Dave: Yeah you put yourself ...

Hagerty: [laughs] Oh my gosh. The shocks about friendship. Yes I put myself through electrical shocks. I mean there's research on friendship which is just stunning. I mean amazing that James Coan at UVA has done. And basically what he's looked at is he has found that friends actually change the way you view the world and they reduce stress and pain. And so the way he did this horrible experiment. [both laugh]

Dr. Dave: Yes, we psychologists specialize in that.

Hagerty: In torturing patients, right? Exactly. [both laugh] So I went down to UVA with a very close friend named Cherie Harder. And what they did is they, they put me in the brain scanner. And they put a little anklet around my ... a little, you know, bracelet, anklet around my ankle. And that anklet could give me an electric shock. And I didn't know how much it would hurt. It turns out that it hurts a whole lot. But then they put you in the brain scanner and then what they do is they look at you in a couple of conditions. There is, as you're

looking at the screen, you'll either see a zero which means you will not, you don't have any chance of getting any kind of electrical shock in the next 20 seconds. Or you'll see an X which means you have a 20 percent chance of getting an electrical shock in the next 20 seconds or so.

Dr. Dave: Diabolical.

Hagerty: [both laugh] Diabolical. Because what they're trying to measure is - they obviously can't look at your brain when you get the electrical shock because basically it hurts so much that you move around - they can't see, they can't get the scan then. What they want to see is what is the brain doing when you are anticipating the shock. When you are anticipating stress, pain, difficulty, that kind of thing. And then they tried it under three different conditions. So one is when I am holding no one's hand. What is my brain do when I'm anticipating stress or pain when I am not holding no one's hand. Then when I'm holding a stranger's hand, which is one of the engineer's. And then when I was holding Cherie's hand. My friend's hand. And what they found is [laughs] once I found out how painful the shock was - when I see that X and I'm holding either no one's hand or the stranger's hand, my brain is going, basically it's going wild. It's saying - Run, Run, Run, Run. Get out of the brain scanner. Get away from this anklet. Do whatever you can to escape the pain. But when I'm holding Cherie's hand ... This was shocking to them. I mean they knew this was going to be true. They thought it would be true with me but the first studies were shocking. When I was holding Cherie's hand, my brain got quiet, as if I didn't even anticipate a painful shock at all. So what's going on here? Basically what happens is when we are with our friends, our loved ones, someone you trust, someone's who's safe, you off-load your stress to that person.

And the way James Coan explained it which I just love is - say you know, your ancestors from 10,000 years ago are walking through the woods. And your ancestor is alone and suddenly he comes across a bear, Well suddenly his brain is going - Oh my gosh. Run, Run, Run, Run, Run, Run. And he's thinking, he has to outrun the bear. Right?

Next scenario. Say your ancestor is walking through the woods and then he sees over nearby, someone from a neighbouring tribe, a stranger from a neighbouring tribe. And they both spot a bear. Well the brain is a little calmer because it's telling you to run but you suddenly don't have to outrun the bear, you just have to outrun the stranger, the other tribesman, right? [laughs] That's all you care about. You have to be faster than that guy.

But say you're out, your ancestor's out with his hunting buddy, right? And you come across a bear. The two of you come across a bear. Well suddenly the bear isn't a threat, the bear is dinner, right? That threat is no longer existing for you, for your brain.

So when we are with people whom we trust, we off-load our stress to them. Now I talked to Jodie, my friend who's a network news producer about the stresses of broadcast news. I talked to her about story ideas. I talked to another friend about you know, my marriage. We talk to people about those things they can help us with. And if you have friends they will reduce your stress. They will make it less likely you'll have a stroke. You'll live longer. You'll be healthier. You'll be less like likely to suffer from dementia. All these things happen when you are in secure friendships and relationships.

Dr. Dave: Yeah friends. [both laugh] Definitely.

Hagerty: In fact the funny little twist on it is that some of the early research ... And there's not a huge amount of research on friendships but some of the research suggests that friendships are more important to your health than family. Because if a friend gets really stressful and too dependent or whatever it is you can kind of distance yourself, but with a family member you really can't. So friends, you just tend to have the friends who help you.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, that's an interesting finding. You know, you're talking about putting yourself in difficult, challenging circumstances during this research and one thing that comes to mind are the - you looked into these brain games that they have out now, video games and so on that are supposed to rejuvenate our brain and build new synapses [Hagerty laughs] and all that. I've explored that a little bit, not as much as you did, but I gave up because it was so, you know ... you say that one of the messages in your book is "Do the hard stuff". [laughs]

Hagerty: Right.

Dr. Dave: Do the stuff you want to avoid. That it's good to challenge your brain. But I found it so difficult to do some of those things that I just stopped doing it.

Hagerty: And you know actually that was someone, that was one of the scientists who told me to do the hard stuff. But the other scientists who study the brain and how you kind of keep your memory intact and your brain sharp, said - Yeah you should do stuff that's challenging, but you should also do stuff that you like. Because only if you like it will you continue doing it . So, for example, say you're already good at crossword puzzles. You shouldn't do crossword puzzles. I mean you can. That's fine. But they're not going to help you that much. But say, you don't do crossword puzzles and you hate them. Also don't do crossword puzzles.

Dr. Dave: [laughs]

Hagerty: But say, you always wanted to learn guitar or Spanish. And it gives you pleasure. And you see progress. And you begin to realize you could travel to Mexico, alone because you now know some Spanish. That's hard, and it's enjoyable. And so that's the key, is to find something that's both hard and enjoyable. I hate brain training games. I hate them. I did them for months.

Dr. Dave: Oh yeah.

Hagerty: After the experiment was over I never did another one. But I do like other things . I like reading books. I like challenging myself. You know the thing I like doing is exercise. And exercise is hugely, hugely important for your brain. So is having purpose in life. So I kind of try to focus on the things I like doing. Having a purpose. And kind of challenging myself exercise-wise. And that is also very good.

Dr. Dave: Yeah, I loved reading about your bicycling exercise.

Hagerty: You're a biker. You're a bicyclist too, right?

Dr. Dave: I have been. I don't currently have one, but I got into initially into mountain biking and then I got interested in skinny tire bikes and riding on the road.

Hagerty: Right.

Dr. Dave: And even tried my hand at ... I tried a competitive mountain bike ...

Hagerty: Wow.

Dr. Dave: ... race.

Hagerty: Wow.

Dr. Dave: Got my butt kicked so bad. [both laugh]

Hagerty: Me too. I know what you mean.

Dr. Dave: The magazines show [Hagerty laughs] ... the mountain bike magazines back when I was reading them, they would talk about falls in the most blythe way.

Hagerty: Right.

Dr. Dave: And you would imagine - Oh you're just falling on a mattress or something [both laugh] No, there are rocks [both laugh] And really hard rocks. I know that from personal experience. [Hagerty laughs] And you know then in the actual mountain bike race that I was in, and I was in my 50s I think ...

Hagerty: Yeah.

Dr. Dave: ... at that point. There a lot of really much younger people and heartier and so on. It was way in the backcountry. I ended up having to be towed out [Hagerty laughs] with a guy on his motorcycle. Talk about humiliation. [both laugh] I'd lost all energy and so on. But boy you really stick with it. You'd talked about some bicycle races that you did. I think once or twice, I did a criterium race where you go round in a circle.

Hagerty: Oh aren't those miserable. I hate those.

Dr. Dave: Well, see you got to the place where you could keep up with the pack. And I didn't get [laughs] ... and as you point out, if you don't have the pack drafting for you, you can't go as fast.

Hagerty: Yeah, you can't. It's all, once you're gapped, you know once there's a gap, it's all over.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Hagerty: And frankly the only people I could stay up with were people my own age. So when I did a couple of Category 4 races with women who were novices but much, much younger - A, I didn't know how to draft when I did that, so I really couldn't keep up with them, but also they were a lot younger so I couldn't, I just didn't have their stamina. When I rode with women my own age it became a very different thing. And, but you know the thing about biking I'm actually at this kind of point, quite right now Dave where I have to decide what to do about it. Because bike racing is ... you'll fall. I've already broken my collar bone. Right?

Hagerty: I know as you've said, falling off a bike is not like falling onto a mattress [both laugh]. Bones are broken. And skin is scraped off.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Right.

Hagerty: It's really a dangerous sport. And if you're serious about it and racing you're going to fall, you're going to hurt yourself. And I have to decide you know, do I want to do that. Or do I just want to do it at a level where it's my own age group. Because face it, women and men in their 50s, they're very different. Maybe not men, I don't know about that. But women in their 50s and 60s are much gentler on each other. They're much nicer. They're not trying to push you off the bike as you go around the last turn. [both laugh] So I've got to decide what to do.

I find it to be little bit of a ... it got me up in the morning. And there was something about a woman named Cathy Utzschneider. Say that three times. Utzschneider. [Dr.Dave laughs] said to me. She was ... she teaches at Boston College and she trains elite masters or older athletes. And what she said I've never forgotten. She said - You know midlife ... When you're younger you've a lot of goals. You have a lot of, you know markers that you hit. You graduate from high school; you graduate from college; you may get married; you may have your first child; you launch a career; you know, all these things are these markers.

And then you hit midlife and it's kind of like a book without punctuation. Right? It's like a sentence that goes on and on and on. No periods, no commas, no semi-colons, no paragraphs. It just goes on and on and on. And so the goal, what you should try to do, is create markers, create little goals for yourself. And for me it was biking. For other people it can be - You know I want to learn enough Spanish so I can speak, I can go and be in, have a conversation with a Spanish speaker. Or I want to learn guitar. Or I want, whatever it might be. It doesn't have to be biking. But you have goals, something you're working toward. Little tiny achievements. That give you a zing. And give you a reason to get up in the morning.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Hagerty: And give you a little purpose. I think having what I call a "little purpose" is hugely important for people in midlife because they have to break up the endless kind of endless responsibility of this age.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Yeah. We talked about the brain training games. Let's talk about the brain some more, because you go a lot into that, and so let's talk about some of those issues - of the shrinking brain on the one hand and brain reserve on the other.

Hagerty: Right.

Dr. Dave: And some of the other issues that you encounter.

Hagerty: Yeah. Well it's, you know, really cool. I mean I think most of us in our 40s realize that we're slower than we used to be. And then in your 50s when you can barely remember, when you never remember why you've walked into the living room with such purpose, right? [both laugh] You have to retrace your steps to remind yourself. Then you get, you begin to get really worried. And oh my gosh do I have early onset Alzheimer's? Seriously, I mean people, I think that. I used to think that. See, research on the midlife brain is so encouraging. And what brain researchers will tell you is actually midlife is kind of the peak of your brain. Of your brain functioning, of your brain operation.

And so there are two types of intelligence. One type of intelligence is called fluid intelligence, right, and that's kind of the Sherlock Holmes, you know - you solve novel problems really quickly, you're really fast at things. You're just quick, right? That's fluid intelligence. Then there's something called crystallized intelligence, and crystallized intelligence is all the stuff that you scoop up all your life. So fluid intelligence begins to go downhill after age 30. Right, we're losing it after age 30. But crystallized intelligence, your vocabulary, your expertise, your ability to navigate both workplace situations and other problems - that crystallized intelligence increases right into your 70s.

And so what happens in your 50s is that you're kind of at the peak. You're at the best point. You haven't lost that much fluid intelligence, but your crystallized intelligence, your expertise is really, really high. So, for example, that's why you want a 50 year old surgeon or 55 year old or even 60 year old surgeon rather than you know a 32 year old surgeon. Because that 50 year old has seen it before. When they open you up, they're going to go - Ok, you know what, I've seen this kind of problem before. I know what to do. Whereas the 32 year old may be more nimble, but that person, he or she, might not know what to do. And so that's why we have expertise. That's why we have supreme court justices, who are older, on the older side. That's why we rely on people with wisdom. And age, because they see pattern recognition. They know what to do. And so, I was so encouraged ...

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Hagerty: ... by this whole idea of the midlife brain that it is at its peak. And I should say for you, you're 76, what they're looking at when they're talk about brain issues and dementia and all that, they're looking at the average, right? So some people are going to do badly. And they're going to do badly because of either physical problems, you know the plaques and tangles of Alzheimer's or whatever. Or stroke. Or diabetes. They're going to have physical problems that might make them lose their brain capacity more quickly. But a lot of people are above the norm. Because if you have people below the norm, you're going to have a lot of people above the norm. So just because, now the scientists say we're going to be slower or lose our, kind of forget names or whatever, that doesn't mean you're slower. And you're going to forget names. It just means that on average we are.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. You know one of the things you say too is that as you age your brain may not work as fast and you may not ... you find that your learning will be slower ...

Hagerty: Right.

Dr. Dave: ... than a younger person. But you say you can learn anything that they can learn. You can learn it too; it will just take you longer.

Hagerty: Absolutely. You can. And you know what people say and this gets back to what should you do to train, to sharpen your brain. You learn anything. I mean I learned brain training. I got better at that horrible brain training game, a lot better at that game. I didn't enjoy it but anytime you're accumulating knowledge - every time you go to a museum, every time you read a book that ... about a subject you may not know about, every time you read a newspaper for Pete's sake. I mean like we are accumulating knowledge, we are, we are getting smarter every time we learn something new. And yes it can be harder to master a new skill. But you know, you just stick to it and if you want to do it you will learn Spanish or Chinese.

Dr. Dave: You know that's a real positive place, I think for us to maybe wrap this up. But before you go I know that you've written another book called *Fingerprints of God: What Science Is Learning About the Brain and Spiritual Experience*. Maybe you can just give us a little peek into what that's about.

Hagerty: Sure. Yeah. So the reason I did that book is because I am, you know I am a believer, I'm a Christian, and I wanted to know is this all hogwash. Right? Am I deluding myself?

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Good question. [laughs]

Hagerty: Is there more than this? Yeah, it's a good question. I wanted to know if I was being kind of a patsy. [both laugh] And so what I did, I went out there and tried to understand the neuroscience of spiritual experience. I didn't look at religion per se because spiritual experience... You know Buddhist monks and Catholic nuns have the same brain pattern. The same brain function - we're having this kind of connection with the "Other". It looks the same in the brain whether you're Catholic or Buddhist, right? So I didn't want to go for religion. I wanted to go for spiritual experience.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Hagerty: And is spiritual experience real or not? Is there such a ... is there a transcendent kind of dimension to life? Is there God? And I hate to do it because it will cut into my sales but I'm going to tell you the conclusion that I came to. [both laugh]

Dr. Dave: Ok.

Hagerty: All these neuroscientists looking at near death experiences, looking at, that was the weirdest stuff, but looking at all the neuroscience and spiritual experience and genetics and everything else. What I concluded was that God is a choice. That there is no way to

prove that there is a god. Or another dimension, other than this material dimension. There is now way to prove that. But there's no way to disprove it either. And so what I ended up concluding, because so much of our experience of faith is a personal experience ... It's what I, what I went through, what I experience. I had a transcendent moment which changed the way I thought about things. But someone who doesn't have that transcendent moment, that person may not believe there's another kind of dimension.

So what I concluded is that both are valid. And you should do what makes you the better person. Believe what makes you the better person. I am better for believing that there's something more than this. I have a more eternal viewpoint. I have more of a sense that, you know, life is about more than me. It's about other people too. It makes me more generous than I would be otherwise. But you know that's me. And so that was kind of the conclusion I came to. But it was a fascinating kind of tour through the science of spirituality.

Dr. Dave: Well I'm sure that some of my listeners despite you're giving away the punch line [Hagerty laughs] will want to look into that. And it's interesting that you brought up "choice" because I was hovering on bringing that into our earlier conversation. Because there was a place where you talk about how some of the people who were caught up in the economic crunch of the Recession and so on ... that there were people who thrived despite hardship and part of it had to do with what they told themselves about that. How they framed it in their own mind. And how they saw that they had some choice.

Hagerty: Absolutely. That is so true. You know a lot of people lost their jobs in the period when I interviewed - you know a lot of the 700 emailers had lost their jobs. And I kept in touch with people. And what I found is almost all of them did find other jobs, all but three that I kept in touch with. But the ones who really tried, for people, you're right, who framed their world in a positive way. So I'm not saying they go - Oh gosh isn't unemployment great. No what they did is they focussed on those things that they had. They had friends. They had family. They had other people to invest in. They could do pro bono work. They could do volunteering work. They had some extra hours because they weren't working full-time, well then they went down to the community centre and they, you know, one guy would go down to the community centre and play guitar and sing for people who were mentally and physically disabled. So like they found ways to make ... have purpose in their lives. It was a choice for them. It's not always an easy choice. But making that choice to kind of thrive and invest in others really mitigated the disappointment, the difficulty of unemployment. And actually got them through the hard times.

Dr. Dave: Well is there anything else that you'd like to add as we wind down here?

Hagerty: Oh my goodness, no. This has been really, really fun. I think the key, the key for me is just learning that autopilot is death. And that I have to engage. I have to be really engaged with those things that are important. And that I should think long term about meaning as opposed to short term happiness. Doesn't mean that you're not happy in the short term. Doesn't mean you don't have drinks with your friends. But those two insights really, really helped me get through, get through the hard times.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Well this has been an absolutely delightful conversation for me.

Hagerty: And for me.

Dr. Dave: Good [laughs] And we could just go on and on. I know. But [laughs] we need to move on, so Barbara Bradley Hagerty, I really want to thank you for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

Hagerty: It's been a delight. Thank you Dave.