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Midlife Reimagined

by Sylvana Smith



A midlife course correction can be triggered by a seminal moment—a deep pain or loss—or the realization that the current path is leading in unsatisfying directions. For veteran National Public Radio reporter Barbara Bradley Hagerty, it was both.

“I had just sent off a conciliatory email to a listener who was angry about my story that aired the previous day on NPR’s *All Things Considered*,” Hagerty recalled. “Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain in my chest. My breathing became clipped and shallow. Heat radiated up my back.”

She blacked out. Classic signs of a heart attack. But by the time Hagerty reached the hospital, she felt well enough to go home. A lifelong athlete, she couldn’t possibly have a bad heart, she explained to the nurse.

“You’re 53, right?” the nurse replied, as if that number were a medical condition. “I think we’d better keep you overnight.”

In an unimaginable plot twist, her 91-year-old father died during the night, leaving Hagerty contemplating mortality from two angles and confronting the disconnect between her “30-something self-image and 50-something reality.”

Those paired incidents would make anyone take stock. After 20 years covering religion, justice, and politics for NPR—traveling and working as many as 100 hours a week—it was time for a change.

With a book contract in hand and a leave of absence from NPR, Hagerty embarked on a journalist’s quest to answer the persistent questions of our 40s, 50s, and 60s. Is a midlife crisis inevitable? Is this a period of unavoidable decline, career languor, and personal stagnation? Can we flourish in the second half of life, and, if so, how?

For the next two years, Hagerty traveled the country uncovering troves of research and personal stories. She interviewed neurologists, psychologists, sociologists,



geneticists, marriage therapists, athletes—in all, more than 400 researchers and ordinary people trying to figure out not just how to navigate midlife but thrive in it.

In the process, Hagerty found plenty of reason for optimism and the science to back it up. Her 2016 book, *Life Reimagined: The Science, Art, and Opportunity of Midlife* is a hopeful journey through empirical evidence, Hagerty's midlife experience, and the stories of people who had "cracked the code" of a quality midlife.

"Science is confirming what we all suspected instinctively," said Hagerty. "There is no such thing as an inevitable midlife crisis." There is no compulsory slide in vitality, cognition, or fulfillment. In fact, midlife can be an energizing period of renewal and rediscovery. We just have to choose the right actions and attitudes.

Accept That Happiness Is a Variable Perception

"In the course of my reporting, I learned that while the stereotypical midlife crisis is a myth, virtually everyone suffers a slump in happiness in their late 40s," said Hagerty. The concept of the "U-curve of happiness" postulates that in our 40s, we grapple with the reality that we will not achieve all our life's aims. In our 50s and beyond, we have reconciled that, and our brains become happier.

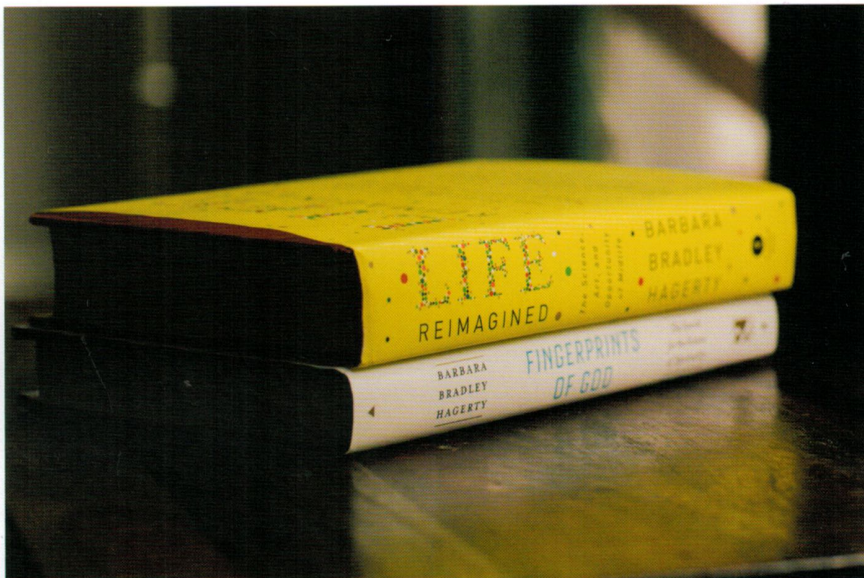
"I was really grateful to read the science, because I knew the ascent of my career was not as easy as it had been in my 30s," said Hagerty. If not a midlife crisis, it was perhaps a midlife ennui. "I felt like there was more friction. I had to run faster to get to the same place. Everything was harder. It was a relief to know that if you just hold on, put one foot in front of the other, the science shows that you will find yourself swooping up the U-curve into a more contented, meaningful place."

Pursue Purpose Rather Than Gratification

"Researchers are finding that 'purpose in life' will do more to make you thrive—physically, emotionally, and mentally—than almost anything else," Hagerty said. "People who have a reason to get up in the morning do better in every way. They even have the mechanism to stave off Alzheimer's, or if they develop the plaques and tangles of Alzheimer's, they do not develop clinical signs. Purpose in life is not a magic bullet, but it's awfully close."

Hagerty defines two types of purpose. There are little purposes: hobbies, passions, and goals, such as learning Spanish, picking up the guitar after 20 years, or, in her case, training to qualify for the National Senior Games in cycling.

And there are bigger purposes, such as rearranging your life to apply your talents in ways that are meaningful to you. "We're going to live until 90 or 95, so if you retire at 65, you have to think through what meaningful contributions you can make in the decades ahead," said Hagerty.



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Punctuate Your Life

“When you’re young, life has a lot of milestones and achievements,” Hagerty said. “You graduate from high school, from college, fall in love, get married, start a family, a career. But midlife can be like one run-on sentence. There aren’t many milestones. No commas, no periods, no semicolons.”

So create those milestones and memories. Inject your own punctuation.

“For me it was, can I get faster, can I qualify for the Senior Games, can I do a 50-mile cycle?” Hagerty said. “Suddenly, my life was filled with a series of little goals. I was so excited to have these little achievements to work toward as I worked toward the larger achievement, which was writing the book.”

That two-year sabbatical was also punctuated by a trip down the Blue Ridge Parkway in a rented motorhome with her husband Devin, their golden retriever, and another couple. The trip was at times a comedic trial of rain, a dormant electrical hookup, and getting flooded and stuck. Punctuation doesn’t have to be all exclamation points; it just has to shake up the mundane.

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Nurture Friendships

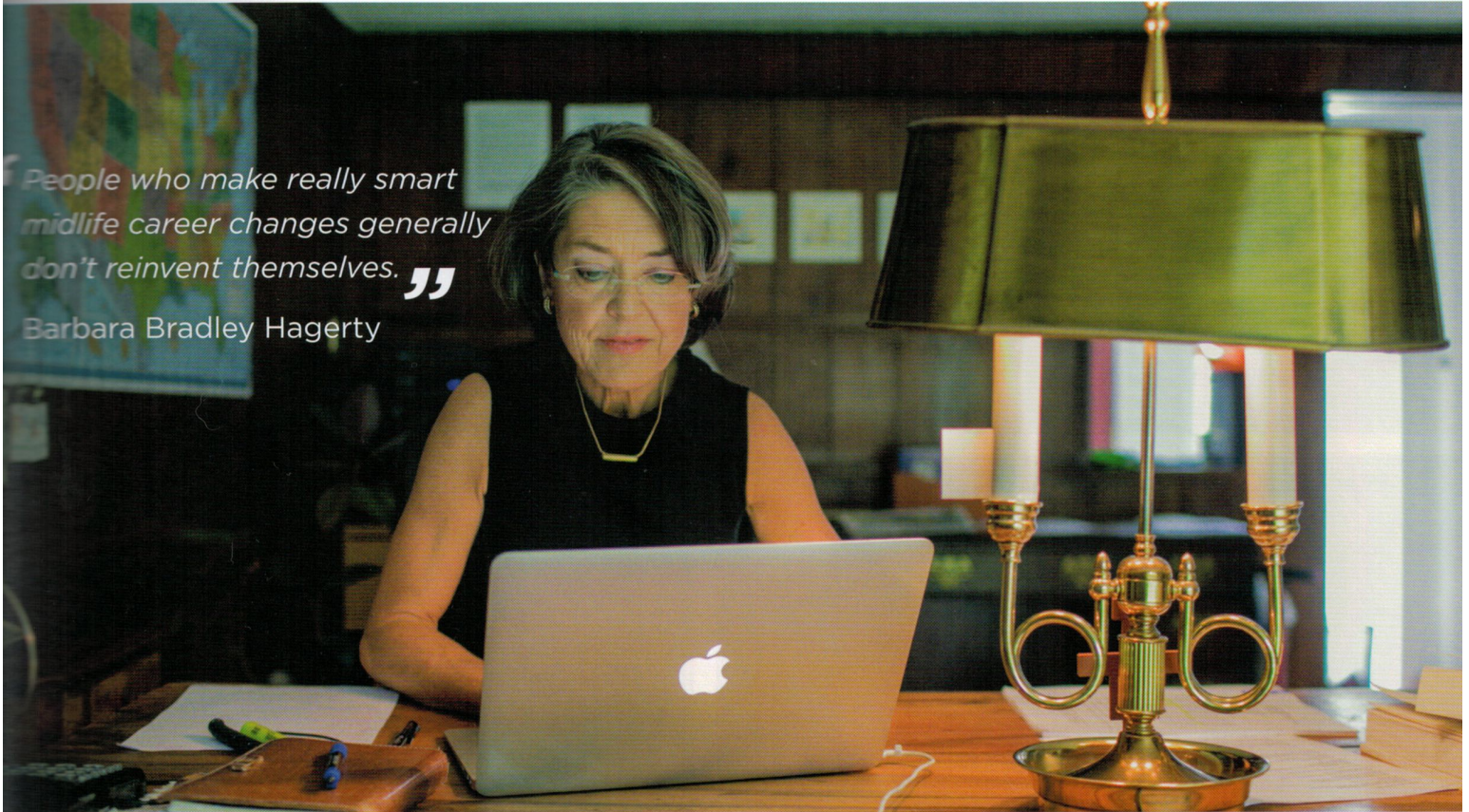
Science also confirms the protective and restorative power of friendships. “The real surprise was how central this is to health and healing as we grow older,” Hagerty said. “Piles of studies show that those with a network of friends live longer, recover faster from cancer, and even preserve their memories better than those with few or no friends.”

Hagerty and a friend experienced this firsthand at the University of Virginia’s neuroscience laboratory in Charlottesville, Virginia. When in a brain scanner, Hagerty was exposed to the threat of electric shocks (and actual shocks) under three conditions: alone, holding the hand of a stranger, or holding the hand of her trusted friend.

“Omigosh, it hurt like hell; it was really painful,” Hagerty recalled of the shocks. The lesson learned? The threat parts of the brain go haywire when you’re alone or holding a stranger’s hand, but when you’re holding a friend’s hand, those parts of the brain go quieter.

People who make really smart midlife career changes generally don't reinvent themselves. ”

Barbara Bradley Hagerty



Is it an evolutionary thing, harking back to our hunter-gatherer days, when a trusted human at your side could save your life? That's one theory. "The big shocker for me was that friends are incredibly important," said Hagerty. "At midlife, we tend to shed our friends because we don't have time, but that's the wrong thing to do."

Pivot Rather Than Reinvent

"People who make really smart midlife career changes generally don't reinvent themselves," Hagerty observed. It doesn't usually work out that well when a doctor decides to become an organic farmer, or when the nuclear physicist decides to run a bed and breakfast. It may work out well if the accountant who wants to become a chef has a lifelong passion for cooking. If you've been doing something all along, it may not be such a leap to make that your second act.

It's not about throwing away your talents and skills. It's about pivoting on them.

It's about working with your *sosein*, your innate essence. For example, a retired lawyer who once helped banks foreclose on families now runs a nonprofit that defends families at risk of foreclosure. An overscheduled physician's assistant now runs a

"slow medicine" clinic in Alaska. A woman who developed hospital technology now operates an orphanage in Honduras.

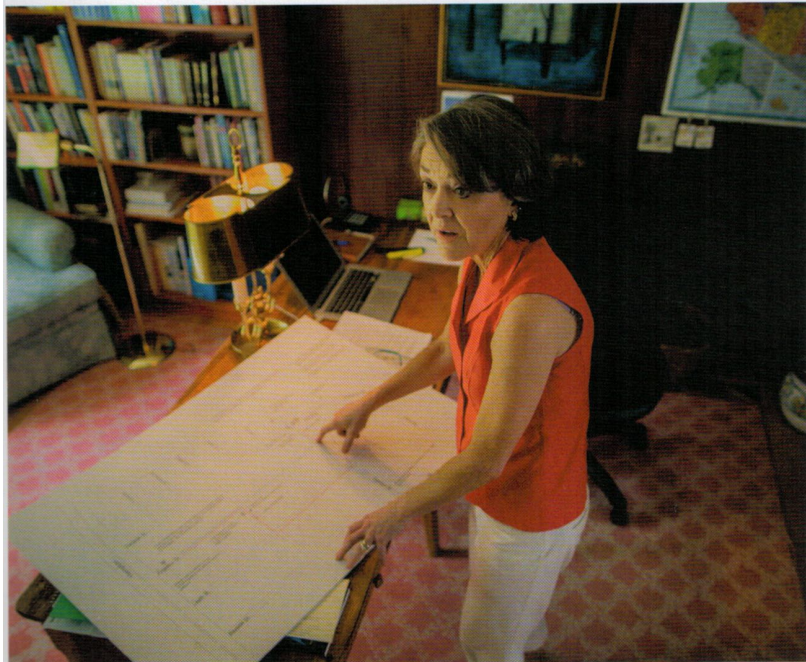
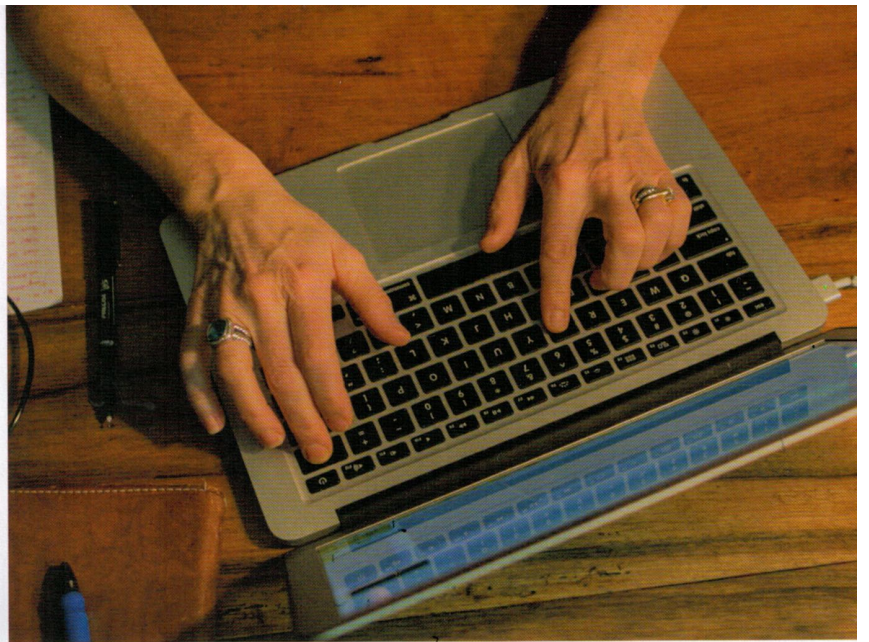
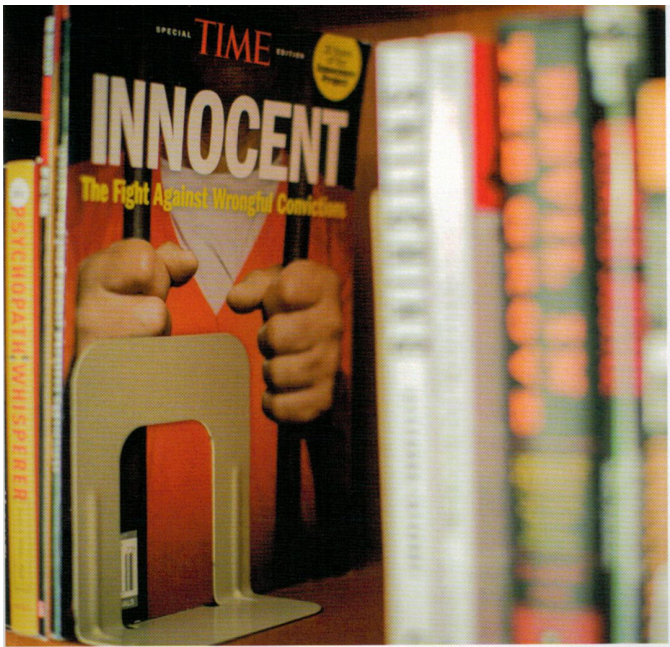
"If you follow what you really love to do—if you pivot so you're using your skills and passions—you'll excel because your heart is in it," said Hagerty. That ardor will pave the way to unimagined opportunity. That's what Hagerty discovered.

From NPR Reporter to Author

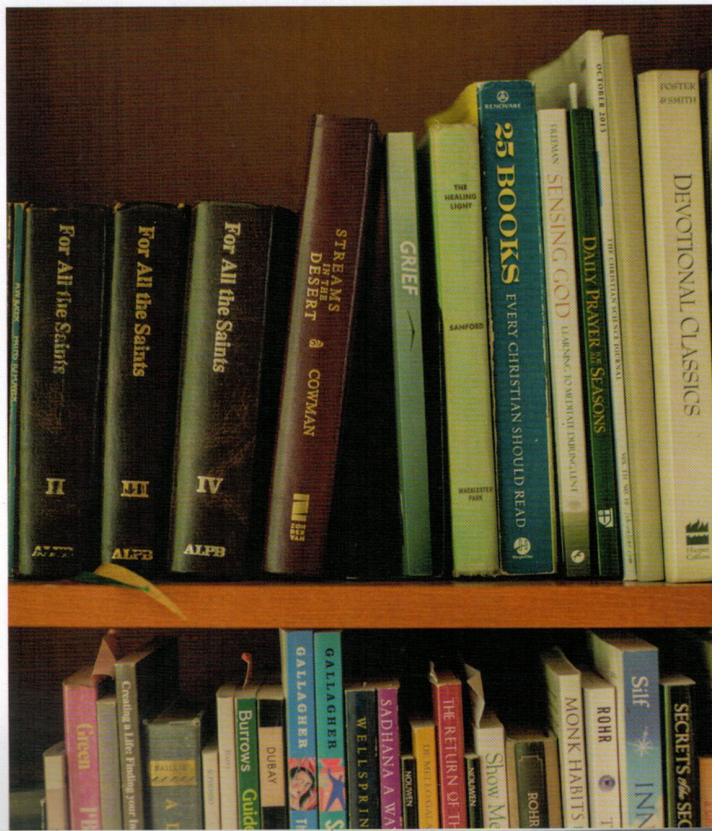
The act of writing the book was transformational. "I had always been afraid to shoot for Plan A," said Hagerty. "It was safer to stay at NPR, to stay within a structure and write the assignments they wanted. When I got the book contract to write *Life Reimagined*, I got away from the daily stress—not just the stress of being on deadline, but the stress of not being in control of my life."

She was now talking to people who had realigned their lives and thought, "Why not me?"

Hagerty knew her *sosein*. She knew from an early age that she was a storyteller; her *sosein* was in making people care about good ideas through narrative storytelling. So she pivoted from four-minute radio segments and 800-word articles to a 400-page book and deep investigative pieces for *The Atlantic*.



Barbara Bradley Hagerty is also the author of the *New York Times*-bestselling *Fingerprints of God: What Science Is Learning About the Brain and Spiritual Experience*. An award-winning journalist, her work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Vogue*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*. She has received the Templeton-Cambridge Journalism Fellowship in Science and Religion, and a Knight Fellowship at Yale Law School. She lives with her husband in Washington, DC.



Yes, Hagerty is still a reporter, but her mission and work life now look quite different. Now there is the freedom to pursue the stories that haunt or entice her. To explore stories over weeks, months, and years. To potentially change lives by choosing stories that matter in personal ways.

Her *Atlantic* piece, “When Your Child Is a Psychopath,” went viral. That success enabled her to pitch a story on a decades-old murder case in Dallas. “I talked to DAs, former prosecutors, detectives, witnesses, jailhouse snitches,” Hagerty said. “I may have found new DNA evidence that almost certainly will show the wrong person has been in prison for 30 years and would be for the rest of his life. This is what I love doing, uncovering the injustice, the wrongful conviction stories. I’m doing it now, and it’s working out.”

That article led to a 90-minute podcast over three episodes on *Radio Atlantic*. “It has been one of the most exciting, fun things I’ve ever done,” said Hagerty, with a zeal one doesn’t associate with the fourth decade of an arduous career. “I reinvestigated a murder. That’s pretty darned interesting.”

Hagerty is developing more story ideas for *The Atlantic*. Her days aren’t driven by today’s on-air deadlines. This week she’ll schedule interviews for those new stories, write a speech for an upcoming writing festival, and pitch a six-part podcast series. Life is an ebb and flow of developing new ideas, then diving into the research, travel, and interviews to bring those stories to life.

“When I went for Plan A, other things that I never even imagined have opened up,” said Hagerty. “Just put one foot in front of the other, and the opportunities appear. Sometimes you actually have to get your feet wet before the seas part.” Hagerty has recently been named a contributing editor for *The Atlantic*.

“I gave up what is arguably one of the best jobs in the world and started my next chapter. My transition may not sound all that dramatic, but it certainly feels that way,” Hagerty says. **V**

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AUTOPILOT IS DEATH

“The temptation in midlife is to just go on autopilot, because you’re good at what you know, and taking on new things is hard,” said Hagerty. “But going on autopilot is a recipe for a long, unhappy decline. I wanted to call the book *Autopilot Is Death*, but the publisher thought nobody would read it. The message is to really engage. Choose three things that are really important to you, and engage with verve.”

In the process, choose purpose over happiness. Fulfillment isn’t found in the pleasure-seeking habits of short-term *hedonia*. It is found in the Aristotelian concept of *eudemonia*, investing in something worthwhile. That choice is not easy, not always fun—like training for a marathon or raising children—but it’s purposeful.

“The cool thing about it is the science backs it up,” Hagerty adds. “These aren’t just ideas I came up with. I come to these conclusions from the science and the stories, not from some pre-formed hypothesis I wanted to defend. I couldn’t come up with these things myself.”

