

When it Mattered

Episode 26: Barbara Bradley Hagerty

Chitra Ragavan: Barbara Bradley Hagerty caught the stomach flu one day. It was no ordinary bug. It was a bug so bad that it set off a short-term health conundrum and a long-term spiritual crisis. Bradley Hagerty was a Christian Scientist and the religion forbids medications, but she felt so awful that she took her first Tylenol ever. Even after Hagerty beat back the stomach flu, there was a bigger issue that no meds could solve. It had to do not with her body, but with her soul. So she went on a quest and the answers she found was surprising, even shocking.

Chitra Ragavan: Hello everyone I'm Chitra Ragavan and this is When It Mattered. This episode is brought to you by Goodstory, an advisory firm, helping technology startups find their narrative. I'm joined today by Barbara Bradley Hagerty. She is an award-winning formal journalist for the Christian Science Monitor and National Public Radio. Hagerty currently is a contributing writer to The Atlantic Monthly. She's the author of Fingerprints of God: What Science is Learning About the Brain and Spiritual Experience.

Chitra Ragavan: Barb welcome to the podcast.

Barbara Hagerty: It's great to be here.

Chitra Ragavan: There you were. You were 34 years old in a hotel in New Haven, Connecticut, never having taken a pill of any kind as a Christian Scientist and you had the stomach flu.

Barbara Hagerty: I sure did. It with three days of just being so, so sick. I remember coming home from I think, from exams at Yale. I was on a fellowship there, every year Yale invites five journalists to go through their first year of law school. I was doing this fellowship. I got incredibly sick. I remember going into bed and putting every piece of clothing, blanket, everything I had on top of me because I was so sick. I was shivering. I was shaking. Suddenly, I remembered that my boyfriend at the time who lived in Washington had left a bottle of Tylenol in the medicine cabinet.

Barbara Hagerty: I just lay there and this flashing in my head went off, Tylenol, Tylenol, Tylenol, so I got out of bed and I practically crawled to the

medicine cabinet and pulled myself up by the sink, took one Tylenol, not two, just one and crawled back to bed. I lay there and about five minutes later I'm thinking wow I feel pretty good. I'm getting warm. Let me get all of these covers off of me. I'm hot, hot. About 15 minutes later I'm sitting there. I'm at the stove. I'm making some tomato soup and I feel terrific. Now that was the beginning of the end for Christian Science for me.

Barbara Hagerty: I made a philosophical shift right then. I didn't quite leave Christian Science because my mom and dad were still Christian Scientists and my brother had left and he said, "You can't leave Christian Science until mom and dad die." I felt obligated, but philosophically I thought, "Oh my gosh, medicine is great. Christian Science really relies only on prayer and says medicine essentially doesn't work." I have to rethink this. I not only have to rethink my medical history. I not only have to look at that, but I also have to rethink what do I actually believe. What are the spiritual truths that I'm going to put my flag on. I remember the couple of days later I saw my friend Laura who was also a journalist on the same fellowship. I told her that I had taken the Tylenol and felt terrific. She grabs my hand and squeezes it and she says, "Oh Barb the whole world of pharmacology is now open to you." It was.

Chitra Ragavan: It wasn't just the whole world of pharmacology. It was literally the whole world of religion and spirituality had suddenly come open because you were confronted with this dichotomy of moving from Christian Science to Christianity.

Barbara Hagerty: That's right. That's exactly right. That shift came a little bit later when the ... The journey began then, but I didn't begin to find some answers for another year and a half or so and that was when I was assigned an article by the LA Times Sunday Magazine to do a story on why some churches grow and why others don't. I went out to LA and I profiled a few churches. One of them was Saddleback, Rick Warren's church. He had never done a national interview before, never done a major interview. I was the first one to interview him. I remember going to Saddleback and looking at these tens of thousands of people who are going to this church, right?

Barbara Hagerty: My church, Christian Science churches, are rather small. Here are these people are flooding in and I want to talk to people about their spiritual journey and I sit through the service and it was fine, but afterwards, I was talking to a woman named Kathy Young. She had had melanoma and it had gone into remission. She was just talking about her spiritual journey and how it intersected with her health journey. We were sitting outside. It was dark by this point. We were

sitting on a bench underneath a light. It was almost like we were actors on a stage, right?

Barbara Hagerty: She's talking about her spiritual journey and suddenly I felt something. It was like the hairs on the back on my neck stood up and my heart started beating a little faster. It was as if there was like, the air grew warm and moist as if someone was breathing on us. It was like there was a presence right there with us. It wasn't just me. It was this visceral feeling, but it wasn't just my own because Kathy stopped talking mid-sentence and we just sat there for 30 or 40 seconds. It felt like an eternity. We just sat there in this presence and then it just receded.

Barbara Hagerty: I looked at Kathy. I was so spooked and I said, "Well Kathy it's been so nice meeting you. You don't need to finish that sentence. I'm just going to get out of here." I drove. I remember as I was driving away from Saddleback to my hotel in LA I thought oh my gosh, what the heck just happened there. What was that? Was that a delusion? Was that the firings of my temporal lobe? Am I crazy or is it possible that there is a presence call him God or whatever you want, but is it possible there's a presence that can actually step in the circle of light and breathe on you, that can actually have a physical as well as a psychological effect on you?

Barbara Hagerty: That was a very, very profound experience that started me really, really started me looking for real answers.

Chitra Ragavan: Going back many years before that even, you had a lot of questions about stories your friends had told you, stories you had read about, even experiences your mother had. What were some of those things that started to raise those questions in your mind?

Barbara Hagerty: Well as a Christian Scientist, I had seen with my mother and I had experienced myself spiritual healing. Now we would call it something else. We would call it the mind-body connection that how you think actually affects your body, and we know this to be true. For me, it was very profound. I saw these healings. It made me really believe that there was more than this that we aren't just wholly human physical beings made up of cells and brain firings and all of that. That's not who our identity is. I really saw the evidence of God I thought. The problem with my theology was that it seemed to be hit or miss like what if you prayed and you didn't get better.

Chitra Ragavan: What about your mom and her hand for instance?

Barbara Hagerty: Oh, that was a great experience, so mom when she was a young woman she was a Christian Scientist and she was talking to my dad and he said something funny and she slapped her hand on his knee and she actually felt a lot of pain. He forced her, he wasn't a Christian Scientist. He forced her to go to the doctor and have it checked it out. This was about three days later. In the meantime, she had been praying about it and she finally went to the doctor. He did an x-ray and he goes, "Yeah you know what, there's a bone in your hand broken, but it's set perfectly. All I could do is break it again and reset it. I'm not going to do that."

Barbara Hagerty: Somehow it set perfectly. This was one of these experiences. Mom had many of them where she just saw physical healings. I saw it as well. I felt the presence of God on many occasions. The problem for me was that sometimes it didn't work. Sometimes the prayer didn't work and did that mean that I was flawed in my thinking. It all came back to was I wrong or was I praying badly or was I not worthy of healing. What was going on with that? It made it feel a little bit random at times. What I really wanted was a sense of-

Chitra Ragavan: Definitive.

Barbara Hagerty: Not only definitive. I wanted a theology that actually accepted the world the way it was because in Christian Science there was this thinking that this world of humans is kind of ... It's a mirage. What's really true is the spiritual world. That's hard to say that this table isn't real. That's a hard one to swallow. I wanted a theology that would take into account the fact that we're human beings, that we're material, that we're flawed, that bad stuff happens that cancer, kills really, really good people, that we go to war, that people are bad.

Barbara Hagerty: I wanted a theology that would take into account the good and the bad and the ugly. I didn't have that as much with Christian Science. When I began my search I was really looking almost for a narrative and that's what I found with Christianity. People find it in all sorts of ways. I'm not an evangelist here. All I'm saying is that I found it in the narrative of Christianity because being a storyteller myself when I started to read Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, there was a story there and it made sense to me and it contradicted with the theology, contradicted the theology of Christian Science.

Barbara Hagerty: Basically, I ended up with Christianity partly because the story made sense.

Chitra Ragavan: For a long time, you were worried about pursuing those answers. I know you and we've worked together. We are both hard-bitten journalists and you had some concerns about going down this path. What were those concerns?

Barbara Hagerty: Yeah I had concerns. Two types of concerns. When I began thinking about these questions that I wanted to answer, is there more than this, that kind of thing. There were two concerns. One is if I explore these questions and look at say the science of spirituality, look at the evidence for God or whatever would I find out that God is just a sham, that I've organized my life around this false notion that there's more than this. That was one set of risks that I was taking.

Barbara Hagerty: The other set was I mean what would my other friends at NPR think of me if they knew that I was like this strong believer and believed in more than this, that there's an afterlife, that we have a soul, that religion makes sense, what would people think of me. Because I think journalists are so skeptical and I mean just in the way we report religion as kind of as anthropologists, aren't these funny little people who have all of these funny little beliefs, aren't they interesting. Well now I was one of these people who had all of these funny-

Chitra Ragavan: Kooky even.

Barbara Hagerty: ... right or kooky. What would people think if they knew that I actually had this set of beliefs. I kept it really quiet. In fact, I told you about it because we were friends, but I really didn't tell anyone about it and people I think found out when I wrote my book, maybe when I was a religion reporter they found out, but at any rate I didn't really want this to be well known among my circle of journalist friends.

Chitra Ragavan: What happened then that put you on this path? You had another experience, I think it was like 10 years later.

Barbara Hagerty: Right, right it was 10 years later. I had all of these questions marinating over the years. Is there a God? Is there more than this? Do we have souls? Should I bank on this? It changes the way you think. It changes your time horizons. Are you doing things for eternity or just for this span of 70 or 80 or 90 years. I had all of these questions and I put them aside because I was at NPR and I loved NPR. I was in awe of people like Chitra Ragavan.

Chitra Ragavan: Hardly.

Barbara Hagerty: No, I just so loved being at NPR and so I put these questions aside, but then in 2004, so this is about nine years after that experience with Kathy Young, I was at a conference in Walland, Tennessee, which is in the middle of the mountains. After the conference ended one day, I put on my running shoes and my shorts and I went off into the mountains around 5:00. I just wanted to do a quick three mile loop, but up the mountain and back or something like that, well very quickly it got dark, extremely quickly, like much more quickly than I thought.

Barbara Hagerty: I happened to lose my flashlight. It bounced out of my sweatshirt. There I was on a mountain, pitch black, not really able to see the path in front of me. Every time I tried to go down the mountain, the path would peter out. Literally, it was pitch dark and I was in the middle of a mountain in Walland, Tennessee. I was scared. I just didn't know how to get off the mountain. At one point literally about three hours into this I see some lights off in the distance and I think hallelujah. I'm going to be able to get off this mountain. I just made a beeline through the jungle towards those lights, clapping my hands and singing Whither Shall I Go From Thy Presence, at the same time, keeping the bears away and invoking God saying, "Hey, I'm here. Let's get off this mountain."

Chitra Ragavan: You had no light.

Barbara Hagerty: I had no light, no, except for those lights I saw in the distance. I finally I come down the mountain. I'm thinking I'm about to meet the person who is going to drive me back to the hotel and there in front of me is this swollen stream that is rushing down the mountain. It's about 40 feet wide. It's swollen with all the snow from the water that's melted, from the snow from the wintertime because it was early spring.

Barbara Hagerty: I remember stepping into the stream thinking I've got to go across. It basically almost takes me down the stream. I had this image, Chitra, of three days later this poor fisherman finding my bloated body slapping softly against the bank. I stood there for a while and I thought I don't have a choice here. I've just got to go across the stream. I did. I plunged ... I'm fully dressed. I plunged into the stream and managed to tumble my way across and get onto the other side and ran up to the door of the house where I had seen the lights and knocked on the door. This woman comes to me and she says, "Oh honey you're all wet." She opens the door, "Oh honey you're all wet." I just began to sob because A, I was so relieved but also I had felt alive in a way I hadn't felt in years that there was this challenge and I had overcome it.

Barbara Hagerty: That stream, that mountain and that stream became a metaphor for me. Because in many ways, I was spiritually wandering around the mountain. I knew I had to ask these questions that could either take away my belief in God or cement it. I knew I had to cross the stream. I decided to do it. Then I ended up writing my book.

Chitra Ragavan: That's an incredible story. You started looking for people who could answer these questions. You found this incredible community. Tell me about the types of people you found.

Barbara Hagerty: I found people of every stripe. The thing about this book is it wasn't about religion. It was about spirituality, spiritual experience. What you find, is that people have, can be of all sorts of religions or none and have had these profound spiritual experiences, many of which are similar. I interviewed Buddhists. I interviewed Sufi mystics. I interviewed Catholics and Protestants. I interviewed Jews. I interviewed Muslims. I mean I interviewed all sorts of people. I interviewed people who had had near death experiences. I interviewed people who came out of these experiences believing that God was quantum mechanics.

Chitra Ragavan: At one point, you said in your book is he an electrician, is he a chemist.

Barbara Hagerty: Right, right, exactly. I interviewed all of these people and what I found is that they had these similar spiritual experiences. The metaphor that was given to me was that it's like spokes in a wheel, and that these religions or non-religions, these paths represent different spokes, but they're all heading toward the same hub or emanating from the same hub, that they all have at their center, this spiritual transcendent experience. Whatever you want to call it, Islam or Christianity or Judaism or whatever you want to call it, there is at the center a very similar spiritual experience.

Barbara Hagerty: One of the studies I looked at really drove that home for me. There was a man named, a neurologist named Andrew Newberg at the University of Pennsylvania and he wrote a book called, Why God Won't Go Away. What he would do is he'd put various people into the brain scanner and he would do a PET scan so he could see what was happening to their brain as they did various things. He did this with Buddhist monks, Franciscan nuns, Sikhs, he did it with people of various religions. He asked them when they got in the brain scanner, not all at once, it would be crowded in there.

Chitra Ragavan: That would be exciting.

Barbara Hagerty: He asked them to just do their prayer or meditation or whatever it was just to seek, go to that deep place where for the nuns it was focusing on Jesus, for the monks it might be this sense of the ground of being, whatever it might be, go to that deep place. Then he watched what would happen to their brains. What was incredible is that he saw two things. One is their frontal lobes, the part of the brain that handles concentration and focus, those lit up. The monks and the nuns, different religions both lit up.

Barbara Hagerty: The parietal lobes, the part of the brain that tells you where you end and the rest of the world begins, it orients you in time and space, that went dark. The feeling people would have is the sense of unity with all things. It could be unity with the Holy Spirit. It could be the ground of being, the universe, but it's unity with all things in the sense of timelessness to a connection to eternity that this moment is all there is.

Barbara Hagerty: Both the nuns and the monks, different religions had the same spiritual experience. It's like one used Map Quest and the other used Google Maps and they went the same route and they got to the same place. From the point of view of the brain, spiritual experience is spiritual experience. It isn't about religion. It's about the experience itself.

Barbara Hagerty: That was really enlightening for me. For one thing, I don't like exclusivity. That's one of the hard things about religion. It made me just feel really comfortable with my discoveries because if ... I was glad I didn't have to be exclusive. It got me in a lot of trouble with evangelicals, but I was really glad that I could really see that spiritual experience is common among all of these different people.

Chitra Ragavan: One of the fascinating things that I thought was that just because you were a Christian or a Hindu or a Buddhist didn't necessarily mean that the spiritual experience you felt had to do with that particular deity.

Barbara Hagerty: Absolutely, in fact it usually didn't. I mean sometimes people would see Jesus. Some Christians would see Jesus and that makes sense because that's been in their memory banks. When their brain is firing in a certain way maybe that memory is what comes forward, but they would see light. They would see relatives. They would see ... I mean they would see the beginning and the end of the universe. They would feel like they were being changed at a cellular level. It wasn't about a religion. It was about the Other, right? It was about the Other. It was about there was this force that

was the universe, bigger than the universe that they suddenly connected to and they had never had that connection before.

Chitra Ragavan: Before we talk about some of the other similarities you found in these experiences, I want to say that you were talking to all of these seekers, but there were also medical and academic seekers, and scientific seekers, you found a whole other community of people and I was fascinated. All of these fields that are emerging, neurotheology and these organizations. Talk a little bit about what you found.

Barbara Hagerty: Yeah, it's a risky thing to be a scientist who explores spiritual experience. It's hard to get funding. People think you're crazy, but what I found is that there are in all sorts of areas whether it's genetics or whether it's neurology, you mentioned neurotheology, that's the study of brain and what happens in, like Andrew Newberg what happens when you are experiencing God or the Other.

Barbara Hagerty: There are people who looked at brain chemistry. They looked at epilepsy. People who were specialists in epilepsy were thinking about the fact that there is something called ecstatic seizures and this is when people have visions and believe that they are seeing God and hearing a choir of angels and all of that. They were studying these experiences through the brain, but they weren't ... The humble ones weren't discounting them. That was what was really interesting. I mean it's really easy to have a materialist mindset and go, "You know what all these experiences, yeah you just had an epileptic seizure. That was all in the brain."

Barbara Hagerty: Some scientists believe that the brain is like a closed system, right, and then if you have this spiritual experience it's nothing more than the firings of the temporal lobe, it's serotonin, it's a chemical reaction, and that it's actually, there's nothing more than that. Other scientists are a little bit more open minded and what they say is, "Gosh you know this stuff is happening, but maybe this is what the brain does when it encounters something outside of itself, encounters the Other."

Barbara Hagerty: One person gave me this analogy, a doctor at Johns Hopkins, he said, "You know it's like eating a piece of apple pie, so when you eat a piece of apple pie, predictable brain activity happens. As you are lifting the fork, the apple pie to your mouth, the part of the brain that mediates smell will light up. As you put it in your mouth, the part of the brain that mediates taste will light up. Maybe the part of the brain that mediates memory will also light up simply because

you can't remember a time that you had this good of piece of apple pie except for back in 1972 and you remember that moment."

Barbara Hagerty: Just because there's predictable brain activity does that mean that the apple pie doesn't exist? No, what people would say, what this doctor would say at John Hopkins is, "No, what's happening is your brain is reflecting an encounter with the apple pie." You could say, it's the same thing about God. When you have a spiritual experience maybe your brain is reflecting an encounter with the Other.

Chitra Ragavan: You found as you were talking to both the community of people experiencing this and the people who were observing this that there were certain commonalities which you called Fingerprints of God. What were some of the commonalities that drove across those experiences including yours?

Barbara Hagerty: Yeah, so most everyone I talked to had this sense of light, that they were just bathed in light. I know that happened to me. The sense that there was a physical presence with them and that they couldn't quite understand because no one was there in the room. They were just meditating, right? There was a young college student just meditating and suddenly he feels like there is something else there, that he's connected to something else there.

Barbara Hagerty: The other thing that was absolutely true is people felt it was this experience was weirder and more real than their previous existence, in their normal every day life, that it was both out of this world strange and true, truer than what their eyes told them, what their nose smelled. It was a very, a very true experience. It was also something that was unchangeable. It was like they went through a door and I felt this way too, you go through a one way door, you can't go back. You don't want to go back, but it's like you are changed, that the way you look at the world is different. This happened to me.

Barbara Hagerty: After my experience, I was really much more contemplative. It was as if I had ... I kind of fallen in love in a way. I wanted to contemplate. I wanted to pray. I wanted to read. I wanted to meditate. I wanted to take long walks, but it wasn't with my boyfriend. I wasn't married at the time. It was with this sense of a relationship with God. It was with God. Many, many people felt this way. It's not that they were extroverted and became introverted, but they did become more contemplative and the things that really mattered like dinner parties in Washington D.C. and getting ahead and all of this stuff it didn't matter as much. There was something

that was more important. I found that to be almost universal. People were almost changed at a cellular level.

Chitra Ragavan: That's on the positive side, but there was also this I won't call it a negative reaction, but a difficult reaction that they ... the change that they went through which is that and you called it "God breaking and entering." It's not like they went through this experience and you went through this experience and came out of it going, "Wow I'm so happy. Everything's all right, live happily ever after." Really this could actually break you in its own way.

Barbara Hagerty: Yeah.

Chitra Ragavan: You've found that in people like Sophy Burnham for instance.

Barbara Hagerty: Right, Sophy Burnham, she was ... Sophy Burnham is Exhibit A in a profound spiritual experience that really upends your life. I remember when I met her I thought oh my gosh. When I heard her story I thought oh my gosh, please don't let this happen to me. Sophy Burnham was a journalist and she was married to a journalist and they were in the journalism circuit. She got an assignment to do a story for Town & Country down in Peru. She took a side trip to Machu Picchu and while she was there on the mountain she was with other people, other tourists, but she had this sense that she had to get away, get away, get away. She found a quiet place to be and she had this profound, I mean one of the most profound spiritual experience I've ever heard. It was truly other worldly where she first felt this great darkness and despair.

Barbara Hagerty: Then it just turned into light. She felt as if, again, she was being changed at a cellular level, but she also said it was like she saw light all around her as if she was seeing the particles of God. She just laid there for a long time just absorbing, feeling like she was absorbing the beginning, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end of the universe. That's how she described it and that suddenly she had a completely different perspective. She's lying there having this spiritual experience and finally she's about to miss the bus, so I guess there was enough temporal sense for her to look at her watch and go uh-oh I better get back to the bus. She gets back to the bus and this was a very, very profound experience.

Barbara Hagerty: She comes back to Washington and the way she described it I love the metaphor she said, "Everything was like ashes in my mouth," that this was so profound and so encompassing that she no longer really wanted to participate in the life she had before. She ended up getting a divorce. She became an author but about spiritual things.

She ended up living a much more quiet and solitary life. I remember when I met her I just thought oh my goodness please don't let this happen to me. I had a spiritual experience. Thank goodness mine was not quite as Earth shaking as hers because I really while I do have a changed sensibility, changed preferences for how I spend my time, I also wanted to be a normal person and I wanted to be ... I loved my job at NPR. I didn't want to leave it.

Barbara Hagerty: I remember Chitra, when I was at NPR and I loved being there, but I also was torn because I thought gosh if you have these kind of spiritual experiences maybe I'm really supposed to be in ministry. You and I actually talked about this on the way to Starbucks. We went to Starbucks a lot and maybe I'm supposed to be in ministry. I remember I was praying one day sitting right over there and thinking about this and thinking well maybe I should be in ministry and a couple of days later this pastor from a mega church offered me a job to start a Christian radio program. I remember thinking well you know what this must be my calling. This is exactly what I should be doing, God prepared me to know how to do radio. Now I can do Christian radio. I was a little weird about it, but whatever this must be what I'm supposed to do because it's all dropped in my lap.

Barbara Hagerty: I'm sitting there praying about this opportunity that's come to me. As I was praying I had this image of God sitting in his La-Z-Boy chair looking down realizing what I was thinking, then you know contemplating taking this other job and I imagined him cupping his hands around his mouth going, "No. Don't become a church lady. Look I let you be this journalist. I trained you. I allowed you to get all these skills. Just be a really, really good journalist, but approach it in a different way, in a sense of have a servant's heart. Share your sources with people. Invest in the younger journalists. Don't be jealous of them because they're smarter than you are. Invest in them and just take a different approach, but be a journalist and be as good as you possibly can be."

Barbara Hagerty: So that way I got to stay in journalism and didn't have to become a church lady or take the path that Sophy Burnham took.

Chitra Ragavan: I'm glad God spoke to you because that would have been I think a little wasted although you'd have done a great job. We talked about some of the fingerprints of God, the commonalities, but the one thing I think that was really also important was this idea of brokenness in people's lives including yours. Tell me about your brokenness and then what you found in terms of it being a commonality.

Barbara Hagerty: Right, yes that is one of the commonalities among all of these people that I talk to. There's a metaphor. It's in the Bible. It's probably other places too. There's a metaphor that when you plant a seed it's a hard shell right? It's hard. You plant a seed and until that shell is broken there's no life. Brokenness is this notion that bad stuff happens that breaks you, but it's through that bad stuff, that brokenness that you can actually come to a new life.

Barbara Hagerty: For me, it really happened ... It happened before in the middle of researching my story for the LA Times Sunday Magazine back in 1995. I was at a really broken period, externally I looked fine. I had finished my program at Yale. I had not gone back to the Christian Science Monitor simply because I felt that would be a bit hypocritical. I was really straying away from Christian Science, so I really didn't feel I should do that.

Barbara Hagerty: I had a book contract which I hadn't signed because the one useful thing I learned at Yale Law School is don't sign a contract if you're not sure you can do it. I had a book contract to write a biography of Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize winner in Burma. I was uncomfortable with the book because honestly the more I learned about her the less I liked her. I didn't want my first book to be this tell all book about a Nobel Peace Prize winner who then was one of the greats in the world.

Chitra Ragavan: She could do no wrong.

Barbara Hagerty: She could do no wrong back then. I had left my career. I was really having second thoughts about this book I was supposed to write. I thought I was going to marry this guy that I knew I should not marry, but I was 35 and I wanted to get married. I was also this marathon runner who had got injured so all of these parts of my identity, these things that defined me, my running, my relationship, my career, my religion, all of those things were sawed off and you couldn't tell this from the outside, but inside I was broken.

Barbara Hagerty: I think what that did is it made me open to surrendering a little bit, to saying you know what what I've done humanly hasn't ... It led me here and this place sucks. I'm not really that happy right now. I need to rethink this. I think that sense of brokenness allowed me to have the kind of spiritual experience I did. Because if you're completely self-sufficient, then God can't break in and enter, right? He can't rearrange the furniture and say, "Oh, you'll love it when it's done." When you're like, "Ah you're rearranging my life."

- Barbara Hagerty: I saw this over and over again with people who were either ... Sometimes it came in real sicknesses or when they were just very sick or when they thought their daughter was ... I remember talking to a woman who her brokenness came when her daughter died. That created this brokenness or it was just when people felt like their lives were meandering and they didn't have direction.
- Barbara Hagerty: What you found is that there was this hunger that people had and they didn't know how to fill it and it was only when they had some kind of either physical or emotional or career catastrophe that they were open to saying, "Okay, I don't know what to do, so let's just be open to the universe."
- Chitra Ragavan: A lot of this stuff is fairly controversial. There are a lot of scientists who are on the opposite side and they're like, "Everything can be explained through biological processes and there are people who hit rock bottom and therefore obviously they're going to seek something and then they read too much into it." One of the questions you asked, was is there a predisposition to this? Is there a God gene? Where do people fall on this stuff?
- Barbara Hagerty: Right, so I looked at a few things. Is there a God gene? Is there a God spot in the brain? Is there a God chemical? Does prayer heal or not? I looked at the questions that mattered to me. In terms of is there a God gene, actually there isn't. They haven't figured out what it is yet. Some people are clearly predisposed to spiritual experience. My mother was spiritual and I'm spiritual. It seems to run in families. They haven't discovered a God gene yet.
- Barbara Hagerty: Is there a God spot in the brain? Yeah, it's called the temporal lobe. People who have temporal lobe epilepsy have spiritual experiences. Some of them do. They're called ecstatic seizures. There's a fellow up in Laurentian University up in Canada, Michael Persinger, very secular guy, who believes that he can put a helmet on your head.
- Chitra Ragavan: The God helmet.
- Barbara Hagerty: The God helmet. I went up there and put on the God helmet wondering if he would be able to basically activate my right temporal lobe and create the sensed presence. It was a wild experience. He believes. So I go up to Canada and meet with this guy, this neurologist named Michael Persinger who believes that he can activate your right temporal lobe by putting this God helmet on you. It's basically ... It's a motorcycle helmet with solenoids in it and he puts these electrodes on your head. Then he sits you ...

Barbara Hagerty: What he did is he sat me down in this really old crusty chair with an ottoman with an Indian saddle blanket on it. Then he puts these electrodes on your head and then he puts this God helmet on you so the electrodes are connected to the solenoids. Then he takes these goggles and puts napkins in them so you can't look out. He puts these goggles on your head. Then he leaves the room. What he's going to try to do is while you sit there in dark wondering what the heck am I doing and this chair smells, what he's trying to do is activate your right temporal lobe and create this sensed presence.

Barbara Hagerty: What he did is I sat there for half an hour and he was activating this and that. I'm having performance anxiety because I'm not having a spiritual experience. The experiment ended and he said, "You know your brain was just working. Your EKG was too high. Your brain ... You were too active, but you were almost there at a spiritual experience. I could tell. You were almost there." I'm like, "Yeah, right, okay, whatever." He had said that you could activate your right temporal lobe and have this spiritual experience, a sense of a presence. When I got back later and listened to the tape on my radio because I put the microphone there in the control room where he was and listened to him and I could hear my own voice, what I realized is that I was narrating something of a weird ... It wasn't a spiritual experience but he would say, "Okay now I'm going to activate your right temporal lobes right now, and dah, dah, dah." Then a few seconds later you'd hear me say, "You know I see these goblins to my left and there this roiling darkness."

Barbara Hagerty: When he would do something I was getting these images, but what it wasn't was a sensed presence. It wasn't a spiritual experience. What it told me was that yes you can manipulate your brain to have these odd experiences, but it's very, very different from having it experience with the other.

Chitra Ragavan: On the other hand I want to briefly say that you also found that people who have had spiritual experiences could actually recreate them for scientists, which was fascinating. They could reach that state, see that light on command.

Barbara Hagerty: They could. They could. This was especially true both with Buddhist monks who meditate and Franciscan nuns, but also people who have had near death experiences and really went to this place where they had ... I mean a lot of them had gone through this dark tunnel to the light and seen relatives and had this profound experience and it was quite ... I mean it was quite common. You could say, "Well that's what the brain does when it's shutting down," but they came back very different. What some of these people

could do is they felt that that experience was so profound that they would meditate and they were able to replicate it again and again and again.

Barbara Hagerty: I met some of these people. They were different as a result. They had a different view of what was important. I remember going to a near death experience conference where there were 200 people who had had near death experiences at MD Anderson. They were all so peaceful. I'd say, "Okay can we talk at 2:00 this afternoon?" They'd say, "Oh well let's just see what the universe has to say." I'm like, "No, I'll see you at 2:00 this afternoon." Well if the universe says ... It's a really different way of thinking, but they had these experiences. They cherished them. It changed the way they looked at the world. They could go back there again and again and again.

Chitra Ragavan: Now this obviously changed your world and then in 2012 you had another major crisis and what you had the journey you had been through helped you get through this other crisis. Tell us briefly about the crisis and how you were able to manage it.

Barbara Hagerty: Right, so in 2012 I began to lose my voice. Now I'm a radio reporter so my voice is fairly important, but every time I would get a cold and even when I wouldn't I would lose it for two or three or four weeks at a time. That was really, really inconvenient, but what happened is in the Spring of 2012 I began getting chronic pain in my vocal cords. It became the kind of pain that was almost unbearable. It wasn't like I was going to commit suicide, but I thought I don't know if I can do this. I don't know if I can handle this pain for another year or two years.

Chitra Ragavan: You were doing a lot of meds.

Barbara Hagerty: I was doing a lot of medicine, medication, which helped enormously. Once I got on the meds, the gabapentin and the amitriptyline which are not opioids or anything but they managed to help my vocal cords that helped an awful lot with the chronic pain.

Chitra Ragavan: For a former Christian Scientist, you were taking a record number of pills.

Barbara Hagerty: I was taking 24 pills a day.

Chitra Ragavan: You've come a long way.

Barbara Hagerty: You've come a long way, baby. Yes, I was taking 24 pills a day. They also made me sleepy and like I was always trying to run

through water. I felt groggy and I didn't like the feeling, but I didn't have the pain that I had had before. What I decided to do was get another book contract. I frankly didn't care what contract it was, but I wanted a book contract so I could step away from NPR and the daily news because what I had noticed is the pain would just skyrocket when I was on deadline, so clearly it was related to stress.

Barbara Hagerty: What would happen if I could step back from the stress, pray, meditate, and get away from that, and what would happen. What happened is that my pain levels went way down, but I also had this a little bit of a crisis because being away from NPR made me realize that doing news was really hard on me. I had been doing really hard news. I mean you and I had both covered the Justice Department. I had been doing hard news for all of my career, but especially at NPR 19 years and it wasn't good for me. I just wasn't cut out to do news. Someone had once said to me, a psychologist, once said to me, "When you are not in the right job one of two things will happen either you'll leave or your body will make you leave."

Barbara Hagerty: What I realized was that my body was making me leave. Who was I if I wasn't NPR's Barbara Bradley Hagerty? This was another identity crisis. I didn't want the pain. I wasn't sure I could go back to news, wasn't sure I wanted to go back to news but who was I. What happened is I had this insight that I got from my book Fingerprints of God which was that I've been here before. I have been at a point where my identity, the things I define myself by have been taken away. While this is really crummy, I've been here and I know that I can get through it and that life will be better if I get through it and surrender to it a little bit and be open.

Barbara Hagerty: The other thing that I learned because I was doing a book on midlife and how to thrive at midlife, what I learned is that I wasn't going to reinvent myself, as I looked at this career crisis I knew I couldn't go back to news, but I wasn't going to become an organic farmer. I wasn't going to open a B&B in New Hampshire, right?

Chitra Ragavan: Or a church lady.

Barbara Hagerty: Or a church lady, that's right. I had left that one behind, but what do you do, right? I'm not going to reinvent myself. What I realized and I learned this in the course of writing my second book is that by the time you hit your early 50s, which I was, you have enough biography behind you to know what you're good at and what you're not good at, what you like doing and what you loathe doing. What I

should do is pivot on my strengths on what I'm really good at and emphasize that. For me, it's long form-narrative. It's storytelling. It's podcasts. It's book writing. It's magazine writing. What I ended up doing is just saying, "Okay I'm going to take my strengths and I'm going to pivot onto those strengths."

Barbara Hagerty: Those two things, this notion that I've been here before and this notion that I don't have to reinvent myself I can take what I'm already good at and proceed along that line. That really helped me get through this health crisis but also the identity crisis.

Chitra Ragavan: Looking back at the person you were in 1994 what would you say to that person about this long journey you've undertaken and who you've become today?

Barbara Hagerty: Back in 1994, I mean I would say to that person, "Boy you know what you've got a little bit of a ride ahead of you and some of it's going to be really unpleasant. You are going to be broken. You're going to have stuff stripped away from you that you will be really, really unhappy about, but you have to be broken to have life. You have to break that outer shell so that the green shoots can come up and that you can have life, so just hang on. Just be open to what happens. Just put one foot in front of the other and embrace the brokenness." That's what I would say.

Chitra Ragavan: Barb it's been so great having you on the podcast and fascinating conversation. Thank you.

Barbara Hagerty: Chitra you are so much fun. I wish we could do this every week. Can you come back next week so we can laugh?

Chitra Ragavan: Yeah, we'll talk about your other book and your other crisis.

Barbara Hagerty: My many crises, thanks Chitra.

Chitra Ragavan: Barbara Bradley Hagerty is an award-winning journalist at the Christian Science Monitor and my former colleague at National Public Radio. She's a contributing writer at the Atlantic Monthly and the author of two books Fingerprints of God and Life Reimagined which I also highly recommend. This is When It Mattered and I'm Chitra Ragavan.

Chitra Ragavan: Thank you for listening to When It Mattered. Don't forget to subscribe on Apple Podcast or your preferred podcast platform. If you liked the show, please rate it five stars, leave a review and do recommend it to your friends, family, and colleagues. When It

Mattered is a weekly leadership podcast produced by Goodstory, an advisory firm helping technology startups find their narrative. For questions, comments and transcripts, please visit our website at goodstory.io or send us an email at podcast@goodstory.io. Our producer is Jeremy Corr, founder and CEO of Executive Podcasting Solutions.

Chitra Ragavan: Our theme song is composed by Jack Yagerline. Join us next week for another edition of When It Mattered. I'll see you then.