

Episode 11: Dr. Mark Hagwood: A Road To Damascus Experience (Part 1)

Matt: Today's podcast is the first of a two-part series, we are with Dr. Mark Hagwood who has been both personally and professionally involved in the field of production for thirty years now. In part one we talk a little bit about Mark's childhood and the traumas that he has experienced in his life and how those traumas affected him as he grew up. He is also a divorce survivor and tells us about what it is like blending two families together. I think you will really enjoy this podcast.

Craig: Some of my favorite people in the world work in mental health. I've had this running joke for a long time that some of the most interesting people you will run into on any college campus are in the art department and the psychology department. I actually took a lot of classes in the psychology and art department, so our guest today is no exception to that. He is interesting and really a man's man. His name is Dr. Mark Hagwood. Mark has his own counseling practice and he is here today to tell us a little bit about his story and how it became the foundation for the work that he does with people every day. So, Mark, thanks for joining us.

Mark: Thanks, you guys for having me today. I look forward to being able to share my story and hang out with you guys. I don't get to see y'all very much.

Matt: Yeah, it is good to see you. It has been a long time.

Craig: Let's jump right in, Mark. Tell us your story.

Mark: Well, my story starts like most people. My parents got together and got married. They were high school sweethearts. Dad worked his way through Millsaps and paid for it and he went to law school at Ole Miss. So, there is this sort of family belief that hard work will get you where you need to be. So that was sort of an under pending growing up in the household that I did. My parents got married when my dad was at law school his last year. Then he got a job in Greenville Mississippi at a law firm there. When I was 4 my mother was in a horrific car wreck and she lost both of her legs. They were amputated on the site. The 1970s did not really have the ability to deal with trauma so they took her to Memphis, and she was gone for about 6 months. What I know now is that is a pretty significant trauma from a developmental standpoint for a young child. For the longest time, I didn't really see that as a traumatic event. Most of the time growing up when things happened in our childhood or even adolescents, we sort of normalize it. It is just how life is. That is what I did with that. Looking back, I realized that during that time, I began to fear the world, insecurities and anger development the further I got into my elementary school and junior high.

Craig: So that is obviously, I am glad that you brought that up. I think that we as individuals, we do have these events that happen to us throughout our childhood that really shape our world view and we bring those dynamics into our future relationships obviously.

Mark: We do. That is like a big T trauma. In the psychological world you will hear "Big T vs Little T" So Big T traumas are the big events in our lives whether it is something like that or whether it's an Iraq veteran coming back who watched their buddies get blown up by an IUD or

rape victim, that's a Big T trauma. But some of the little T traumas, are maybe as significant or possibly more significant create complex trauma, are some of the developmental things that happen in life. So, you stack some things like being bullied or having a large event at home or maybe a parent's alcoholism. So, those can create some more complex things that people don't realize as being trauma. Most of us have some little T traumas and probably a significant portion also have a mix of big T traumas. It develops characteristics in us that later in life bleed into our relationships so we will pick that up probably in a few minutes.

Craig: So, Mark, as it relates to your story, it manifested itself into anger?

Mark: Yeah, it did. Anger that was fundamentally rooted in fear and insecurity, so I remember 12-15 just this increasing sense of uneasiness. When I was about 15, I found alcohol, drugs, and girls and so I thought I had cured the problem inside. I often times say that I found a solution to a problem I didn't know I had. It simply made the chaos go away.

Matt: So, alcohol and drugs, in you view as a 15-year-old, alcohol and drugs felt like a cure to this anger?

Mark: Yeah, it was like the first time I had enough to become intoxicated, it was like I breathed a sense of relief. It was a relief to this chaos I had inside of me.

Craig: Yeah, we had an earlier podcast guest talk about his parent's divorce in how kids are resilient and because of their resilience, they will find ways to medicate the pain.

Mark: I think that is a human characteristic as well. So, from 15-20 I used a lot of alcohol and drugs. I didn't find anything I couldn't do. My goal was to continue to medicate this pain that I had unresolved. Of course, like all addictive behaviors, it grows and gets to the point where it is no longer a weekend activity and go to the point where it needed to be addressed and my parents had to have an intervention. So, when I was 20, they put me in the MS Baptist chemical dependency center. Actually, I turned 21 in there and I was in treatment for the whiskey that I wasn't even legal to buy. So, I get out and I get involved in a 12-step program and from there life took a different turn. I began to resolve a lot of internal conflicts. Got an undergrad in psychology, so I was one of those interesting people that you talk about out and worked on my masters in counseling and eventually went to MS State where I did all of my course work for my PhD and then moved into the field of counseling.

Matt: So, at the time of your parents intervene, what was your substance abuse like? Frequency, amounts?

Mark: SO, when my parents intervened, I was drinking every day, smoking marijuana as much as I could, daily. The weekend before they intervened, I did cocaine, ecstasy, and LSD, all in a 24-hour period of time. The startling thing was that it stopped working. 3am on a Friday night, I came to my senses that I wasn't high, and I wasn't drunk and that was a scary feeling because what had been working so well was no longer working.

Craig: and you eventually became sober and you, based on what I assume was your childhood experience with chemical dependency, sought more information and that led to your study of psychology and counseling?

Mark: Yeah, originally my major was business and I did an accounting class and I thought, there is no way I can do this. So, I had been taking some humanities and psychology interested me and so it naturally developed from that.

Matt: You ended up focusing your education on psychology?

Mark: Yes, I got a bachelor's in psychology from Mississippi College, and then I went to Mississippi State and got a masters there and did PhD work there too, all but the dissertation. I worked in the field where I was around an outpatient program for alcohol and drug addicts in Starkville. Then, back here in Jackson, I was a clinical director at Copac where we dealt with sexual compulsivity as it was called back then.

Craig: Talk a little bit about the difference between when an addict uses a chemical and process addiction.

Mark: So, with chemical addiction, we are taking substance into our bodies that we become emotionally dependent on and we can also become physically dependent on them. So we actually get addicted to the substance, right? One of the debates that has been going on for a while is, can you really be addicted to a process addiction, and by process addiction we mean gambling, sex, spending, even maybe exercise To answer that question, is yes because the brain creates neurochemicals in response to everyday behaviors. It also produces neurochemicals in response to chemicals that we are ingesting. So, you don't have to have a chemical to become dependent on something so, we can become dependent on gambling, which I have heard it referred to as the purest addiction because there is no substances. There is not food, there is nothing coming into our bodies. We can just get addicted to the high created by it and the lows created by losing, is the chaos and the cycle that we get addicted to. We can get addicted to sex, well for a lot of reasons but one is, there is a connection piece to it and there are a bunch of chemical releases from oxytocin, to dopamine, to adrenaline, so we become dependent on these processes to fix our emotions because it feels good or releases different highs.

Craig: So, talk about your family, you moved through school and what was going on with you personally at that point?

Mark: So, I worked in the field of counseling for a while in different areas, and then I got an opportunity to get in the business world. So, my father opened, started opening McAlister's Delis in Louisiana. We did that for 8 or 10 years, and I was married during that time, had two awesome kids. The marriage was volatile. I think it was a combination of both sides of that coin and eventually that lead into divorce which is a very traumatic time for everybody, my kids and myself.

Craig: How old were your kids when you got a divorce?

Mark: So, my kids were about 6 and 9 years old when we got divorced.

Matt: How long had you been married at that point?

Mark: We had been married about 10 years at that point

Matt: How did you meet your former spouse?

Mark: I met her through mutual friends here in Jackson. We both worked in the recovery community.

Craig: And so, you were living in Jackson when you got a divorce, you had been married for ten years, you've got relatively young kids.

Mark: We had moved back from Louisiana and we were actually living in Ridgeland when we got divorced and the economy imploded around the same time and we ended up using the business we had had and I ended up filing chapter 7 bankruptcy. So, once again there is this stacking of traumatic events. It was impactful for my kids and myself.

Matt: So, at this point, you are still experiencing these different traumas, you are in recovery, are you still carrying that anger with you that you talked about earlier in the show?

Mark: So, there were different parts, I have been in recovery at this point for 31 years in my life, then it was 20 something, so there were different periods of growth just like anybody who is on a growth pathway. So, I dealt with a lot of the original sort of anger and feelings of insecurities, however, the volatility of the marriage, created different levels of anger and other emotional things. So, rolling out of that marriage I was an Emotional wreck.

Craig: Talk about your life post-divorce.

Mark: So, after the divorce I went through a period of unemployment because of the economy. It was just awful. I had been in the restaurant business and I was trying to figure out what was next and I met my future wife at that time period. We were going through similar life circumstances and we had been friends prior to that, and we rekindled the friendship. She was a believer and at that point I was not. I had the anti-apologetic meaning and I was actually pretty convinced that Christianity was one of the worse things that mankind had ever invented and my mother and sister were also devout believers. So, I was surrounded by three women who were devout believers. My mother was a godly woman and she had been praying for me for about 30 years and God just finally got tired of hearing her prayers.

Craig: Moms do that.

Mark: Yeah, they do they are pretty awesome. So, I went to my parents house for my fathers birthday and my sister and my mother were doing another Christian intervention on me and my sister ended up giving me a book to read and she begged me to read it and through a series of me being in a vulnerable place and having my heart and mind open, I had a, what I consider to be a Damascus experience.

Craig: What was the name of the book?

Mark: The name of the book is Letters from a Skeptic, and it is written by Dr. Gregory Boyd who is a theologian and his father was a roman catholic who lost his faith and became an atheist. So, the premise of the book was that Dr. Boyd was worried about his father's salvation, but they couldn't have conversations about it because atheist aren't real open to having conversations about religion, like my family found out. What he had done was invited his father to write him a series of letters and then Gregory, the son, would write back a series of responses. so, what I found was, when I was reading the book, I connected with atheist at first but what became convincing for me was the answers to the questions, like "why is there a good god if there is so much evil in the world?" were much more about logic than they were about faith and about three quarters of the way through that process, something happened in side of me that was powerful.

Craig: Is that what you refer to as the road to Damascus experience?

Mark: Yeah it was a profound experience where I think the Holy Spirit, I felt His presence and it was about three months. It was like I had this light living inside of me from the time I opened my eyes until I went to bed. Had it not been that powerful, I probably would have written it off as a psychotic break from the amount of stress I had in my life.

Matt: So, at this point, you are not yet a counselor, but had you been in counseling?

Mark: Yes, I had gone through training and then I had an undergrad, a masters, and worked on my PhD, I had been the program director for the Mississippi counseling for compulsive gambling, I had been an inpatient clinical director for sexual compulsivity, and had done outpatient IOP. This was in the mid-90s, so I had done it and moved away from that and now I had this experience and God moved me to go to seminary for a little while. I had a lot of internal chaos about that because I though there was know way God would want me to be a preacher, but I got there, and I took a course called Christian counseling and at that point I knew where my road was headed. I enrolled at Mississippi College, they had a newly formed Doctor of Professional Counseling degree, so I enrolled in that and knocked it out in a couple years. Then I started a private practice while I was also the program director and clinical director of Harvard house of chemical dependency services. So, I had been in the field and in my own recovery for years.

Craig: And that is the Turning Point counseling center that you own and operate today?

Mark: Yes.

Craig: Lets talk about one of the things that you have experienced in your life, that I think a lot of our listeners can relate to is the blending of families. You had been married before, at the time of your divorce you had two kids under the age of 10, and then you met and married a woman who also had children and the two of you, with all those people, decided you were going to make a life together. So, talk about personally your business family and then professionally how you guide others who have blended families.

Mark: Blending families on the front end, everybody just thinks it is going to be awesome. We love each other and so all the love we have for each other as parents is just going to bleed into the family. It was a bigger challenge in some ways than what I think we thought it was going to

be. So, I had two biological kids and I got two bonus kids in the process. So Kathryn had two children so blended, I have a son who is now 21, a bonus daughter who will be 20 in July, I have a biological daughter who is 18 and graduates from high school this year, and a bonus son who is 16 and is just picked up the driving deal.

Craig: So, your kids, your biological kids and your bonus children, their ages overlap.

Matt: So, at the time that you and Kathryn got married, were your children living primarily with you or with their mother?

Mark: So, my custody agreement is essentially 50/50 split on time. So, they were spending a lot of time in both places.

Craig: So, you don't necessarily have to share the name of the lawyer but what was your experience like through the legal system?

Mark: Well, it wasn't smooth, but I don't know of too many divorces that are. I had retained an attorney and my ex wife had retained an attorney. There was not a lot of movement and it wasn't because the attorneys were doing it, she just was not ready to go through the divorce process.

Craig: I think we often find that Matt and I, two people are not always at the same place with regards to the grieving process. They aren't always in an emotionally healthy place. You also told me that the marriage wasn't great but the legal system as it is today, even when marriages are often broken, there still is difficulty moving through the legalities of the process.

Matt: So for those listen that don't know, Mississippi is a very unique state when it comes to divorce and if you live in any other state besides MS and South Dakota, you can get a divorce on a no-fault basis. So, you can unilaterally get a divorce just because you want one, but in MS that is not how it works. You have to have a reason or agreement. So, it creates a little bit of a trap who are maybe not happy in their marriage but do not have legally recognizable reasons in their marriage to get a divorce.

Mark: It can be a trial and it can be rather expensive too. When you have to find cause or fault, it can get really expensive to prove these things that are in these statutes in MS.

Craig: Absolutely and that is what we try to tell are clients and what we try to keep in mind at our very small practice. We represent people. We do not represent big companies, so we have to be mindful when helping people because no one is ready for a divorce.

Mark: I know in my practice when I am working with clients, it looks like they are not going to be able to resolve their marriage because of whatever reason, sometimes the way that the laws are set up in MS, they are trapped. Particularly with people who have narcissistic disorders and others that aren't known to the court systems, people can get trapped.

Craig: I am glad that you brought that up because that is one of the things that I definitely want to talk to you about is narcissistic personality disorder and borderline personality disorder and bipolar depression because I think there is a lot of confusion around those, but before we dive

into that, lets talk about your blended family and how you counsel those you help as it relates to their new family dynamic.

Mark: One of the common traps in blending a family is that unless there is a lot of intentional discussion on the front end, most families just get together and think they will just figure it out. Many times, you often have two parents who have different parenting style, and they just assume that their parenting styles is going to be their new spouse parents, but their parenting styles are not the same. That one element alone can cause a lot of discord in the family and a lot of discord in a relationship.

Craig: Not to mention the complexity associated with the former spouse and their different parenting styles. And, most second and third marriages fail because there is more people involved.

Mark: Yes, it is complex when you start blending families. So, you have your family dynamics coming in, the trauma that your divorce caused for you and your children and then you have somebody else if they have children, coming into it with those same dynamics, or if you marry somebody who doesn't have children, then you have this new father or mother coming in who have this new form of power because there is more of them. A lot of times there is a lot of resistance about bringing somebody else into that.

Matt: So when you are blending these families, if you looked at like a traditional family unit, you are dealing with the dynamics of three other people that are immediately attached to you but when you blend these families, you are potentially expounding that to as many as 10 or 12 depending on how big the families are which is immeasurable more difficult to manage. I have been doing this for a decade and I still do not know how people do that. What challenges did you guys face in blending your families together?

Mark: When we blended our family, we had a lot of the same challenges everybody else probably faces. My relationship with the bonus kids and Kathryn's relationship with my children, that is one element, and early on I approached my bonus daughter and said the nature of our relationship is wholly dependent on you. My relationship with you is going to be whatever you want it to be. For her, that was empowering because it gave her a sense of control over it. I wasn't going to become disciplinarian dad and all up in her business, I was going to be what she wanted me to be and I think for her that was super important. One of the parenting traps that I think everybody has to negotiate when they are blending families is, how is discipline going to work in the house? And so, I talk to a lot of people that particularly the men in the family are going to take the role of "I am the man" and that is absolutely dangerous when blending families. The role that I talk about with people is that the biological parent is the one that disciplines the biological children because that is where the relationship is. Now, mom and dad get together and these are the house rules so if I have a problem with my bonus kids, then I go to Kathryn and say, "Hey look, these are some of the things that I see are going on" and she goes and explains it to the kids. I do the same with mine. In the beginning that is super important, as we have been together now for years and years, it is not the same, but you have got to earn that authority position as a family.

Craig: Right and it sounds like what you are saying is that the more empowered the bonus kids feel, the better the dynamic and the better the relationship will be.

Mark: I believe so.

Craig: You know Mark I am really encouraged to hear you talking about these blended families because even in my own life, some of my dearest friends, who I have the most respect for, have parented kids who have no biological connection. I can think of the faces of many of my friends are coming to my mind right now and whether that is a child that was born outside of their marriage or whether or not that is a child that their spouse brought into the marriage. It is just a beautiful thing when a person devotes themselves to a child that they don't have to. So, we do a lot of divorce work but one of the things we get to be involved in is adoption and so , it is not exactly the same things when families blend together but we are parenting, mentoring, coaching a child that we have no biological connection to.

Mark: You make a choice to love so when you have a child, that natural connection is there but when you get the opportunity to love a child you have had early life experiences with, you are making an active choice and that carries its own level of connection.

Matt: Anytime we love somebody it is a choice; a biological connection makes it easier to make that choice but when we don't have a biological connection it can make it special in its own way.

Craig: Right and sometimes we see a reflection of ourselves in our children and so when someone without that reflection chooses to love, it is just very beautiful. It is what God does for us.

Mark: Yeah, it is a powerful experience.

Craig: Mark, we are going to have you back to dig into narcissism and borderline, and I want to have you back and talk about those, but what is the best way for people to get in touch with you?

Mark: Well, you can look up Turning Point Counseling in Flowood or Ridgeland on our website and all of our contact information is there.

Craig: What is the URL for that website?

Mark: Turningpointms.com