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Catching Health podcast: Our Wisdom Years and how to make the most of them

A conversation with author Dr. Charles Garfield

Dr. Garfield: What fulfills you the most? What lights you up? What makes you feel most alive?

Diane: Welcome to the *Catching Health* podcast. I'm Diane Atwood, and today I'm having a conversation about aging with Dr. Charles Garfield. Forty-five years ago, he founded the Shanti project, a volunteer peer support organization in San Francisco. It was originally created for people with cancer and later became the first community based organization in the United States to care for people with AIDS. Dr. Garfield has spent much of his adult life helping people manage the final decades, years, months, and moments of their lives. Dr. Garfield was also a clinical professor of psychology in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California School of Medicine in San Francisco. He's also the author of 12 books. I've left out a lot of details about his life, and we're going to get to some of those in our conversation. He is speaking to us from just outside of Oakland, California, and I am in Gorham, Maine. We're on opposite sides of the country, but we are connected by where we both are in our lives. We're in our seventies, our wisdom years. That's what he calls them. Welcome to *Catching Health* Dr. Garfield. I'm very excited to have this opportunity to talk to you about your life and also about your most recent book, which is called *Our Wisdom Years*. So, here we are in our seventies, it just happened overnight, didn't it?

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Dr. Garfield: Well, it felt, it felt that way sometimes it's been a joy though. There have been many, many things about this stage of life that I really value.

Diane: I had a friend, her name was Delphine. She was in her eighties, and I remember one day we were together and she caught sight of her reflection. And she said to me, Diane, Who is that old woman? I don't look like that. And I laugh, but now, it's come true. It feels like just yesterday, we're looking forward and we have our whole lives ahead of us. And then snap of a finger here we are kind of face to face with our own mortality.

Dr. Garfield: Well, interestingly enough, the fastest growing segment of the population are people over a hundred. Centenarians. Fastest growing segment of the population. So if you're in your seventies, you could have another couple of decades to go. And the question is how are you going to spend your time?

Diane: So your book is about teaching us how to make the best of whatever time we have left? To find the meaning in our lives? I think that I spent most of my life searching for the meaning of my life. So what's different now that I'm in my seventies than when I was say in my forties?

Dr. Garfield: Well, interestingly enough, you, you have the long arc of your life to look back on. You have all this experience to bring, to bear on the current choices. So when you look at meaning now in our seventies or eighties or nineties, however old you happen to be during our wisdom years, you can look back and ask the question, what has been the most consistent thread of meaning for me all along? And, you know, people talk about two things in later life that matter most to them. They talk about people

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they love and who loved them. They talk about relationships and then they talk about work that they're most proud of. Work that made a difference. Work that made a contribution to another person or people. Work that they really cared about. Love and work turn out to be the things that people in later life focus on the most.

Diane: So what's all this work that you think we ought to be doing to try to get in touch with that? I mean, there are a lot of people who reach our age and they regret not having done certain things. How do you deal with that, for instance?

Dr. Garfield: Well, you take a look at that regret and you asked yourself the question, how might I give it life now? How might I do the kinds of things that I want to do now? You look back at the things that may be incomplete. I'll give you an example, a really good one. My parents met in an acting class after high school. My father was a really good actor. He was always the leading man in plays. He wanted to be an actor except it was the depression and it was not a good career choice if you wanted to make a living. So he went into sales and he spent 40 some odd years as a salesman. As soon as he retired within weeks of his retirement, he, he joined an acting troupe and I asked him the question, what happened to that desire to act in your sales career? He said I spent my whole career in sales acting. What do you think sales is? So, you know, he regrouped, he went back to the kind of activity that he really loved originally. So I would counsel anybody who's listening. What have you always wanted to do that you may have even started earlier in life, but left incomplete that you want to take up again now.

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Diane: So your dad, as soon as he retired, he went straight into acting full time?

Dr. Garfield: Yes, absolutely. My mother did the same thing, except she chose a different area. She always wanted to be a graduate student in a major university, but she had to raise her kids and live a family life. And as soon as she retired, my parents moved from New York to California. She ended up on the University of California at Berkeley campus, wandered around, worked up her own curriculum, sat in on whatever classes she wanted to sit in on. And I asked her nobody minded that you weren't a real student? She said nobody kicks out a little old lady.

Diane: You know, I know that for a fact, because, for many years I dreamed of going to art school. When I turned 65, I was going to audit classes, but I happened to interview somebody who worked at the university and he said, no, don't just audit. Become a matriculating student. And that meant I had to write my college essays and fill out the application, but I was an art student. I haven't gone to classes for the last year because work got in the way, the work I do now, but I am nearly there. So anyway, that's my story about pursuing a dream.

Dr. Garfield: I could have easily interviewed you for the book. Oh, well. You know, the interesting thing is that you picked what you loved and what we teach in *Our Wisdom Years* is how to find what you love, how to find what you love, rather than climbing a ladder and trying to be a success, making lots of money and doing all sorts of things that may be appropriate earlier in life. We asked a different question. What sort of work really fulfills you? What sort of work would you really love? And you may start out as a hobby.

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People start out doing things as a hobby and they find that they so adore what they're doing, that they dive into it full time.

Diane: You know there is this thing that humans do sometimes they tell themselves, oh, I can't do that. I'm too old or how am I going to fit it in? They come up with all the reasons why it can't be done, even though their heart is telling them, do it.

Dr. Garfield: Yeah, interestingly enough, if you spend all of the energy you spend invalidating yourself and telling yourself why you can't do it. If you invest that energy in actually taking a few baby steps, you find that you're capable of far more than you ever dreamed.

Diane: So baby steps. Now that I'm in later life, I will sometimes ask myself this question. If you were on your deathbed, would you kick yourself in the butt cause you didn't try that? And if I can say yes, then that's the green light to do it.

Dr. Garfield: Well, having spent more than a few occasions with people on their death beds, one of the saddest things you can imagine are people who talk about their regrets at the end of life. The kinds of things they wish they had done but didn't. Sometimes it has to do with fixing a relationship an estranged relationship that could have been mended, that could have been fixed. Sometimes it has to do with an activity like we're talking about now, an activity that they wished they had done, that they could have done. You don't want to wait until your deathbed to do these things. Do them now.

Diane: All right, so that's what your book is all about. It's deep soul searching about what really brings you joy and fulfillment, and you've got nine steps w with all kinds of tasks to do. I'm very

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excited to do these tasks and these steps. Before we get into the steps, what made you want to write this book in the first place? Did you go through these steps on your own and figure it out?

Dr. Garfield: Absolutely. You know, I realized when I was in my mid fifties that something was changing. Things were different. The kind of drive that I had to climb a ladder and be a success and achieve was getting less obvious and less intense in my life. And I wanted to actualize parts of myself that I'd never gotten to before. Things that I actually love. That's what I was talking about before; when I said I wanted to make sure that the relationships in my life were what they should be. I wanted to make sure that the work that I did was something that I really loved, not just something I wanted to achieve. And I realized as time went on, especially when I hit 60, I was in my sixties; I realized that I was in a different stage of life. That's why I call the book *Our Wisdom Years*. Our wisdom years are a different stage of life than adulthood. This is not the same as adulthood. It's not the same priorities. It's not the same motivations. Things have changed, and the book has so many different exercises on how to make use of this time. Most, not only productively, but in a most fulfilling fashion.

Diane: Fulfilling is the word I think that resonates the most. Some people look forward to retirement because it means they don't have to answer to anybody anymore and they can get up when they want to, go to bed when they want to, but once that novelty wears off, I would think most people are left with this sort of, I don't know, longing feeling or big question mark, like, okay, now what? Can't play golf every day or...

Dr. Garfield: That's exactly right. That's why I wrote the book. How many rounds of golf can you play? How many vacations can you

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take? At some point you ask yourself the question, what do I want to really dig into now at this stage of my life? There are nine steps in the book. There are nine tasks to do, and they're easy to do. And we focused on things like legacy. How to look back on your life and ask the question what have I learned that's been most important, that I want to pass on to my children or grandchildren or other people's children or the world in general? What is my legacy? And it doesn't have to be something great. It might be the values that you had that you discovered were most important to you.

Diane: The book is broken down into chapters and each chapter, is kind of like a task for us to do. Why don't we start off with the first one? You want us to tap into our own inner wisdom? I mean, because you can't reach age 60 or 70, 80, 90 without some kind of wisdom. And you want us to tap into the wisdom we already have?

Dr. Garfield: Absolutely. If you actually focus on the wisest part of yourself, a part that teaches you what you need to be doing, who you need to be. And what we find is that people ask two questions that the wisest part of themselves guides them to. During your wisdom years who is your soul calling you to be? And then what is your soul calling you to do? And you don't have to be religious or even spiritual to use the word soul. It's the best part of yourself. See it as the best part of yourself. And what is the best part of yourself calling you to do and who is the best part of yourself calling you to be. If you could be the best version of yourself, what would that be? What would you be doing? What would you be feeling? It's a way of describing yourself in a way that leaves you most proud of who you are.

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Diane: And so you have people actually sit quietly with themselves, perhaps meditate. Some parts of the book you talk about looking at old pictures of yourself and thinking about stories that are attached to these pictures. Thinking about people who influenced you either positively or negatively, that helped steer you on a certain path.

Dr. Garfield: Absolutely. And then people develop photo albums. I developed four different photo albums for my mother when she was in her wisdom years. And she looked at all of the old pictures of people and places, and I always asked her one question, what did you learn from this situation? Well, what did you learn from this person? And she talked about all sorts of things that were important to her, that she discovered just looking at the old pictures.

Diane: That's a wonderful project.

Dr. Garfield: Thing that was great was hearing the old stories and my asking her, what did you learn from it? What was most important about this situation that you brought into your life for the duration? And she would go into these stories and what she learned and she was so excited. I very rarely saw her as excited as when she looked at those pictures.

Diane: You talk about forgiveness, gratitude. It's a time to perhaps even write letters, whether you ever send them, of forgiveness, even to yourself.

Dr. Garfield: That's one of my favorite parts of the book, the forgiveness letter. Who do you want to write a forgiveness letter to? It might even be yourself and what are you forgiving and why? And you don't even have to mail it. You just have to unburden

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yourself of that difficulty that you've been carrying around all these years. Again, you don't want to be in your deathbed, wishing that you had gone through this forgiveness process earlier. Lay down the burden of all of this regret. You can get rid of that. That's why the term, no regrets is in the subtitle.

Diane: That's right. Subtitle: Growing Older with Joy, Fulfillment, Resilience, and no Regrets. What's your legacy?

Dr. Garfield: Well, I would have to say, you know, when I'm up at night wondering what the meaning of my life has been. I think of Shanti project, the volunteer organization that you mentioned earlier, we're 45 now almost 46 years old. We've been taking care of people with various life challenging conditions for almost half a century now, as a nonprofit. Thousands of people have benefited as a consequence of having volunteer peer support, people who are available to take care of folks who are up against it, who are really struggling. When I think of what my legacy is and what the meaning of my life is I think of Shanti Project and all the other projects around the world that had been modeled after Shanti. We write about it in the book. .

Diane: I think your book is also a wonderful legacy. Finding you and your book came at a perfect time for me, and I'm going to make sure that a lot of other people know about it as well. I mean you sort of give this a roadmap.

Dr. Garfield: Well, thank you. That's what I intended. That's what I hoped for. One of the things that's been most gratifying is the feedback we've gotten on the book has been extraordinary. I've done 12 other books; I've never had this experience before. We seem to have touched a nerve. And the older segment of the population is one of the fastest growing, in fact some studies say

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the fastest growing segment of the population, and yet there isn't a single guidebook on how to do this. There are books on aging, but not books on how to make the best use of this time, this very special time in life.

Diane: Right. Oh, it's a very inspirational book and you're right, there are lots of books about aging. How to deal with your feelings. How to deal with your physical ailments, all that stuff, but this gets to the core of a person's soul and that's why it's so special.

Dr. Garfield: It gets to their soul and what their soul's wisdom is. That's why we call it the book *Our Wisdom Years*. It's about wisdom. It's about what you've learned has been most important to you.

Diane: So what are you going to do next?

Dr. Garfield: Well, I'm going to see what the response to the book continues to be. I think that'll guide me. I'm very interested now in taking one of the subjects we talked about in the book, namely joy, and what does joy mean during a time when things are really tough for people. This is a challenging time in the lives of all of us. What does joy mean? How do we participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world? I'm really interested in that concept of who's able to still be themselves, still feel good, still find happiness and joy during a time when things are really difficult.

Diane: What have you discovered so far?

Dr. Garfield: That there are people who can do that, that there really are ways in which we can view what is most precious in life. That's the question I would ask and we actually talk about it in the current book, in *Our Wisdom Years*.

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Diane: There's a quote that I found that really spoke to me. The wise self reminds us of the resources inside us that cannot be depleted. Kindness, equanimity, gratitude, forgiveness, love.

Dr. Garfield: Yep, that says it. That sentiment which is covered in the book a lot, is something that I value a great deal. And I would also say that the reason we have the word joy in the subtitle is during rough times, all of these higher values that you just talked about -- equanimity, service and justice and beauty, and all the others really are anchors that teach us what we want to do with the time we have remaining.

Diane: So it isn't about accomplishing things at all?

Dr. Garfield: Not anymore. That was very appropriate during the adult stage. During the stage that we exit when we go into our wisdom years, but our wisdom years are a whole new stage of life. And we don't even know that, we don't even take that into consideration. We think we're still adults, but in some ways we're now wise elders.

Diane: Huh. What do you mean exactly by joy?

Dr. Garfield: The word aliveness is really an important word that we don't use often enough. What really lights you up and makes you feel most alive so that you get a hint as to the best use of your life, where to focus your life. It may be on things like beauty, or it may be on service. It's different for different people, but what values are really the anchors for you during this time of life?

Diane: So there's obvious things that bring most people joy, but you're asking us to look more deeply.

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Dr. Garfield: Always more deeply, and what's interesting is be prepared to find things that really bring you alive more fully. Several of the exercises are based on my mindfulness practice, really learning to observe your thoughts and realize that there were other things going on besides thoughts, that there are feelings going on, bodily sensations going on, that there's a whole panoply of things that are going on that we may not be aware of them.

Diane: Hmm. Well, you've given us a lot of work for the next 30 or 40 years, haven't you? All the steps. Our lives will be rich.

Dr. Garfield: Absolutely. And I don't think of it as work the way adults think of work as these difficult things to accomplish, to get through a to do list or a calendar. These are things that bring joy. So rather than being difficulties they're actually things that light people up and get them excited.

Diane: So what are you going to do with the rest of your day?

Dr. Garfield: Oh, I've got a few more interviews to do and a few more things to write, and I'm going to think more about my next book and think more about how grateful I am that people are responding well to *Our Wisdom Years*.

Diane: Excellent. I do have to ask you, because we're in the middle of the COVID pandemic, how are you coping, you and your wife personally?

Dr. Garfield: We're doing well. We're home most of the time now. And we're each writing books and working on books. And talking to people about our books and we're doing okay. We're happy.

Diane: All right. I'm glad to hear that. Any words of wisdom on that issue that you want to impart?

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Dr. Garfield: Find what you love and do it.

Diane: Well, on that note. I'm going to say, thank you. Thank you for taking the time and for that book, which I think is going to revolutionize how I look at my life, actually. So I want to thank you for that. I do want to ask you where can people find your book? Can they just go to your website and that's the best way?

Dr. Garfield: One very good way is go to the website, Charles garfield.com. It's very easy. Charles Garfield, one word.com and they'll find all sorts of information on how to get the book.

Diane: Awesome. Well, thank you again, Dr. Garfield.

Dr. Garfield: My pleasure.

Diane: Okay. Bye. Bye.

I have been having a conversation about aging and other things with psychologist, Dr. Charles Garfield. He has written a book called *Our Wisdom Years*. The focus is on people in later life, but really, it's a book for people of all ages. I'm Diane Atwood and you've been listening to the *Catching Health* podcast.

For more information about Dr. Garfield and to listen to other podcasts or to read my blog, go to catchinghealth.com and please stay safe and well, and enjoy your later life.