

FINDING BRAVE

with Kathy Caprino

Transcript

Finding Brave Episode #9

How Living With Less Leads To So Much More

With Courtney Carver

Kathy Caprino: Hello, everyone, this is Kathy Caprino and welcome to my podcast *Finding Brave*. I've created this show for everyone who longs to create something bold and brave in their life. To rise up, speak up, and stand up for who they are and to reach their highest and biggest visions. Each week I'll be speaking with inspiring guests from all walks of business, leadership, entertainment, the creative arts, and the entrepreneurial world. They'll be sharing their intimate stories of finding brave and offer their best strategies for building your most rewarding, joyful, and meaningful life, business, and career. Hello, everybody, this is Kathy Caprino and welcome to *Finding Brave*. I am so excited to share with you our guest today, Courtney Carver. Courtney, thank you for being here.

Courtney Carver: I'm delighted to be here.

Kathy Caprino: I'm so thrilled to have you. Your message about soulful simplicity. In fact, I can't wait to talk all about your book *Soulful Simplicity: How Living with Less Can Lead to So Much More*. Who really doesn't need to know more about this? And I certainly do, so I can't wait to dive in. I want to share your bio with everyone so we all know what you're working on and what you're all about. Courtney Carver changed her life by simplifying it after a devastating diagnosis in 2006. She's the founder of bemorewithless.com and minimalist fashion challenge project 333. Is that how we say it? Wow, I can't wait to hear more. Her new book *Soulful Simplicity* was recently published by Penguin Random House, what a great publisher. Carver shows us the power of simplicity to improve our health, build more meaningful relationships, and relieve stress in our personal and professional lives. Let us not waste a minute, Courtney, thank you again for being here. Will you dive in and tell us how this came into your life, what happened exactly, and what emerged from it?

Courtney Carver: Sure, in 2006, I was living the American dream. Running crazy, completely burnt out at work, ridiculous deadlines, working after hours, and thinking it was all normal while feeling like I was just crumbling on the inside. During that time, I got sick and after months of visits to the doctor, debilitating vertigo, fatigue, tingling in my hands and face, all kinds of weird symptoms that all happened at once, eventually I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. This was the moment for me that I finally had to pay attention to --when I thought things aren't working anymore. Even though I had had that thought a zillion times before, I never paid attention. I was just like, this is it. This is how life is supposed to be, so quit whining and let's get on with it. I would make my life busier and crazier so I wouldn't have to pay attention to those "this isn't working" messages. This time I had to change. I really had to stop and assess how I was living my life and figure out how to live well with MS, but also how to live well.

Kathy Caprino: How did simplicity come up as the thing you knew you had to do? Before you answer that, what did you do for a living? Before all this happened.

Courtney Carver: I worked in sales, so my last job— when I was diagnosed I was working for a magazine selling advertising and had been with that company for many years.

Kathy Caprino: Intense pressure, "you're only as good as your last sale," that kind of world, right?

Courtney Carver: Dollars and deadlines.

Kathy Caprino: Did you have kids at the time when this crisis happened?

Courtney Carver: Yes.

Kathy Caprino: How old were they then?

Courtney Carver: I have one daughter and today she's 22, so she was about 10 years old when I was diagnosed.

Kathy Caprino: Wow, so much. So, tell us— if you've listened or read anything of mine, you know my world is professional women who wake up— professional women who've had some success and wake up and say, "Boy, what I have here is not what I was going for." For lots of reasons, but what you're talking about it is very common. That wake-up call comes in a big way, for most of us, to push us off the track, doesn't it? It's almost like we tend to need a crisis, sadly. We need a breakdown moment, don't we? Till we can finally say, "Okay, this is enough."

Courtney Carver: Although, hopefully, with as many people talking about their breakdowns and their wake ups, people are starting to ask the questions before that, everything falls apart.

Kathy Caprino: Yeah, let's pray that this podcast is one thing that catalyzes that. How did simplicity come to the forefront for you?

- Courtney Carver: It wasn't immediate, it was never my intention to simplify my life. All I wanted to do was eliminate stress. All the research I did after my diagnosis pointed to stress as being a real problem for people with MS, autoimmune conditions, and other disease. I would say for everyone, it's all the little things, the big things, everything is being thrown at us in so many different directions and it starts weighing on us. I wanted to eliminate as much stress as possible, which sounded like a crazy goal but I thought if I just do one thing at a time I can make some progress. I started with my diet and eliminated some food that I thought was not adding value and possibly contributing to MS exacerbations.
- Kathy Caprino: Tell us, what did you—
- Courtney Carver: I'm not a nutritionist or a doctor, but I tend to experiment with things just to see how I feel. My research pointed to animal protein as being a negative, so I took it out. Not all at once, but for a month I removed all cow-related meat and then pigs and then chickens and poultry and then seafood. Was vegetarian and dabbled in veganism for a good 7 years. Then I brought seafood back and a little bit of fish back into my diet a few years ago. Again, I'm constantly reassessing, so I realized because I was eating less meat, I was eating more greens and pasta and that wasn't really resonating either. Now I'm kind of shifting away from that, but it's this constant re-evaluation for me with diet. Then I looked at the next most stressful thing and for me that was debt. I had gone into debt with my first credit card at 18 and never come up for air.
- I realized it was just crushing to always be owing someone something. As we began to eliminate debt, we weren't shopping as much or bringing as much into our house, so we were starting to pay attention to our clutter. At first, I didn't think of that clutter as stress, but when I really started to pay attention to it, it was this constant reminder of my debt and discontent and started to reduce clutter there. It was in that moment that I realized what all these changes had in common were simplicity. I was simplifying each area of my life with one little bit at a time. It definitely wasn't an overnight process, but after many years I was clutter-free, debt-free, I had made a big dent in the clutter in my calendar and my to-do lists. It's made a huge difference.
- Kathy Caprino: I've got questions. I'm a trained therapist and I don't do therapy anymore, but a lot of my coaching work kind of has a therapeutic lens. Can I ask you this kind of probing question?
- Courtney Carver: Please.
- Kathy Caprino: The fact that food and debt and clutter, it was all an amalgam of stress for you. Does any of that have an antecedent in childhood? Is there anything you can tie back around lack of simplicity in your childhood that contributed?
- Courtney Carver: I really bring all of this back and I haven't been to professional therapy, so I could have it all wrong, but I really bring it back to my 20s and being in a really bad marriage. Easing any pain that I was in with something, because I didn't want to face it, so I would ease that pain with spending or with food or alcohol just so, again, I could get through it.

My 20s seemed all about getting through it and not really addressing the bigger picture, but really medicating the pain immediately, and going to the mall was a quick way to do that. This was before internet shopping, so thank goodness. Thank goodness. Who knows what kind of damage I would have done? Whatever I could do to soothe, ease the pain, even though I didn't know I was doing that. I could never say that I knew I was doing that then, but looking back I could see I just wanted to ease the pain.

The answer for me was *more*. More spending, more indulging, and then I needed to make more money to make up for all of that *more* and so I would work more, work longer hours, take a job that paid more. I was always chasing the *more* as if I could finally be successful by having it all.

Kathy Caprino: Wow, so in a way, clutter— let's get a metaphor here. It represents the way we numb ourselves.

Courtney Carver: Completely. Maybe that's not in every case, it certainly was for me and for many people that I talked to. It's how we numb ourselves, it's how we remove ourselves from our life.

Kathy Caprino: It prevents us from facing the realities.

Courtney Carver: Exactly, we're removed, we are focused—

Kathy Caprino: I just want to share one quick thing. I have a final addiction that is hard to get rid of, of chocolate, and I've been to a nutritionist, shed about 20 pounds, but what she said is, "You need to reinvent your relationships with food. This is not a diet, this is our relationship with food." The final bastion for me is chocolate. I find that when I'm really upset about something, but I can't say it out loud to the person, I am eating chocolate before— it's like I've— what's the word when you're all of a sudden in another room and you didn't even remember walking there? I'm eating chocolate and now when I force myself to sit with it, it's not chocolate I want, it's I need to use my voice, I need to say this is wrong, and I don't want this relationship with you or I don't want— you know?

Courtney Carver: I completely relate, and I don't think there's anything wrong with enjoying a piece of chocolate, but when you're removing—

Kathy Caprino: It's more than a piece.

Courtney Carver: Well, either way. Exactly, not to get too far off topic, but I don't know if you've ever tried The Whole 30?

Kathy Caprino: No.

Courtney Carver: Oh, my God, if you want to redefine your relationship with food, this is it. It's a nutritional reset. It was founded by a woman named Melissa Hartwig. Basically, it's a 30-day food challenge where you eliminate most of your trigger foods. You eliminate dairy, sugar, grains, alcohol. Did I say sugar? My husband says, "Fun."

Kathy Caprino: Yeah, really?

Courtney Carver: The first time I did it, the first five or six, seven days were really tough, but by the end of the 30 days I felt so amazing and had learned so much about why I turned to certain food. What food doesn't make me feel well, and that's one of the reasons I brought some fish back in, but in the past three years I think I've done it six times. I had just started another round. I'm crazy for it. I feel so good when I eliminate those foods.

Kathy Caprino: I can't wait to try it and I'll let everybody know how it goes. You know what I love about—well, I love a million things about what you're saying, but one thing in particular. You use yourself as your highest guide. You said, “I didn't go to therapy, but here's what I know. I didn't go to a nutritionist” or I think you said that, “but here's what I know. I'm listening to me, I'm listening to my body.” Is that right?

Courtney Carver: It definitely is, and I think it's great to have outside help whether that be a nutritionist or a therapist when the time is right. That can only be a piece of the puzzle. The big problem is when we forget who we are, we forget what we believe. This kind of came to my attention right around my diagnosis. Because I went to the support meeting for newly diagnosed patients, and I had read some things on the internet about this crazy cure-all product that, of course, I wanted to believe in so much and I asked about it in this meeting. There was a gentleman in the meeting who said, “Quick question.” Because I said, “Do you think this will help?” He said, “What do you think? What do you believe?” I just wanted to start crying because I forgot that I had a voice in this whole process. I felt so victimized up to that point. I forgot what I believed mattered, and that's really where this entire journey has come from. Is knowing that I can trust myself and learning how to trust myself again.

Kathy Caprino: How beautiful. Tell us more about— you shared how it kind of unfolded for you and then turned into “how do we declutter our entire lives and our minds and what we do?” I also noticed you said you can experience more love when you are more simplified in your life. Can you talk about that?

Courtney Carver: Sure. First of all, I think about it in the simplest terms in that, how can we have love when we are so disconnected from everything we care about? When we're removing ourselves from our lives, we can't really have that amazing love that we want for people, for work, for causes, whatever. It's hard for us to be present when we're super overwhelmed. Without presence, there's very little connection. Without connection, there's very little chance for love. I noticed, and I wasn't looking for this, I wasn't expecting it, but I noticed the more I remove from my life things that were cluttering things up and making me feel overwhelmed, the more of that, that I removed, the more I could show up for the people that I love, for starters. Even though I have always loved my husband and daughter with all of my heart and said that they came first, there were clearly times in my life where they didn't come first.

Not even close, because I was so removed and distracted with work or my phone or something else. When I started to show up, not just be there, but listen and show up, everything changed. We got so much closer. My best relationships have gotten so much better, and on the flip side, my relationships that weren't really that close in the first place fell away.

Kathy Caprino: It got decluttered. How beautiful! You know what runs through my mind, Courtney? A lot of people listen, who are in pain to “our stuff, my stuff.” They'll often respond in a way that there's a defensive mechanism that comes up. What I know people will say when we go back to “how do we declutter a career?” They're going to say, yeah, all well and good, Kathy and Courtney, but I'm a vice president and there are things I have to do. I have to work late or I have to do this or I have to do that. What would you say to the maybe high level professional man or woman who wants what you're saying, wants a glimpse of it? Where do they begin career wise? What do you think they have to think about and do?

Courtney Carver: I can only speak from my own experience. I was the regional ad director for a group of magazines, luxury magazines. I felt like I had the weight of the world on my shoulders all the time. I knew I wanted out, but there was nowhere for me to go because I was so deep in debt, had so many obligations. Would have felt that same defensiveness had I heard this conversation then, I would have been like, “Good for you, but yeah.”

Kathy Caprino: Yeah, you go, but I can't do that.

Courtney Carver: Right, and what happened with me is as I started making these changes, tiny changes, they gave me confidence. I became more empowered and more curious about the unconventional path. Does it have to be this way? I started asking questions that started with this sentence or these words: Wouldn't it be crazy if...? Those questions led to some of our biggest changes. Wouldn't it be crazy if we sold our house? Wouldn't it be crazy if I quit my job? When we started talking about me leaving my job it wasn't, “okay, that's a great idea. I quit,” because I was still in debt, still had tuition for my daughter, bills like crazy. I had to make an exit plan, an exit strategy. It had to be kind of two prompt. One, what I'm I going to do, and two, what has to happen before I take the leap? Because I don't want to go out and get another job—

Kathy Caprino: Just recreate the same situation.

Courtney Carver: Right, and so when I made that decision and made that list of nonnegotiables, we have to be debt free, I want to have this much set aside so that for the first two months of this new venture I am not desperate for money. I don't have to do a job just because I need the money. There were a couple of other things on that list. Once I made that list, it was about 16 to 18 months from thinking about it to starting something new, to actually giving my notice. It sounds like a long time, but it goes by in a flash.

Kathy Caprino: A blink, yeah, and did you know the new thing was going to be “more with less?” Did you—

Courtney Carver: I knew that would be the new thing, but I didn't know how it would be the new thing. I didn't know what it would look like. I didn't know exactly what would happen. I just knew that A, I was going to share my story, and B, I was going to serve people. That was it. There was no— you don't start a blog and money comes shooting out of your computer by any means. I knew that based on my history, I wouldn't be accepting any advertising. I made that right from the start no matter what, no matter what someone offers me to advertise on my site, it's going to be a hard pass.

Kathy Caprino: Why based on what history? Being in sales?

Courtney Carver: Selling advertising. Because of how that had played into my history, I didn't want to do that. I wanted my website to be a place where people could come and get what they needed and leave. Not be distracted by 50 other things or banners or things that maybe I didn't believe in. I was really mindful of that, but otherwise I didn't know. I knew I would probably build things and create things, but I didn't know what they were or how it would go, and it worked out.

Kathy Caprino: It sure did, holy cow. I have a question for you, another question. I'm interested, if we had your daughter— it's your daughter, right— here, what would she say, do you think, about at age 10 watching mom be what she was to what she is now and how that changed her life?

Courtney Carver: Wow, that's a great question. One of my very favorite reviews of this book is not a published review. She read the book and she gave it to some friends. A friend messaged her and said, "Bailey, this book is a love letter to you from your mom."

Kathy Caprino: She's right.

Courtney Carver: It really is a love letter to her and to me. I'm hoping it will be a love letter for other people that want to incorporate it into their lives. In the beginning, I'm sure for her it was scary. At 10 years old to find out that your mom has this disease that could potentially be chronic and not pretty, to then seeing that life is going to change. However, we were so careful to do this slowly because the whole point was to eliminate stress. That meant for the whole family. I wasn't going to make all these massive changes overnight and stress everyone out. I know that— she's 22 today. By the time I was her age, I was using one credit card to pay off another. I was just about to, if I wasn't already married, just about to get married to someone that for seven years I would be very unhappy with. I made every choice based on money. What job to take? What I had to do next.

It was very stressful, and I think by her watching us pay down all that debt, hearing those conversations, seeing the changes that we were making, I think that impacted how she decided to move forward. She doesn't have a credit card. She doesn't have any debt. Her apartment isn't out of apartment therapy. It's something that she can afford. She most recently left a well-paying job so that she could try to do something on her own. I don't know.

She would have to actually be the one to say this, but it seems to me that she's more comfortable with uncertainty, and she's more focused on what matters versus all the stuff and other— she's able to now know that she can make her own definition of success. It's not what I think is successful or what anyone else thinks.

Kathy Caprino: It's so fascinating. See what just this one decision, I want to reduce stress. For you to identify clutter as the issue and clutter in all these dimensions, look what it does. I just want to share quickly, when I was laid off after my corporate career, which was my breakdown moment, and then decided to become a therapist, money was tight for years and years and years. If I had my kids here, they're 20 and 23, I don't know that they would consciously say this, but I have seen in them that, what became really clear was, I had to make decisions about what I wanted to give them or make possible for them that were hard because I didn't have the money I used to have, but they were the right decisions. Not to just give, give, give and compete with the Joneses about the money. Am I making myself clear?

Courtney Carver: Totally.

Kathy Caprino: I had to say no and thank God I did. No, you can't get the latest Xbox. No, we can't get a new car. You'll have to use the one Grampy gave us, which in my very affluent town made a lot of people laugh, but they are different people because of that, with stronger values and a stronger sense of self, I think. Does that make sense?

Courtney Carver: Yeah, definitely. Wonderful to have that, to not need something new to be happy or successful. Yeah, it's huge.

Kathy Caprino: It is huge, holy cow. First of all, I cannot wait to complete your book, and everyone should run out and read it. Can you do this for us? There's a lot of different people in a lot of different scenarios listening to this. Some are employed, some are not employed. Some have a huge job, some have a lot of money in the bank, some are in debt. Some have toxic relationships with narcissistic people in their lives. Could you offer three steps that someone hearing this, who's brand new to the idea of soulful simplicity, could take that wouldn't stress out their system and turn everything upside down, but could get them moving in a way that could lead them on a path to this? What three things could we have folks do?

Courtney Carver: Okay, well number one isn't really a thing to do, but something to keep in mind. That is, that consistency is more important than intensity. If you don't have enough time, you don't have enough energy because you are exhausted or you're sick or whatever it is, just know that the tiniest stuff every single day will matter more than making these big leaps and bounds once a month or once a year or in the spring. Every single day, if you can just take a little tiny step forward in whatever area that is stressing you out the most, it will make a difference. Even if it's just writing that thing down every day. I know before I quit my job I wrote every day for months. That was my number one thing to focus on: quit my job, quit my job, quit my job. It sounds a little trite, but it made a difference. It kept me focused on that one thing.

The next thing would be to give yourself five minutes a day to sit quietly. It can be meditation, it can not be meditation. You can sit with your hands on your heart, just five minutes where you can reconnect with yourself and start to remember who you are and what you think and what you believe. I think that's really the first step in learning to trust yourself again.

Kathy Caprino: Beautiful.

Courtney Carver: Because most of us really trusted ourselves when we were kids; we didn't even think twice about it. We didn't do all that overthinking and not believing in ourselves. Then we lose that somewhere along the way and we start listening to all the outside voices. Coming back to yourself five minutes a day, really sitting quietly and, gosh, there's so many that I want to add. I would say maybe number three is, consider what your definition of success is and why you think that is successful. Not to say one way is better than the other, because I think we really each have to find their own way. If in that conversation that you have with yourself or on paper or with your partner or family, ask questions like, "Wouldn't it be crazy if...?"

Kathy Caprino: I love that.

Courtney Carver: It's just unbelievable because we get this script in our mind of how our life is supposed to be, and then we follow that until one day, we're like, "Wait, why am I living my life like this?"

Kathy Caprino: It opens the door for a new way to look at things, just asking.

Courtney Carver: It's all about what you're willing to consider. Maybe it's a no, but maybe it's a yes.

Kathy Caprino: I love it. If we look at clutter, I know this is hard. You went through food, then debt, then your house, I'm guessing, from the latest post I read of yours. Even being addicted to being responsive, which I am, on social media. A minute doesn't go by and I'm not responding to someone who's commented. That's beautiful and engagement is great, if you can sustain it— you called it, you said something about how that thing is actually self-sabotage sometimes.

Courtney Carver: Yeah, well, because it turns on you at some point and becomes depleting and then you're not serving anyone very well. I just took a week off of Facebook. I don't use Facebook on a personal level anymore, but for my business I do. I post very regularly on Facebook and engage and connect. I enjoy doing that to a certain extent, but while I was traveling recently it was very challenging to keep up with it, so I just stopped. It had been a long time since I stopped, then I was like, what is going to happen if I don't post anything on Facebook for a week? Then I thought about it and really, what was the worst-case scenario? And that was decreased web traffic. It's not like people would be missing it, they just wouldn't see anything. They wouldn't think about it and they wouldn't click over.

Okay, I think I'll survive that and that's exactly what happened. Less people were visiting the website. In the bigger scheme of things, I saved myself between that and not blogging as frequently and a couple of other things I backed off of, about 10 hours in that week, 10 full hours. Based on the other things I had going on, it was well worth the trade.

Kathy Caprino: The final thing I want to ask, well, two things: How has it affected your MS?

Courtney Carver: I go into great detail in the book about my treatment plan and my neurologist and all the other changes I've made, but everything combined has led to me now. I've been relapse free for the past 10 years.

Kathy Caprino: Oh, my God.

Courtney Carver: Virtually symptom free, I feel better now than I did before I was diagnosed, for sure. I mean more energy, more focus, more clarity. Just feel better physically, mentally, spiritually, it's—

Kathy Caprino: That's so wonderful. I think, don't know if you agree, but I do feel there's an emotional and spiritual underpinning under every chronic illness. I believe that.

Courtney Carver: 100% and if not, definitely it comes full circle and it's all woven into one thing. If one part of you is unhealthy, eventually all of you will be unhealthy. You can't just be addressing one area at a time.

Kathy Caprino: Gosh, so powerful. I'm going to push you for one more actionable strategy, Courtney, if we could. If someone says, “I have everything she's talking about. My house is a cluttered mess. I'm addicted to shopping. I don't eat the way I need to. I don't make time to exercise.” Do you think that even starting with your own room and decluttering it would be a—

Courtney Carver: Yeah, one small thing because sometimes when you feel completely overwhelmed because there's too much to change, you don't change anything at all. Yeah, if clutter is the issue, I recommend putting a box by your front door and no timeline, just the box by the front door, and whenever you see something that is not adding value to your life, put it in the box. When the box is full, close it up and let it go. That's one tiny thing, but it adds up. It really adds up. Even if that's one thing a day, that's—

Kathy Caprino: It's a lot of things.

Courtney Carver: Yeah, it adds up for sure.

Kathy Caprino: Gosh, I can't tell you how exciting this all is. Thank you for your— it's so inspiring. The one thing I really come away with here is, there's such intention that you have about how you want to make your life the way— in the image of what you believe and what you think is healthy. That intention changes us. It takes courage, it takes finding brave, it takes commitment, it takes perseverance. A beautiful life that matches how you feel, it should be— doesn't just land in our laps anymore. Well not— it never did.

Courtney Carver: No, even once it does, it's still going to be messy. It's going to be hard, it's still going to be frustrating. You're going to do it your way and that makes all the difference.

Kathy Caprino: There's a quote we've got to end on. Thank you so much. Now where can people learn more? I'm sure you have courses or programs. Where can folks learn more and grab all that stuff?

Courtney Carver: Everything is on my website, bemorewithless.com.

Kathy Caprino: All right wonderful. Check out *Soulful Simplicity: How Living with Less Can Lead to So Much More*. Thank you so much. It's really inspiring, and I love these specific strategies. I'm going to do it. I'm trying— is it Whole 30 you recommended, as well?

Courtney Carver: Whole 30.

Kathy Caprino: Whole 30, I'm going to read your book, Whole 30, and here we go. I'm going to do it. Thank you so much.

Courtney Carver: Thanks for the great conversation.

Kathy Caprino: So fun and thank you everybody. Please share with us on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com), anywhere you want to, underneath this podcast, what you get out of this show and these strategies. We'd love to hear how they impact your life and we have big hopes for it. Thank you, everyone. Have a brave, brave week and see you next time.

Thanks so much for joining us today and please don't forget to check out findingbrave.org for more programs, resources, and tips. Tune in next time for your weekly dose of *Finding Brave*.