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FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS

In My 50s, I Wasn't Sure Who I Was – So I Asked

A writer visits people from her past to uncover her authentic self

By Robin L. Flanigan, AARP

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Robin Flanigan interviewed her exes, friends, former coworkers and family, using the same nine questions to figure out who she is now. Left: The author with then-boyfriend Brice Hancock. Right: With friend Jen Chaney.

COURTESY ROBIN FLANIGAN



The last time Brice Hancock and I talked this long face-to-face

The last time Brice Hancock and I talked this long face to face, we were in our mid-20s, close to breaking up (again) and living in an East Baltimore graveyard (we lived in the caretaker's house rent-free in exchange for opening and closing the gates). Brice was a guitarist living his life; I was a band girlfriend living his life.

Thirty years later, I'm on his couch in Colorado, asking what my weak spots were back then.



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"I think sometimes maybe you played small, like you dumbed down parts of your personality to be around me," he says.

I've traveled two time zones westward for this first leg of a multinational self-reflection tour. The idea came to me two months before my 55th birthday, after finding 29 journals in my attic dating back to high school. I read about my first boyfriend being a convict, that I hate when toilet paper rolls don't spin around in public restrooms, and poem after poem of grief and longing. The highly detailed documentation made me more than nostalgic. It made me ask that tired, age-old question: "Who am I?"

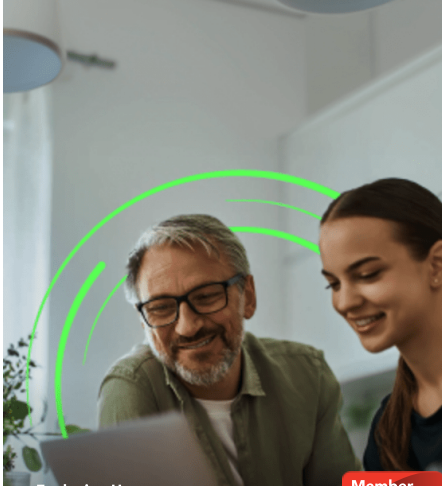


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Hancock (left) and Flanigan reunite to discuss their their long-ago relationship.

COURTESY ROBIN FLANIGAN

Factually speaking, I'm someone who went through the breakup of a 22-year marriage (not Brice). I've raised a child with a serious mental health condition. I tend to put others first.

While I've done a lot of personal growth since my Baltimore days — I definitely know who I'm not — I realized that even at 55, I'm not quite sure who I am.

For the answer, I decided to interview exes, friends, former coworkers, family and others using the same nine questions:

- What is your earliest memory of me?
- How would you describe me when we met?
- How would you describe me now?
- What do you think my insecurities or weak spots were/are?
- How do I handle conflict?
- What brings me joy?
- What did you think I was going to pursue as a career?
- What's your favorite memory of us?
- Have I impacted, influenced or challenged your life in any way?

The structured format is my way of adding some so-called “scientific rigor” into my experiment, as I look for patterns that may have shaped my identity.

When I shared my plan with my therapist, Cathy Lucisano, she was fully supportive, calling it “an optimistic, important and really creative” way to understand my own narrative. She said she'd recommend it to others, provided they retained an educational perspective and were prepared to manage any

triggers that could arise from revisiting the past.

I also asked if she thought it was a good idea to reconnect with an ex while investigating who I was then and who I am now. She said yes, though ideally one should start out in a secure relationship with their current partner. She also recommended setting aside time with the current partner to reflect on what it might mean for you as a couple. “There’s nothing here that can’t be processed in a strong, healthy relationship. If I’m a better me, I’m a better partner,” she said.

I’ve been recording my conversations in living rooms, old haunts, even a side alley in Paris. And what I knew — but needed to be reminded of — is that how we show up, for ourselves and each other, often matters more than we realize in the moment.



Flanigan (left) and Chaney met while working at a local newspaper. Reuniting after decades of not seeing each other, Chaney says she remembers Flanigan as an incredibly curious person, always asking questions.

COURTESY ROBIN FLANIGAN

Following in old footsteps

I haven’t seen Jen Chaney in decades, though we occasionally exchange comments on Facebook, usually after one of her sardonic posts makes me laugh out loud. We lived together for just over a year in our early 20s while working at the now-defunct *Montgomery Journal* newspaper in Rockville, Maryland; she was an editorial assistant, I was a reporter. When you live and work with someone, you get to know them pretty well.

How does she describe me? “You’re a very curious person,” Jen says when we meet up near our former workplace, nearly seven

hours from my home in upstate New York. "You ask questions when people tell you things because you're interested in

learning more about them. With just about anything, you say, 'Oh, that's a story.'"

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We spend the day traversing our old neighborhood. I knock on the door of the house we shared, hoping to be let in. The man who answers is in the middle of cooking and a bit hesitant, but he allows us to stand in the living room and reminisce for a few minutes about nights spent drinking malt liquor and writing haiku. After, we order milkshakes at the Dairy Queen that was built while we lived there. We make our way to the church where F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald were buried. Our first attempt, long ago, to find their graves — at night, without flashlights, while tipsy — failed. This time, success.

Four days later, Jen emails to say one more thing about my curiosity: "It galvanized me then and still does now. It gives me the courage to ask questions and not be afraid to push harder to understand the world around me."

So the curiosity that used to land me in loads of trouble when I was young not only helps pay the bills but also aids others. Take that, permanent record. (And I suppose I don't need to worry about being too wide-eyed for my age ... at least not yet.)

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My body clings to conflict

Melissa Prestinario, my fashion-forward friend in Paris, has known me since seventh grade, back when I thought it was funny to sneeze in her face. Sitting side by side atop an alley wall near

the Picasso museum, she says, “From my intuition, I would say you probably absorb a lot, then end up getting sick.” She’s not wrong about my body soaking up even the slightest of skirmishes — whether I’m involved in them or simply a witness — then feeling run-down.

This tracks with what others in my life have said. I don’t deal well with conflict. I recoil or shut down.

I think about how my fundamentalist father often quoted the Bible when punishing me and declared when I was 10 that I’d go to hell if I missed church too much. Never mind that this was against the backdrop of Sedona, Arizona, where tourists from around the world still flock to find spiritual serenity.

And then it hits me: Unconsciously, I’m probably equating conflict with eternal damnation.

Talking to my ex-husband, Patrick Flanigan, in the house we used to share, he says, “There are three parts of a person: mind, body and spirit. I always felt like you put everything into your mind and body, because it was like your spirit was sort of forfeited already.”

Guess I’ll need to talk with my therapist about that.

I’m silly but seasoned

Driving through more old stomping grounds in Maryland on my way back home from North Carolina, I (separately) meet up with two men who knew me when I was cutting my teeth in the news business.

John Scheinman is another *Journal* colleague I keep in touch with, mostly through social media. Over northern Chinese dim sum, he characterizes me as “very willing and eager to be silly quickly.” He recounts when, one night after the bigwigs had gone home, I jumped up on the copy desk and asked him to join me in a mock-serious rendition of Bob Seger’s “We’ve Got Tonite.” (He did.)

To be honest, I can see myself doing that today.

I catch up with Rafael Alvarez, who sends me monthly postcards

that document his travels and book recommendations, over an anchovy and onion pizza. A journalist, author and screenwriter — and my main career mentor — he got me a job at *The Baltimore Sun* as a copy girl. In an email after our visit, he writes: “In your face I still see the million-dollar smile, but something about your aging seems well-earned. The crinkles around the eyes don’t lie about what they’ve seen.”

Well, I can’t argue. A reporter’s eye can be brutally frank.

Once back on the highway toward New York, I toggle between those conversations, pledging never to let the “crinkles” keep me from jumping on metaphorical desks.

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I don’t know a stranger

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In college, Kim Saviano and I studied abroad, doing a semester at the University of Oxford. We’ve seen each other maybe twice since then and talk one to three times a year. But I think of her often, because a colorful drawing we created together back in the day hangs in my office.

“You seem to be able to have conversations with absolutely anyone, as your adventure yesterday kind of showed,” Kim, now a software engineer with purple-tinted hair, says from her Colorado living room.

I tell her about how I fell into a deep discussion with a guy I’d met the day before, after asking him for directions. We talked about life and values while he helped me get my bearings, and as I waved goodbye — after we got a picture together — he told me I’d given him “God chills.”

I don’t know exactly what that means, but Kim says, “Those are the ripples, right?”

I can’t believe she referenced our drawing, which we titled *Water, Water Everywhere* and has at its center a rippling pool of water. With our very different personalities, Kim and I used to talk about how we’re on different sides of a pond, but our ripples

eventually reach, and influence, each other.

“That image has always stuck in my mind,” she says. “I think you probably give people God chills pretty often.”

This only confirms what I sensed in my gut, which is that everything — everyone — is connected. It also validates that we always have a purpose, even when we’re lost.

The last word

What I discovered during this adventure is surprising, not because of how much I’ve changed but because of how much I haven’t. That’s not a bad thing — I believe it’s worse to wonder where your authentic self (to use an overused but spot-on phrase) has gone.

I shared my findings with my therapist, who responded that these were clearly steps I needed to take to rethink some of the ways I think about myself. So, she said, instead of thinking about myself as a person who has experienced immense trauma, I can view myself as a person who is living very joyfully and effectively, even though I experienced trauma. Those types of reframes, she said, make a big impact on your confidence, sense of self and who you are in your relationships.

It has been good to figure myself out. I like how my friend Sue Lautenslager put it when I told her about my experience: “I think it’s an unusual thing, to be the way you are.”

Robin L. Flanigan is a contributing writer who covers mental health, education and human interest stories for national publications. She is a former reporter for several daily newspapers, and her work has appeared in People, USA Today and Education Week. She is the author of the children’s book M is for Mindful.

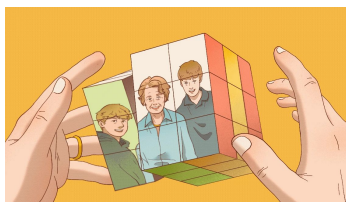
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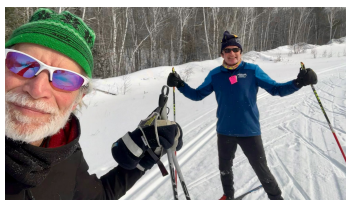
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