

JAMES B. FLAHERTY

DEAR OLD FRIENDS

STAY YOUNG,
STOP THINKING OLD,
AND LOVE YOUR LIFE
EVERY DAY.



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Chapter One

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

"The body does get older, but the person gets smarter." --- Burl Ives

OH, I WISH BURL was right. And what's that other "oh yeah?" expression: "Old Enough to Know Better" Hmm, wish it were true. I'd like to think it is. Anyway, this little book or memoir or diary or whatever you choose to call it, was something I wrote, maybe 44 years ago. You may ask, what have you been doing with it for the past 45 years—editing?

So, you're going to read how I was feeling back then in my prime, around 42 years old (I thought 50 to 75 were my best years), with up-to-the-minute commentary and additions by an 86-year-old (mentally going on 66). Anyway, thought you should know this

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book took me 42+ years to complete. Now and then I'll remind you, so you'll know whether it's a young whipper-snapper talking or a wise (I'm laughing at myself) elderly senior.

This originally was a love letter. It was Me saying Thank you Thank you Thank you for your love and guidance and tolerance, thinking of my Dear Old Friends, many 30 or 40 years older, who injected me with the juice of human kindness and caring. They were all people who welcomed every day as another blessing, another opportunity to learn, teach, create, console, uplift—God, they were amazing, and why I was so privileged to be embraced by their wisdom still astounds me.

Trust me when I tell you age 86 is not a picnic in the park. But it also is not like driving into the heart of a hurricane or tornado, or I can't imagine living in a true war zone. However, it has forced me to look at the many challenges of aging and to figure out how to not surrender to its physical, mental, and emotional demands. And dammit, pardon me, darn it, please listen to me, and stop thinking about surrendering yourself!

First, I'll tell you who I am. I doubt if it will make your heartbeat faster, but you should understand who's writing these words. Okay? I am remarkably neat, clean, and disciplined. Even though I have a full-time housekeeper/cook (we call her our Nanny) living in, I

roll out of bed (and I'm 86 years old) and turn around and make my bed. I then go to my pool and exercise, doing 1200 high knee jogs in shoulder deep water, then back upstairs for soapy shower and clean clothes, followed by my everyday perfect breakfast—a double portion of fresh cut-up fruit, with a healthy helping of homemade applesauce on top, and sometimes a crunchy healthy cereal on top.

Next, 15 steps up to my balcony office, where my desk often looks like a herd of wild hogs just ran across it, had a party acting irresponsibly, and ran off. When I can't tolerate the clutter another minute, I spend a day cleaning the desk down to the bone, which entails filing (I miss the luxury of having a full-time secretary). But I'm drifting away from this document. Whilst cleaning recently, and looking at files in a secondary filing cabinet, I FOUND THIS BOOK, OR WHATEVER THE HELL YOU WANT TO CALL IT. I was shocked! How could I have written a 110-page document and forgotten it? Was life that demanding? I guess so, or at least I thought it was.

I was a pushy kid. Oh, not in the obnoxious sense of the word. Our pre-drug, pre-electronics generation was not as difficult as today's youth. I was just hyper-active, and boiling-over with the need to be helpful, to take part, to share my life and thoughts with everyone who touched my life. I guess it was back

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then that my special relationship began with an older generation.

Maybe one of my first "older" friends was Jane Prettyman, my high school biology teacher. I was 15 and I suppose Jane was an ancient 45. I fell under her brilliant tutelage for just four years. It turns out Jane had dated my father before he met and married my darling mother, whom you will meet later in this book. And it was Jane, a brilliant teacher with some serious personal issues, who laid her own problems aside to help comfort me. I was drowning in a quicksand of self-pity on a hot South Florida afternoon in 1950 when the only air-conditioning available was in movie theatres and millionaire's homes. That same year, my wonderful, loved-by-everyone Father died, only 47 years old.

Jane told me, whilst wallowing in my cloak of Poor Me that steamy afternoon, *"Now listen to me, James. I know your sorrow about your father is real and deep, but your loss is nothing compared to your mother's. She has lost her lover."* Slightly prudish (I still have an untraceable strain of Victorianism in me), I was surprised by the intensity of her words, but they stayed with me, and I remember that moment now as if it were yesterday. So, Jane became my first "older" friend.

That allegiance to "older" has followed me throughout my life. For the moment, I'm going to set my

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mother and parents aside, because your parental relationship often has too many facets to be a clear-cut friendship. When age irons out your Mother/Son/Father/Daughter relationships and you allow yourselves to function as just people, it can be magical. I'll speak long and lovingly of this phenomenon when we reach the chapter entitled, Mom and Me. And when I get there, remind me to talk about Daughters and Me, which is one of the great Happy Cloaks I get to wear every day.

I realized when I was still in my 20s that my Dear Old Friends were crucial to my personal outlook, my career, almost every decision I made. Maybe I should say Dear "Older" Friends, because they were 20 to 50 years older than I, and advised, criticized, questioned, supported, and loved me as I tiptoed (and stomped) my way through that marvelous maze call Life. In short, they took a middle-class boy who doubted his ability to end up in the corner office and made it good to be Jim. I think they're the reason I was chosen as Master of Ceremonies for my 30th, 40th and 50th High School Reunions.

And while thinking about them pushing and poking and hugging me, I started writing this love letter to them and about them—44 years ago. Huh? Yeah, I wrote the first draft of Dear Old Friends 44 years ago, and just this year, realizing I had become a Dear Old Friend to quite a few kids between 20 and 50, finished

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writing my Dear Old Friends with a memoir thanking them for having my back.

And whether you're 25, or 45, or anywhere up to 86 (My Age at publication time), I think you'll find some very solid ideas about staying crucial to yourself—and everyone else. Remember, the band won't stop playing till you stop dancing!

Recently, (this was a note from 1977) a dear and beautiful friend of mine—Ruth West by name, annoyed that her body had reached 80 when her mind was still about 40, or maybe 39 is nicer for a lady—said to me: *"You put no age on people do you, Jim? You just accept them as people, as your mental and physical equal, even if you have to make allowances for them."* Ruth thanked me for making the past two years, difficult ones, easier for her. And I thought how dear of her to say it, but I didn't really do anything. I mean, we were friends, chums, and surely, I benefitted as much, if not more, from her friendship as she did from mine.

This personal involvement with an older, wiser, more settled generation has comforted me and guided me through most of a satisfying and productive life. There were countless people I could name who would be astounded at the importance of their influence on my every thought, every action. They were cornerstones of calm, beacons in a stormy sea of humanity. People, who I am sure, just thought we were friends

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for the moment, a few hours, weeks, or months, not necessarily a lifetime? Perhaps they were neighbors, or friends of my parents, or bosses, or co-workers. They taught me how to live.

I'm remembering gentle Howard Moss and his irascible Helen, whose razor-sharp voice and strident exclamations couldn't hide the tender pushover she really was. They made it possible for my wife and I to enjoy country life many weekends with them, inviting us even though we had young, active children.

When I bought a brownstone in NYC, they were there to advise me. They introduced me to the wonderment of Alcoholics Anonymous, (even though I wasn't a candidate way back then). It was the first time I was ever aware of someone being and admitting they were alcoholic. That friendship lasted 25 years!

Then there were bosses who shaped my life, if but for a few minutes, some stayed with me through the years. I remember beautiful Dorothil Patterson, a deeply religious Christian Scientist, who wore flowered hats and had a Gene Tierney overbite. Her femininity and charm made me flirt (not seriously, remember I was and still am a wee bit prudish) which would make her blush. We exchanged many, many letters, and years later, when she was dying of cancer, she was astounded and pleased she had helped me find my path. And it's true--some of my management techniques today harken back to that appealing and

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attractive woman, playing no favorites, injecting energy into her charges every day.

(It's 2020, and I'm remembering): In 1978, comfortably ensconced in a hard driving, but interesting corner office creative director's job in a New York City advertising agency, I was to make a decision that would have a profound effect on my life.

With one partner, a brilliant renaissance talent I might add, I purchased a decaying stack of abandoned stone, an English country estate in Amenia, New York, with forgotten grounds and gardens, just five minutes from our country home in Sharon, Connecticut. It had no glass in the windows, no working electricity, plumbing, or heating. I loved it. Troutbeck had been a glorious home in its day, a gathering place for the literati and liberals of the 1920s.

It was first settled and named in the late 1700s by the Benton family, English immigrants who named it after their native home, Troutbeck, a beautiful village in the lake district of England. An aristocratic American Jewish family--Joel Elias Spingarn and his wife, Amy Einstein Spingarn purchased the original home, which had evolved over the years into a handsome Dutch reformation farmhouse, in 1904. It burned to the ground about 1915--no injuries. Between 1916 and 1918, Amy Spingarn, Joel (Colonel Spingarn) being away at war, created a new Troutbeck with an English

architect at her side, and it was this Troutbeck that ignited my passion.

With stone walls nearly two feet thick and a slate-on-slate roof that glistens in sunlight, Troutbeck is a romantic reminder of an earlier period when great homes dotted the landscape of the world.

In time, (Hah, it was a full year!) we cleaned up the debris of 35 years of emptiness, replaced plumbing and electric, built new bathrooms, a new kitchen, decorated it (we were shooting from the hip, weren't professionals at any of those tasks) and opened Troutbeck as an executive retreat and country inn. I'm happy to say we became quite well known in both categories.

But during the negotiation period to buy the property, the deal fell through because the owner was greedy, or his lawyer was being ridiculous. After much unnecessary back and forth, I called our attorney and put the kibosh on the deal. I recall telling him, "No more, Stanley, these people are nuts and I can't be pushed any farther." He did as I instructed, and although it pained me, I was and am a great believer that life goes on--that if you don't get what you want, there must be a reason, there will be other roads to travel, other doors to open, and I set about putting that fantasy country castle out of my mind.

(I realize this section is part 1977, part 2021...don't go away, this long story does have something to do with my relationship with an older generation). The

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day after I ended my dreamy affair with the romantic stack of stone, my attorney called to say there was a gentleman in his office and that he and the gentleman wanted to come over to my office for a chat. An unusual request from my conservative attorney. An hour later, Stan arrived with a handsome 72-year-old named Carl Trantum.

I was going to devote an entire chapter to Carl and his beloved wife, Honor, whom I am fortunate to still count as one of my nearest and dearest, but decided it might prove to be too personal, and maybe even too sad. (I wrote those words over 40 years ago.)

After putting the purchase of Troutbeck back on track (Carl accomplished that with two phone calls, his deep melodious voice still touched with a faint hint of his Tennessee boyhood) we began what would prove to be one of the most meaningful relationships of my life. Carl's wife, Honor Spingarn, was a gifted painter and intellectual, a beautiful, gracious woman who had grown up in Troutbeck and New York City. She had studied art with Hoffman in Germany and was very much a product of an upper-class New York family.

It was Honor who first opened the door to friendship. When she and Carl would come up to New York from St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, where they had lived many years, they would call and invite me to dinner to tell them about "my Troutbeck". I welcomed

any opportunity to be with them. Remember the kind of kid I had been, I still was at age 42--eager to share my experiences; willing to have my life touched by an interesting elder. Honor and Carl and I did this with open arms and much laughter, none of us sensing the passionate willingness to become “best friends” that was waiting just below the surface.

We talked, mainly Honor and I carrying the conversational ball. In the beginning, Carl was always a little wary—he was biding his time, appraising my viability as a human being. At some given moment, Carl joined this tight little klatch Honor and I had formed. Honor, knowing Carl's need for a close friend now that the physical and mental passions of business had passed him by, was grateful to see Carl and I ignore our 35-year age difference and fall into each other's heads. God, I loved Carl. Even now, remembering him, tears come to my eyes. We talked for hours—often in print. We could both afford to speak every day on the phone, but it seemed more important to put it down in writing.

I still love to write letters to the people I care about.—And computers and email have made that a delightfully easy duty, not a chore.

Those first two years of Troutbeck were fraught with horrors. First, we had to restore the inner workings of the structure, clean and restore the grounds, decorate the interior, and start the marketing process. Mind

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you, we practically had to invent the town of Anemia—it didn't exist to anyone out of the area. "Where are you—Anemia? Amnesia?"

Then, remember, we had no experience in hospitality. We had to teach ourselves how to run a conference center and country inn and restaurant and wedding site. And imagine the problem of finding and training employees from a group of small towns. There wasn't a rich labor force, and no one had hotel or inn experience. Put it all together and Wow! I'm surprised I'm still standing. On top of that, I had to keep my brilliant but eternally anxious partner on an even keel.

Meanwhile, so we'd have enough money to pay salaries, I continued working full time in New York City. The combination of all that, plus maintaining a working and loving relationship with my two daughters, and a good and supportive friendship with an ex-wife, plus the worry of an aging mother—well, it's good I was in my young 40s not young 80s.

But what really helped was my loving relationship with Carl and Honor. I had a pretty good fix on myself. I mean, I did "Jim" pretty well, was reasonably happy with being me. But Friend Carl gave me a gift for the rest of my life. He made it great to be Jim. He made me feel secure with my instincts. He made me happy with the hand I was dealt.

We had only four years attached at the hip and heart and mind before he died. The last summer was

ABOUT AUTHOR



“Hello, I’m Jim Flaherty, and I’d like to know you better.”

Let’s cut to the chase, friends. I’m a healthy, happy 86-year-old. Huh? Yep, 86, and don’t mind it. Oh sure, it kind of annoys me I can’t pound the table and say, “Well, I have 20 more good years.” But gosh, I think it’s great I’ve been gifted with 86 nonstop years and am still looking forward to a lot of tomorrows.

I was happy to grow up in Coral Gables, Florida, with my mid-Western parents and good public schools. I went to University of Florida in Gainesville

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(Go,Gators!) for my first two years of college, then graduated in 1957 from MSU, Michigan State University in East Lansing, with a degree in Communications.

The next twenty years were really satisfying. I did military service, married a beautiful girl, had two beautiful daughters, became an advertising copywriter, and surprised myself by ending up in the corner office, in NYC, earning more money I had ever dreamed of earning. Even enjoyed four executive years in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

I believed in the value of “shooting craps” with my life. Started a new business I knew nothing about at age 45, and Wow! It was successful. I created a country inn/conference center in a small town in the boonies—a huge risk—and it required at least 70 hours a week of nonstop work to make it happen. I think being The Innkeeper--psychiatrist, psychologist, boss, wedding planner, conference coordinator, best friend to guests who were there for business, romance, relaxing, or self-seeking, helped me understand what motivates people, and what is the inner motor that makes them win the race on that tough track called Life. Good stuff for a writer.

I also traveled a lot. Other cultures, other languages (I

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still speak Spanish fluently), other manners of living, even other climate zones, all work on your head and your hands (those fingers that type are very important).

Also, I'd really like to know you, better. If you will send me a note via email, I have a gift for you. There's a page in the front of the book that talks about that in more detail. I thought we might start some group meetings among those of us who understand the band won't stop playing till we stop dancing. Thanks for listening, friends. May I have the next dance?

Jim Flaherty.

Write me: **talktome@jamesbflaherty.com**.

We can become better acquainted if you visit My Website: **jamesbflaherty.com**

XO, Jim