Geraldine Bown's Being Book

Being the Sum Total of All the Parts of My Life

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About This Book

My name is Geraldine Bown. I am born British and became an Irish citizen in 2018. I have been living in Connemara Ireland for the last 19 years. The pictures on this page are of the view I look at every day from my computer – same scene at different times. This view inspired me when I was writing and continues to inspire me every day.

Lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 gave me lots of time to reflect on my life – what had shaped me, what are the experiences that have stood out for me and what sense can I make of it all now at 73 years of age. These memoirs are the result of my reflections.

It was interesting to me to see what the things were that I most remembered, what meaning I gave to them then, and how all my experiences have contributed to the person I am now. I have covered most of the aspects of my life - there are just one or two areas I have kept private.

Unless people have specifically given permission to use their names I have used pseudonyms.

I have not written every chapter in chronological order. Some chapters are time specific e.g. Being a Student; Being a Teacher. Others span many years e.g. Being Confident; Being a Catholic. Each chapter is in a different blog post.

Feel free to read any chapter which interests you or read the whole thing. I have included a PDF of the whole book plus an audio recording of each chapter in case you prefer to listen rather than read.

At the end of each chapter there are some questions in case my reflections prompt you to think about that particular stage of your own life. There's also a blessing while you reflect. The Questions and the Blessing are only on the blog online - not on the audio or the PDF. The blessings are taken mainly from the book Benedictus by John O'Donohue. If I couldn't find an appropriate one I wrote one myself.

I have set up a private FaceBook group for anyone who wants to share their own reflections and memories. If you would like to be a part of this group just go to the Contact page and enter your name and email address and I will happily add you to the group. You need to be on FB yourself to join the group.

I have indicated the relevance of the picture selected for each chapter at the end of the chapter. It wasn't easy to find photos of me as I am usually the one taking the pictures! Also I didn't want to show anyone in photos who might not be happy to be identified.

Many thanks to Jo Parfitt at www.joparfitt.com for her help with making this fit to be read! Her course on How To Write Life Stories With SPICE was inspirational and instrumental in helping me to shape my ideas. Thanks also to Joshua Parfitt who created this website for me – https://joshuajames.xyz

If you are interested to find out more about my work as a Management Consultant you can see that at www.dominoperspectives.co.uk. My work as an Interfaith Minister can be found at www.revgeraldine.com.

Enjoy the book!

Join The Discussion

You are invited to join the private Facebook group - The Being Book Discussion Group - so you can comment on any of the memoir and enter into discussion on your own reflections.

Just send me an email and I will add you to the group.

NB You do need to be on Facebook to join.

See you there!

Chapter 1: Being Abused – Finally Understanding

"To every child – I dream of a world where you can laugh, dance, sing, learn, live in peace and be happy."
Malala Yousafzai

You see, I never saw it as abuse. I've read and heard about how children are sexually abused and what happened to me was a million miles away from that. The truth of the matter is, I enjoyed what happened. I adored my older brother – and did for the next 50 years.

The first time he touched me he said, "Now you must never let a boy do this to you ever."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because it's wrong."

He would stroke my pubis. I didn't even have any pubic hair. It gave me delicious feelings – I wanted more. I used to sit and read with my feet up on the chair he was sitting on so he could easily reach under my skirt.

He wanted me to hold him but I didn't like the feel of his rubbery pipe. Even so, I did what he wanted.

My new baby brother had his cot in my small bedroom and my brother used to offer to settle the baby down and he would sit on my bed looking into the cot so I could reach him when he unzipped his trousers. Lying in the gloom, a brown paper bag covering my light and giving an eerie red glow to the room, I listened to the baby noises coming from the cot. I held his 'thing' and moved it like he said, all the while waiting for my turn, so I could get the feelings again. It never went beyond that. He never put his finger inside me. I don't think I even knew there was an 'inside'. He kissed me once but I didn't like it. I don't know how long it went on for – a few weeks? a few months? – I was 10 years old.

It stopped when, one day, he followed me into the bathroom and masturbated. I could smell it. I turned and saw the milky stuff running through his fingers. *Ughh!* It was disgusting.

"Stop," I said. "Just stop."

Later on, in the dark, he spoke to me from the other twin bed (I have no idea what I was doing in his room when I had my own). His voice hung in the darkness. “You know it’s a mortal sin, don’t you? What we have been doing.”

“What do you mean?” I whispered.

“It means that if you die before you go to confession you will go to Hell for all eternity.”

Sweet Jesus, I thought, don’t let me die then. I resolved to stay awake all night, terrified that if I fell asleep, I might die.

“But what shall I say in confession?”

He said, “You say, ‘I have been impure to a boy by touch’.”

Funny sentence. *How would I ever remember that? Say it over and over in your head.* Stay awake as much as you can for the next three days until you can get to confession on Saturday.

I didn’t much like confession – a small musty box, dark wooden panels. Kneeling on a hard wooden kneeler. A covered window – black mesh on my side, a black curtain on the priest’s side. Rustling of clothes. Noisy breathing. Raspy voice.

Begin. Begin.

In a rush, “Bless me father for I have sinned, it is four weeks since my last confession I have missed my morning and night prayers five times – I have been disobedient to my mummy and daddy three times, I have been fighting and quarrelling with my brothers four times…” then… deep breath… “I have been impure to a boy by touch.”

There, I said it, now give me three Hail Marys for my penance and let me get out of here.

There was a pause.

“How many times has that happened?”

I froze. *Oh my God. I don’t know, loads and loads of times.* Please don’t ask me anything, just let me go. “A lot of times,” a tiny voice in the subdued orangey lighting of the confessional box. If he asked me anything more, I clearly blanked it out.

What I *do* remember is when he said, “You must promise me that you will never see this boy again.”

Oh no! Don't say that! What am I to do now? I mumbled something. I felt desperate. I hated my brother for not preparing me for the questions, nor for not giving me the answers. Interestingly, I didn't hate him for what he had done.

Somehow, I got out of there with a cleansed soul – I'd escaped Hell.

For many years this episode lay in the recesses of my mind. If ever it surfaced, I acknowledged it, but it didn't disturb me unduly. It never presented as something I might need therapy for. I never spoke about it for 50 years. Then I wrote about it during a week-long writing course. When I read my piece out, the group said how glad they were that I didn't hate my brother. Why weren't they angry on my behalf? Were they saying I was right to not be angry about it?

I now have 62 years of life since it happened. What sense is there to be made of it now?

I don't think I was damaged as a little girl. The incident with my brother hadn't traumatised me. If anything had traumatised me, it was my experience in the confessional. I don't think it affected my confidence or feelings of self-worth, neither of which I have ever doubted. But it impacted me as regards my relationships with men. It is only recently that I have been wondering if how I relate to men is a consequence of what happened so many years ago.

Boundaries were certainly violated. And yes, setting boundaries is an issue for me as subsequent events in my life would show. The line between right and wrong – regarding my relationships with men – became blurred. I became accepting of immoral and amoral behaviour from my husband and from myself. My brother had told me that what we did was wrong yet I adored him. Why was I *not* angry with him? Maybe I was but I hid my anger under my feelings for him and my own guilt. I would spend a lot of my life hiding anger. I could be angry on the behalf of others and angry about issues but when it came to being angry with someone I had a personal relationship with, I shied away from it. I was always afraid it would end in my being rejected.

I desperately didn't want my brother to reject me and I think I have feared male rejection ever since.

The episode also awakened sexual feelings in me way too soon. But were it not for my fear of pregnancy, on the one hand, and the fear of hellfire on the other, I would probably have been promiscuous by the time I was 13. I saw sex as separate from love. I could enjoy sex much the same as I could enjoy a good meal without having feelings for the chef. As an adult I learned to enjoy sex without needing to feel love. The experience of sex as the expression of a deep and intimate love has escaped me. I can only fantasise about what that is like.

I also realise I see men very much as sexual beings. I have no male friends at all. The only male friend I had was my husband, and he didn't turn out to be much of a friend at all in the end.

I wonder now if my lack of male friends is because I associate men with sex rather than friendship.

And I don't trust men. Those early mixed messages of 'don't let boys do this but let me do it' have maybe led me to distrust any expression of love displayed by a man. I knew I wouldn't believe them. So, I always seemed to choose men who couldn't, or weren't, willing to open their hearts to me. But now, maybe, I think that it was me feeling too scared of rejection to really open my heart to them. I was a little bit in love with my brother when I was 10 years old and I have never been in love with a man since.

My brother and I have never talked about what happened. Only once, the night before he got married, when I was about 19, did he start to mumble something about it. He had been on his stag night (in those ridiculous days when stag nights were the night before the wedding and hen nights hadn't even been invented) and I was still up when he arrived home. He mumbled something in his drunken state and I couldn't make sense of what he was saying. He said something like, "That thing that happened when we were kids."

I suddenly realised what he was referring to. I stopped the conversation immediately. “Stop that. It’s done with.” I had said the same thing when I was 10 years old, in fact. I felt the mortification and the embarrassment I had felt then. We never mentioned it again. Seven years ago, my brother cut off communication with me. It was just after he had had life-threatening major heart surgery. Maybe he had been evaluating his life and couldn’t bear to go back to that dingy bedroom when he was 14 and I was 10 and it was easier to cut me out of his life altogether? Or maybe it had nothing to do with that at all. In the light of no information, we make up stories.

Just recently, I was wondering about whether there might have been impacts on me that I didn’t realise. I mentioned it to my cranio-sacral therapist, Karen, during a treatment. She said to me, “Why don’t you visualise that little girl you were when you were 10 and talk to her and ask her if she has anything to say to you.”

I tried. Sure enough, I saw her. She was sitting on a stool. I spoke to her. She turned her back on me and wouldn’t look at me. She said she didn’t trust me. I was shocked. I told Karen and she said, “Well, just keep talking to her at the end of your meditations and see what happens.”

So, every day, for 10 minutes, I would visualise her and speak to her. “Hello, little girl. I’m here. I want you to know you can trust me now. I’m just going to sit here with you for a while. I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to be here for you.”

As the days went on, I added, “I know it was really hard for you. Your mum and dad didn’t really notice you and the attention you got from your oldest brother was inappropriate and you were left to deal with it all on your own. Well, I’m here now and you won’t be on your own anymore. You learned to look after yourself and your strength stayed in me and I have had a good life and done many things. Thank you.”

Bit by bit, she started to look at me and eventually, she smiled. She allowed me to hold her hand. Finally, I asked her to stand, and we stood together, holding hands. I said, “It’s taken me a long time to acknowledge you, little girl, and because I ignored you I made a lot of foolish decisions as an adult. I have wanted to hide you away and appear strong rather than

vulnerable. I became so independent I thought I didn't need to let anyone in. But now you and I are going to stand together and face the world. You are so brave, little girl, and you don't need to be brave on your own any longer. We will be brave together. And I will never ignore you again."

She looked up at me and smiled. Then I said, "Shall we dance now?"

I put my online half-hour dance programme on the TV and we danced around the lounge and laughed together.

Chapter 2: Being a Child – Early Memories of Belonging and Longing

"For in every adult there dwells the child that was, and in every child there lies the adult that will be."
John Connolly, The Book of Lost Things

I remember my childhood and my teenage years as being secure if not entirely happy. How I lived as a child in the 1950s would be classed as 'deprived' now but, of course, I never saw it like that. It was normal for us because it was what we were used to and because we never saw anything different as we never went to other people's houses for social visits.

I was born after two boys, Daniel and John, who were four years and 14 months older than me, respectively. Brother Andrew followed 10 years after me, so I was the only girl in the family. My brothers used to bully me and so I learned to be aggressive and fight my corner. In short, I learned to be a bully myself. I was loud and argumentative and always trying, unsuccessfully, to assert my authority. They called me Miss Primrose Prim or Little Miss Prim.

I can remember well the house we lived in until I was 11 years old with its paved yard, shed and outside toilet. The shed was where the washing board and mangle were as well as the coal bunker, where the coal men tipped the coal after they had carried sacks of it on their backs from the lorry in the street. I can remember their black faces and their rolled up dark shirt sleeves and their loud and gruff voices as they shouted at each other. Their arrival was always something of an event, as was the visit of the rag 'n' bone man to collect old clothes. He used to leave us a pumice stone and it was my job to take a bucket to the back step, wet the pumice stone and scrub the step as white as I could get it. It made me feel grown up.

The outside toilet was small, dark and dirty, with torn up newspapers hanging on a string from a nail for wiping yourself in the dark. We all had potties (which were called 'Jerrys' – goodness knows why) under our beds for when you needed to pee at the night. I can't even remember if there

was a bathroom but maybe we never used it because it was so cold up there.

When you got into bed the sheet was like a layer of ice on you and your breath appeared as a cloud in front of your face.

We had huge stone bottles filled with boiling water as hot water bottles, but if you forgot it was there and stretched your foot out in bed you were in danger of breaking your toes. Or worse, the bottle fell out of bed and crashed to the floor and I would worry that it had smashed through to the kitchen.

We used to have a tin bath that came out on Friday nights for us kids to have baths in, in front of the fire – one after the other – using the same water. We had no TV but there was a radio and a treat was to listen to *Tales of the Unexpected* on a Thursday evening at 8:45pm with John Laurie. We were allowed to stay up late to listen to it. And, of course, life as we knew it stopped every day at 6:45pm when *The Archers* came on the radio (*The Archers* is a 15-minute serial of everyday farmers and it's still running today, nearly 70 years later). It didn't matter what was happening in our house – an argument, an important discussion – everything came to a halt once the music for *The Archers* came on. I never listened to it and still don't.

Our kitchen was tiny and was referred to as the scullery. It had a faded cream kitchenette with two glass-doored cupboards at the top and underneath those was a drop-down panel with shelves behind it where you could butter bread when it was open. There wasn't a fridge, so we stood the milk bottles in a sink of cold water to keep them cold. The milkman would deliver milk daily and I would regularly drink a pint straight from the bottle when I came home from school.

I would take porridge oats in a paper bag with some sugar in it to school as a snack and eat it by the spoonful.

There was no garden — just some bits of soil and stones laid out haphazardly but we did have one garden gnome providing colour with his red hat and yellow jacket amid all the greyness of the back yard.

The highlight of the week was when Mr Wallis from the corner shop at the bottom of the back street, brought up the 'rations'. Mum would write what groceries she needed for the week in her small, lined, blue ration book, and one of us kids would run down to Mr Wallace with it. He was a tiny man — a bit like a garden gnome himself but without the colour. He had a tanned face but I don't know where he got that in the smog and fog that regularly descended on us for most of the year. He always wore a tie and shirt under his white coat. I never saw him without that white coat. As he walked back down the yard in his polished brown shoes after delivering our rations we would rush to the window in the living room.

"Watch Mr Wallis. Watch Mr Wallis" and we would clamber up on chairs to get a better look. Mr Wallis would walk down the yard, stopping at the garden gnome and looking down at it.

"He's stopped. He's stopped." We held our breaths. Then he would start to speak to the gnome, his head bobbing from side to side in animated conversation. We would watch from the window, delighted and squealing. We could never hear what he was saying of course but the garden gnome, his head on one side, looked up at him and listened intently. Such a small incident. Such enormous pleasure.

On Sundays we always had two small slices of roast beef with beetroot and two slices of bread and butter where the butter, being cold, would form lumps and tear the bread when you tried to spread it. It used to make me heave. The beef would be overcooked and sliced so thin that you could see through it if you held it up. It had no taste and was impossible to swallow. I still can't eat roast beef, no matter how delicious I am told it is. I don't eat it and have never bought it. Even when I've been persuaded to try it, it turns to sawdust in my mouth. But we had to eat our beef, our beetroot and our two slices of bread and butter before we were allowed to leave the table. And all the while *Sing Something Simple* would be on the radio – a choir singing various tunes of the day.

There was one Sunday when we were all sitting at the table having tea and I was wondering how I was ever going to swallow down that bread that rolled into paste balls in my mouth with lumpy butter that made me want to be sick. One of my friends from the back street, Mavis, came to call and see if I would go out and play. She stood at the back door and shouted. I don't recall her ever coming inside and I never saw inside her or our other friend Jean's house. Mum shouted that I could come out when I had finished my tea. I was desperate, so a plan formed in my eight-year-old brain.

I asked if I could leave the table to go to the toilet and sneaked the two pieces of bread and butter outside, where I flushed them down the toilet.

I went back to the table and after a minute asked if I could leave as I had finished. Mum checked my plate and said I could go. I was delighted with myself as I skipped out.

Unfortunately, I hadn't checked to see whether the bread had indeed been flushed away. It wasn't so long after that my dad called the three of us children and lined us up in front of him. He began, "Someone has tried to flush their bread down the toilet." He paused and looked at us. My little legs could barely hold me up. I thought I would die on the spot. We looked at each other horrified and started nudging each other:

"It was you," one of us chimed in.

"No, it wasn't, it was you," we shouted, elbowing each other and glaring.

Dad stood in front of us one by one, starting with Daniel the eldest, "Was it you?"

"No, Dad."

Then to John, "Was it you?"

"No, Dad."

Then to me, "Was it you?"

"No, Dad," I said it in the same way as they had.

Dad stood back and said, "One of you is lying and I want whoever it is to come and tell me." He dismissed us.

I started to panic and couldn't stop looking at the strap, a piece of black leather which was actually a barber's strop used for sharpening razors. It hung ominously on the wall on a nail where we could see it constantly. None of us ever got the strap actually, but its presence was felt constantly. Eventually, I went to my mother, blubbing, "It was me. It was me. I'll get the strap."

My mother said I had to go and tell my daddy the truth and it would be okay. My father sat me on his knee while I told him the truth in little gasps in between my tears and my constant 'I'm sorry'. He dried my eyes and told me that I must always tell the truth no matter what – that was the most important thing – and he set me down. It seemed to me, even at the time, that the most important thing was that I had tried to flush my bread down the toilet, yet my dad had taught me a very important lesson: if you say sorry and cry, you'll get away with things.

Had I told the truth when he asked, there's no doubt I would have been punished.

Yet, lying then crying seemed to work as a strategy. I'm not sure that was the message he intended me to get!

We played a family game on a Sunday evening – whatever game we had received the previous Christmas. Once, my brother John pulled the chair away from me as I was about to sit down and I fell to the floor writhing and crying like my back had been broken. My father put John between his legs and beat him on the bottom until he started screaming and his legs were dancing up and down on the floor. My mother asked him to stop and I stopped crying – shocked at what I was seeing – and said that I was really okay and feeling terrible about how I had caused this beating. Daniel stormed out and into the outside toilet in protest and refused to come out. He spent a lot of time in there as he battled with my dad.

John, being only 14 months older than me, was my constant companion until I was 10, even though we quarrelled a lot. We went to the fair together and ate fried potatoes in paper cones and tried to win goldfish by knocking over tin cans. I did win one once and brought it home in a

water-filled plastic bag with a string. We got another one to keep it company and a glass fishbowl for them. It was our job to change the water regularly but we were slack and so, once, when the water was green and you couldn't even see the fish in the bowl, we changed the water and put fresh water in. The fish promptly died of shock, so we washed them down the sink. I wasn't upset in the least.

John and I had a lot of fun together and were always finding things to amuse us. We used to visit our grandpa's house once a week and I would have creamed mushrooms on toast for my tea, a rare treat. There was a TV programme called *The Brains Trust* that Grandpa always watched. It was a panel discussion with academics about the issues of the day. Of course, we didn't understand a word of it but found Dr Jacob Bronowski – one of the panelists – hilarious. We noticed that he always managed to get some part of himself in every frame – even if it was only his tie! We would sit quietly and watch until this happened, after which we would collapse in giggles and start imitating him, much to the annoyance of Grandpa, who regularly threw us out of the front room when we started. Our grandpa caused us amusement even after he had died as the funeral attendants couldn't get his coffin round the corner from the dining room to the hall. John and I crouched on the stairs, behind the bannister where we couldn't be seen and laughed so much, our sleeves stuffed so deep into our mouths that we nearly choked.

Daniel, John and I used to hold concerts in the street behind our house. We stood on orange boxes for a stage and set out chairs for the neighbours who paid one penny each to see the show. My contribution was to sing 'Lipstick on Your Collar' by Connie Francis (a weird choice for a nine-year-old). I loved performing on our make-shift stage. It was my first taste of performing for an audience. Later, I would make a living from 'performing' to corporate groups and at conferences. Our 'backstreet' shows were an early indicator of a career choice for me.

John and I used to go to the cinema together and to the park to play. But once I had become very friendly with Jean and Mavis in the street behind our house (everyone lived in the backstreet, we never used the front door) who were older than me and told me about periods, I didn't want

anything to do with John. Daniel, who was three years older than John, didn't want his kid brother hanging around him and so John had no one. He had a 'wandering eye', which meant that he couldn't catch a ball very well, so Daniel and I would constantly throw balls to him to catch, then laugh when he couldn't catch them. We were so mean to John.

I became a bully before I was even 11 years old.

I can find all kinds of reasons as to why this was so. For example, having older brothers bully me and needing to assert myself, not having control of my life and controlling other people (girls) to assert my power. Whatever the reason, it's still inexcusable. There was a girl called Josephine Riley who had to walk down our backstreet after school to get to her own. Her father was a coal man and her mother had run off with someone else, so she was always 'poor Josephine'. She was easy meat for me. I would block her path on the pavement and stare down at her (I was much bigger than her). She would cower back into the wall and when she became frightened enough, she would start to cry. Only then, I would let her go. Mission accomplished. I remember guilt being mixed in with inexplicable satisfaction though. Many years later – maybe 30 or 40 years – in one of my 'reflect on your life' periods, I thought about her and how terribly I had behaved towards her. I said a silent prayer and asked for her forgiveness and wished her well, wherever she was and whatever she was doing. A few days later, I was speaking to Mum on the phone.

"By the way," Mum said, "Someone came up to me at church on Sunday and asked how you were and asked to be remembered to you. You were at school with her."

I stopped breathing. I knew what she was going to say.

"You might not remember her, her name is Josephine Riley."

Now I knew that somehow my apology had reached her after so many years and she had accepted it.

When I was 11 years old, we moved house, back to where my mother had been raised, so we could care for my grandfather while he was sick and dying. We had the big five now: a telephone, a fridge, an inside toilet, a

television and a cellar, so the washing could be done inside. My life improved overnight. The Morrisons lived next door to us in a big house – we were at the edge of the terrace on quite a steep slope – and then there was a cobbled ginnel which was always called the 'gable end' and which separated our row of house from the Morrisons'. Their house took up the final stretch of slope down to the main road. I remember visiting Mrs Morrison once after church and my mother said, repeatedly, "She doesn't want to be bothered by the likes of you." Apparently, Mrs Morrison *did* want to be bothered by the likes of me. I used to go through her back door and sit with her in her little breakfast room while she talked and smoked incessantly. I loved going into that house and was friendly with all the family, who were all adults, and they all welcomed me. Mrs Morrison was a tiny woman with a long, pinched face and short, straight, brown hair. Her legs would be tightly crossed as she sat on her chair and she always wore a plaid skirt and a twin set (a round-necked jumper and a short cardigan in the same knit and colour). She chain-smoked the whole time I was there. Her first name was Jean but I never called her anything other than 'Mrs Morrison'. She was Scottish and I loved her soft, lilting accent with its ups and downs as she told me stories of her life. She would tell me stories of her childhood and her work as the buyer at the most prestigious jewellers in Bolton and all the while, she would impart little insights and pieces of advice. Of course, I can't remember any of them now, but I remember being impressed by how wise she seemed.

I think I loved her so much because she always treated me as a real person – as an adult – whereas at home I was treated very much as a child.

I got appendicitis shortly after we moved and was taken to hospital as soon as the doctor had been. My father took me in and I was promised that once I was settled in the ward he would come and see me. He never came because they never let him in. I waited all day for him. The consultant and his students came round the ward and when they got to me the consultant said, "She's going to the theatre at 6pm," and moved on. I was delighted. My stomach pain had gone and I was going to see something at the

theatre! I waited in vain for that too. My father had warned me that they would give me a little prick to send me to sleep before the operation and he bet I couldn't count up to 10 after it. Unfortunately, he didn't tell me about the pre-med they give you in the ward to relax you. I started counting and got to about 2000 before they came for me. Nurse Baker, who was young and smiley with brown curls peeking out of her cap, took me down to theatre and I worried all the way that they would start the operation and not realise that I wasn't asleep, so I talked and talked and talked and talked. We had quite a wait in the prep room and I was beginning to feel a little drowsy but I kept talking to Nurse Baker until a doctor came and said, "I'm going to give you a little prick now so I want you to see if you can count to 10." *Oh,* this *is the prick my daddy mentioned…*

When I came around from the operation my mouth was completely parched and I couldn't swallow or speak properly. I begged for some water and was told that I could have some at midnight when the night sister came on. I lay watching the ward clock go round minute by minute. Finally, I saw the night sister who did her rounds. I asked for water.

"Certainly not," she said sternly, "Wait until morning."

I cried and cried.

It wasn't the first time and it wouldn't be the last that I had been let down by adults.

I had my favourite pyjamas with me in hospital – bright pink with white flowers and a little Peter Pan collar. I had had a peek at my stomach under the bedclothes but then didn't move the rest of the day until my father came that night. Meanwhile, the consultant came round with his entourage – unsmiling and cross looking. He was filling in his sheet on his clipboard.

"Have you had your bowels moved?" he asked.

"Excuse me?"

"Have you had your bowels moved?" This time said louder and impatiently.

"I don't think so. I came in to have my appendix out," I offered weakly.

He obviously thought I was being very cheeky and he shouted at me, "Have you moved your bowels?"

"No!" I shouted, panicking now. "I haven't touched them."

The students with the doctor sniggered and a kind nurse lent down and explained exactly what he meant. I turned bright pink, the same colour as my pyjamas. When my mum and dad finally came to visit me that evening, I told my dad that they had left all the blood on my stomach. He asked to see so I pulled down my pyjamas and he started laughing, but not unkindly.

"That's not blood. That's just the pink antiseptic they put on your stomach to clean the area before they operate."

I was so relieved. I wouldn't die after all.

I don't remember being that close to my mum when I was little. I have no memory of her cuddling me, except in the car when I got car sick and my father was furious at having to stop. I don't remember her reading me stories. I don't even remember her being there when I was ill. I only remember the old doctor who was always in a rush. He was a big man with a belly and a grey waistcoat stretched over it (he always wore a suit and tie). He had grey thinning hair and glasses and a mouth set in wobbly skin. He spoke in a blustering babbling way and you couldn't speak to him without him interrupting and shushing you. He was always flustered with crossed brows and had no time – he barely had time to look in your mouth – then he would write a prescription and he was gone. I'm sure I was a lot sicker after he'd been!

And I remember my dad's speciality when we were ill – egg sandwiches – made with a boiled egg, cut up in a cup, with butter, salt and pepper and then spread on white sliced bread.

The only time we got these was when we were sick – they were almost worth getting sick for. But where was my mother? Why do I have so few memories of her as a child?

I was sporty as a child and not particularly lady-like. My mother tried to make me into a lady and she sent me to dance classes (I guess because she was sick of me prancing about at home and getting under her feet). We

learned ballet, tap and stage (free movement and mime). I wasn't very good at it. I don't have a natural sense of rhythm or movement. My body was more suited to using the strength of my arm in tennis or playing goal defence in the school netball team and intimidating the opposing team's attack.

I remember those Saturday morning dance classes. They were run by a very stylish woman called Jenny Smith with short, well-cut black hair and red lipstick. She always had a black top tucked into a red billowing skirt and she wore proper tap shoes. She used to walk with a very straight back and her feet turned out. She was always very kind to me. I wanted to be like her. When I was eight or nine, I had a dance exam (what's the preoccupation with exams for recreational subjects? We weren't planning on joining the Royal Ballet!) I think I passed the ballet and tap part, but for the 'stage' part I had to do a mime. The only prop I had was a little stool. I remember that blasted mime to this day. At the very end of the mime I had to step onto the stool. Somehow my foot missed the top of the stool. Instead, I put my leg through the space in the spindles that held the stool up. Of course, I fell down and failed the exam. Jenny Smith was furious. My mother tried to comfort me but comforting me wasn't her strong suit. I took the exam again sometime later and passed but the magic was gone. I stopped going to the lessons.

The next attempt by my mother to make me into a cultured young woman was the piano. My mother played the piano extremely well. She also had a beautiful singing voice, even into her 80s. I never inherited her voice, as much as I would have loved to (I did inherit her varicose veins though, thanks Mum!). We had a piano at home, which a blind piano tuner used to come and tune every now and again. I would watch him in fascination. My mother started to teach me and my two brothers to play the piano. Very quickly they were allowed to stop but I wasn't. I insisted that if I was going to play the piano, I wanted a 'proper teacher', which, of course, my mother was. When she pointed this out, I said, "No, you're not, you're my mother."

Finally, she said that if I taught myself to play 'Für Elise' by Beethoven I could go to piano lessons.

‘Für Elise’ isn’t an easy piece but I did it – to spite her probably – and so she fixed up for me to go to piano lessons with a teacher on the other side of town. I had to walk for forty minutes to get there through back streets and under a railway bridge. Miss Browne was very tall, thin and had a tiny whispery voice and scented hands with extremely long fingers. If you hit a note too hard you’d worry it would shatter her frame altogether. She used to wear long cardigans and skirts in browns and beiges with thick stockings and flat shoes. The smell in her house was like the smell that floated out from old Mrs Bethel’s house from the back street when we went to ask if we could have our ball back from her back yard - that permanent air freshener smell.

That didn’t last long either. I had to do theory exams as well as practical exams. I didn’t want to do exams at all. I wanted to play like Mrs Morrison’s son Andrew, who I could hear every night from my bedroom. My bedroom overlooked the back of the Morrisons’ and Andrew’s baby grand piano was in the conservatory next to the small concrete patio garden. He could play *anything*. You could give him a tune and he would play the tune then find all the right chords for it and play it in any style you liked – jazz, swing, folk. I wanted to play like him. Alas, I was never going to learn to do that with Miss Browne. The last piece I learned with her was Durand’s ‘First Waltz in F Minor’. And by that point, I had found tennis. I was looking forward to being a teenager.

My early years gave me a strong sense of belonging – to a house, to a location, to a school, to a church, to a family. My home gave me a safe place to live and to come back to each night. I knew how everything worked, what the rules were and what my place was – even if I rebelled against some of it. Yet those years also gave me a sense of longing: longing to be taken seriously; longing to play the piano like Andrew Morrison; longing to be seen by my mother.

This last longing would endure my whole life.

Chapter 3: Being My Mother's Daughter

"Children begin by loving their parents, as they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive them."
Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray

It's still a great sadness to me that I never had a close relationship with my mother.

I don't know when I started being angry with her. I only know that I seemed to spend a lot of my adult life living in the tension between being irritated with and upset by her yet, at the same time, wanting her approval. And it was the hurtful things that coated the inside of my brain – the kind things would never get a purchase on that coating and would slide away and be forgotten.

I do remember that my mother always looked good, always smart and she always wore makeup. I used to watch her in the kitchen 'doing her face'. She was fair skinned and wore rouge to give her face some colour, a red paste she rubbed into her cheeks while her mouth twisted to one side to make the skin more taut. I would dart from one side to the other, watching and giggling. I never saw her in trousers my whole life and she *never* wore flat shoes but she always had her hair done and stood tall. She looked stately, right up to when she had her stroke. More than one person remarked on how like Queen Elizabeth II she was, which secretly delighted Mum. She was known when she was young as something of a beauty. I still have her two favourite photos of herself as a young woman. As she got older, she stood them up in frames in her lounge, where she could see them because she hated how she looked as an old woman.

I attribute my own desire to look good, even if in the house on my own, to my mother's example.

My mother had had a daughter before me. Her first born died within an hour of her birth. Patricia had been born at home. My mother refused to give birth in hospital as she had been there for antenatal appointments and had been made to sit outside the delivery ward, where she could hear the

women screaming and had insisted on a home birth instead. Patricia turned in the birthing process and which then became a breech birth. I can't even imagine the pain. The cord got twisted around the baby's neck and she choked and only managed to breathe for an hour. Apparently, my mother was in bed for three weeks and didn't even go to Patricia's funeral. I knew I had a sister who had died. If it ever came up in conversation, I would glibly say, "Oh yes, I have a sister, but she died when she was only an hour old." It sounded dramatic to me and even glamorous, in a weird sort of way. I never really understood how painful it must have been until I had my first born, Emily.

Mum was the first person to visit me in hospital, after my husband. I looked at my little perfect baby lying next to me and was suddenly overwhelmed by the terror of losing her. In that second, I had a small inkling of what it must have been like for my mother to lose Patricia. I tried to say this to Mum when she came in, but she dismissed it and concentrated on Emily and how beautiful she was. We never spoke about it. Mum never really spoke about any of her feelings. She carried the pain of Patricia's death for 50 years, for her whole life in fact, without ever speaking about it. When her youngest son, Andrew, was killed in a car accident when he was 29 years old my father was trying to tell her that he was in Heaven and Patricia would look after him and she said, "Why would Patricia do me any favours? It's my fault that she died. I lost my first and I've lost my last."

If she had never really got over losing Patricia, she definitely never got over Andrew's death. We begged her to go to bereavement counselling, "What's the point?" she would say, "It'll only make me cry." I don't think it was uncommon for women, especially of her generation (she was born in 1915), to not talk about their feelings. If you were Catholic, you would suffer and offer it up to God. The Catholic Church does a fine training in martyrdom.

My father had at least one affair I knew about. I'm sure Mum knew too. She was a teacher at Dad's school, unmarried, glamorous. Mum used to spit her name out if ever she came up in conversations – 'Agnes Redmond'. She would snarl and sneer. Of course, she never talked to me about my

father. Perhaps she wanted to leave my dad more than once but she didn't, of course, because people didn't do that. No doubt that is why she never understood me leaving my husband. As far as she was concerned, you married and you stayed married. I could never talk to her about my feelings either.

I guess she must have learned to suppress her feelings from *her* mother. But I was very different. I was a friendly little soul – always smiling – with blonde wavy hair and was always very talkative – to anybody. Everyone said I looked just like Princess Anne (my mother and I made a right royal pair!). I think my mother wondered a lot about what Patricia would have been like because I obviously wasn't turning into the daughter she wanted, the daughter she hoped Patricia would have been. Later, when I worked and ran my own company and left the Catholic Church, and then my husband, it's possible she was jealous. I had made choices for my life that she felt weren't available to her. Maybe we weren't so very different after all. My husband used to say, had she been born 50 years later, she would have been a feminist. "I certainly would not!" she would reply, indignant.

I am in no doubt that I got my strength and determination from my mother.

She was one strong woman. She didn't marry until she was 26 years old, which was late in those days. My father pursued her relentlessly. He came from a family of market traders and his father George was small and always wore a raincoat. My mother's father, James, was the mill manager at the local mill. He was tall and held himself as stiffly as his starched white collar. He always wore a waistcoat. Men used to doff their caps to him when they saw him. I think her parents always looked down on my father, so my mother was brought up to see people as 'more thans' and 'less thans'. She saw everyone in those terms. "She's common," was the reason given about more than one girl who my mother thought wasn't fit to be my friend. I'm sure her parents didn't want her to marry my dad, but she must have held out.

She was a teacher all her life. In fact, she was one of the first women of her generation to become a teacher and was much-loved as one for 40 years. Of course, she had to leave teaching as soon as she became pregnant, but she always went back to it as soon as she could. Yet, being one of the first role models of her generation as a professional working mother didn't make her sympathetic in the least to my career choices as a working mother myself.

She had some rare talents, including a beautiful soprano voice, even in her 80s. She always regretted that she wasn't able to train her voice but her mother wouldn't pay for it. Instead, she learned to play the piano and got the highest qualification one could. In her 70s, she started practising again and took the playing exams again to prove to herself she could still do it. She was also a fine tennis player. The men at the tennis club always wanted her to play with them because she was as good as any man. I remember watching her on Saturday afternoons in the bathroom as she rubbed tanning lotion into each of her legs to cover the ghostly whiteness. The lotion had a distinct smell which spoke to me of hot sunny days and the thwack of tennis balls.

Mum had strong views on many things and didn't have a problem voicing them. In 1975, when the UK was voting on whether to stay in the common market, she was out campaigning against it and getting people to sign petitions. One evening my father arrived home from a meeting to find our front room full of strangers who had turned up at the door to sign her petition. I am sure she would have been out campaigning for Brexit if she had been alive. She was a *Daily Express* reader and very right wing. She believed everything she read in that paper. Once, when my own daughters were young and my parents were visiting, we were all watching *BBC News* together. As it was July 14, the newsreader commented on Bastille Day and ended the news with an *'au revoir'*. My mother and father nearly had heart attacks on the spot.

"What is the BBC doing speaking French for God's sake?" Mum screamed in shock.

"The bloody French sold us down the river in the war. They're all bastards," Dad exclaimed.

"Language, George," commented Mum.

"Listen to this, girls. This is what racism sounds like," I warned.

As I was growing up, my mother wielded a lot of power over me.

Feisty though I was as a child, I was usually under my mother's control.

I didn't have friends round to the house, no one did in those days. My school friends didn't live close by, so I never saw them outside school hours. I was only 12 when the swinging sixties began and so a large chunk of the decade of free love passed me by. I was 17 before I started going out in the evenings. I came across a holiday photo from when I was 15 – I had my school blazer on for goodness sake! What makes a teenage girl, who is lusting after every boy she sees, wear a school blazer on holiday? As my mother was a terrible snob and overly concerned with what other people thought, maybe she hoped that people would recognise the blazer as being from a girls' grammar school. Or maybe she just had no idea how teenagers dressed. To be fair, I didn't either! And how did I agree to it anyway? I'm even smiling in the photo.

My liberation began when I went to college. Although it was a Catholic college with lots of nuns there, they weren't strict at all. I began to live my own life. I still didn't wear jeans, though. They were banned at home and I didn't start wearing them until I was married. But, bit by bit, I managed to move away from my mother's orbit. Yet, she was still able to insist that I have a graduation photo taken. I had been crying all morning after a row with her, so I deliberately look sullen and unsmiling in the photo. It would actually have been a lovely photo if I had smiled.

She disapproved of many of my views. "Who did you get that daft idea from?" she'd say and never credited me with thinking about anything for myself. So, of course, I stopped telling her things. I started to hate her right-wing views and the more I became alienated from the Catholic Church, the more I became alienated from her too. Yet, she was a very kind woman in many ways. She was very involved in the parish and ran the choir at church and played the organ. She was still taking food parcels to 'my old people' – who were younger than her – well into her 80s. She

walked up the hill, in all weather, to attend daily Mass and read at church. She was reading the epistle the day before she had her stroke. And during the four years I was away at college, she wrote to me every single week, even if the letter was only to tell me she had nothing to tell me!

She lived for 10 years after my father died. By this time, I was married with daughters of my own and living over 100 miles away. I think I had disappointed her in many ways: I had refused to have a traditional wedding; I had married someone she didn't particularly like who was left-wing and anti-Catholic; I had moved to London straight after I married, then travelled abroad with my husband and lived in a van for a year; I had decided then that, after seven years teaching, I didn't want to teach my whole life and left my job with no other job lined up; I had insisted that she didn't buy my daughters girly presents but gender neutral ones; I was in constant conflict with the local parish priest.

On just about everything possible, my mother and I differed in our views.

I would phone her weekly, more out of duty more than desire. When my daughters think of me and my mother, they think of me sitting in my kitchen next to the boiler speaking to her on the phone, my head in my hands and the phone at my ear, looking pained and strained.

This wasn't the relationship I wanted with her and I did make efforts to improve things. We had a nice exchange of long letters where I found out things about *her* life I hadn't known. It was one month after this exchange when I thought things were finally improving between us that I travelled for four hours to see her on her birthday – two hours there and two hours back – and took her lots of small gifts I had put great thought into. I mentioned while I was there that I was starting a Catholic feminist group in my small town. The week after, I got a long letter from her beginning, "My dearest Geraldine. Since you visited, I can't stop thinking about you and…"

In my head, I had read the lines, "How lovely it was to see you and how thoughtful for you to drive all that way and bring me such lovely gifts."

What she actually wrote was: "…and worrying about your daft idea of starting a Catholic feminist group. For goodness sake, Geraldine, please drop the idea." She gave a defence of the hierarchy of the Church, then continued: "You have to look after: 1) your husband; 2) your children; 3) your house; 4) your job. In that order and, of course, your own health, to be able to cope with everything."

I leant against the unit in the kitchen where I was reading the letter, devastated. Why could she never accept my views and my desires? The lovely exchange we had had only one month before was wiped out. It always seemed like I was bending over backwards to understand her point of view and she made no effort to understand mine.

I remember taking her to Canada to see her brother, who she loved and lived there. I was going to stay for three weeks and then my sister-in-law was going to come out for the following three weeks to bring her home. I got us a business class ticket on Air India, as it was cheap. But, of course, they served curry on the plane and my mother wanted potatoes, so she didn't eat anything. She told me on the flight about her best friend Gladys, whose grown-up daughter Judith took her out for lunch every week. She would often tell me about how often Gladys saw Judith. I always replied that if I didn't live 100 miles away, I would be able to do that too. She would say, "Oh, I realise that, but I was just telling you about Gladys and Judith." Then she said, "Judith is taking Gladys away to Llandudno for a few days for a holiday."

I said, "Your daughter is taking you to Canada for three weeks to see your beloved brother."

Mum replied, "Ah, but it's not the seaside."

When we arrived in Toronto, Mum pointed to her bag coming off the carousel. Foolishly, I never checked it, so we didn't realise we had the wrong bag until we were boarding the coach to take us to our hotel. I was less than pleased, not altogether sympathetic to the situation and not a bit compassionate towards her. We had to rush back through the airport and beg them to let us into the baggage area again. Mum was panting and distressed. I was mean. I'm not proud of how I was that day.

There were many examples of how I was hurt by something she said. When I did eventually take her to Llandudno for a few days, we had our usual kind of conversation as we were inspecting our bedroom. Always seeking her approval, even when in my 40s, I said, “Do you like my new haircut?”

She said, “It’s shorter than you usually have. I prefer it longer,” closely followed by, “Those trousers make your stomach look fat.”

I turned to her, exasperated, and said, “Is there *anything* about me you like?”

At this, she flung her arms round my neck and said, “I adore you.”

She held onto me tightly and I teared up. And it’s clear from her letters that she *had* reached out to me too, but we could never seem to bridge the gap between us.

Any expressions of love from her have clearly been buried beneath years of my anger which served to erase memories of her that would have allowed me to see her in a kinder light.

After my younger brother died, Mum’s thoughts always seemed to be about him. I phoned her and said I wanted to come and talk to her. When I arrived we sat in her front room. My father was in the corner making his rug with his coloured strands of wool laid out in colour-coordinated bands on the arm of his chair. My mother and I sat in separate chairs. The gas fire was full on, so your shins were burned but as soon as you went to the back of the room you froze to death. Dad asked if we wanted him to leave and I asked him to stay in case we forgot any important part of the conversation we were going to have.

Mum clearly wasn’t going to say anything, so I started, “Mum, I don’t feel good about our relationship. I will never understand your pain at losing Andrew, but you still have three children who are alive. You have me and I’m here, but you never seem to see me. You’re not interested in my work and you criticise me about how I live my life: for being away from home too often, not looking after my husband enough, spending too much time on things unconnected to my family, being too old to dye my hair, working so hard I neglect my children… the list is endless. I can’t seem to do anything

right. Why aren't you interested in me and my life? That's all I want but you never see me." I said everything that was on my mind and through it all Mum never looked at me but stared ahead at the switched-off TV.

When I finished, she said, "I think I am critical of you working because my view is that you should be home with your children, to be there at least when they come home from school. My mother was always there for me."

I had a sudden flash of insight. "But you weren't there for me when I was a child! John and I had to come home from school to an empty, cold house, sometimes having run home all the way through the rain and then had to set a fire with paper spills and coal and try and get some warmth into the room."

My mother denied this. "That's not true," she protested. "I was there for you."

I appealed to my father, "Dad, help me out here. Was she there or not?"

My father was *very* good with numbers (he was a maths teacher). He worked out that she had returned to teaching until she had Andrew, and she had had Andrew when I was 10 years old so, when I was seven and eight, I had indeed been coming home to an empty house. Thank goodness my father was there to confirm this.

"So," I continued, "you seem to have skipped a generation and you are judging me by your mother's behaviour, not your own."

Was she just guilty about how she had 'neglected' her own children and projected it onto me? Maybe. I left the lounge to take a phone call in the hall and I heard my father say, "So, do you think that is going to make any difference, then, to how you two get on?"

My mother replied frostily, "Well, if it doesn't, I don't know what will."

It didn't.

The last time I tried to communicate honestly with her was when I was explaining to her why I was separating from my husband, Martin. I was now approaching 50 years of age. There were just the two of us sitting in my lounge. I opened my heart to her about my marriage and my ordination as an interfaith minister. She was looking at me the whole time and I thought, *My goodness, she is really listening to me!* After I finished speaking, she

said, “You know when I used to come and see you at college, the principal would tell me what a fine girl you were, how the other girls looked up to you and how you were a great president of the Students’ Union, how you were going to be an excellent teacher and what a great role model you were.” She paused, then continued, “What happened to you?”

My stomach lurched and I opened my arms wide. “I’m here, Mum,” I said simply. “I’m still here.”

That was the last time I tried to talk with her.

I dropped any expectations that day that anything would ever be any different.

But there came a day when things did become different. Our usual pattern was that she would criticise me and I would tell her that I was a wife, a mother and a businesswoman; that my family were happy; that my children were great; that they were all leading their own full lives, but my mother didn’t seem to listen. I was still caught between being irritated and angry with my mother, yet wanting her approval. I would regularly scream at her (in my head) to accept me as I was and stop wanting me to be different.

But one particular day, in my kitchen, a miracle happened. I suddenly realised that while I was screaming for my mother to accept me, I was not accepting my mother at all. Here she was, her 80 years of life, much of which I knew nothing about; her 80 years of disappointments and pain that she never talked about; and her best efforts at bringing up a daughter who had not lived up to her expectations. And I was wanting her to be a different kind of mother. I wanted her to change and be more supportive. I would complain, *If only she would accept me as I am*. Yet, in that moment, I realised that I was not at all as accepting of my mother. So, right then, in my kitchen, I accepted my mother exactly as she was, with her 80 years of pain, pleasure and efforts. I blessed her and loved her and vowed that I would never again expect my mum to be different – she was absolutely fine as she was. I felt wonderful and a great peace descended on me. I told no one what I had experienced and went about my business.

The next day the phone rang. It was my mother; this was very rare. She hardly ever phoned me on the grounds that, “I never know if you’re going to be there”. Here she was, on the phone.

“Hi Mum,” I said. “How are you?”

Mum said, “I remembered that you said you were working abroad this week. I just wondered how it had gone…”

Wow! I had to sit down. *What had happened?* What had happened was that I had changed my perception of my mother and changed the whole dynamic between us. Although my mother had not been told what my thought process had been, somehow, at some level, she had felt the energy of connection that I had created inside of myself and responded to it. I hadn’t done it in order to change my mother. I didn’t even know that would happen. I did it to bring some peace to my heart. But, by choosing peace and practising acceptance, I brought about a change in the relationship, which wasn’t dependent on my mother changing. Of course, I had to do this many times!

On my annual visit to see my friend Mary in the US, there would always be a point at which I would say, “I *have* to talk to you about my mother. She’s driving me crazy.” But there came a time when, sitting in Mary’s car in a car park, waiting in the heat while she did a quick visit to the grocery store, I had a huge insight about my mother. I often wondered why I had chosen her as my mother (I believe that children choose their parents). What was her purpose in my life? Suddenly, out of the heat, in that car in the car park came my answer – she was there to give me the opportunity to choose peace in every moment – and usually I blew it. This helped me enormously from then on. Each time my mother said something critical, and I could feel the irritation building inside my body, I would stop and breathe and say to myself, “Thanks, Mum. I’m not going there. I’m choosing peace. Thanks for the reminder.” Of course, I had to do that many times too!

After she had her stroke, everything changed. She was discharged from hospital and was in a nursing home for a year before she died. She had a feeding tube in her stomach and she couldn’t speak. Once I was no longer waiting for her to say something to me that she wouldn’t say to me, all my irritation just fell away.

All there was left was a fierce love for her and a desire for her to be comfortable and treated with dignity.

I was living in Ireland by now and, as my brother John and his wife Wendy had borne the brunt of being on-hand to address my mother's needs, I stepped up to do my bit. I checked out the best local nursing homes for her, I took care of her financial affairs and insisted on organising her funeral exactly as I knew she would want it. It took her stroke to remove the barriers between us but, by then, we had no time to enjoy a fruitful relationship.

At the funeral, many people came up to me and said things like, "Oh, you're the wonderful Geraldine. Your mother always talked about you. You were such a good daughter to her." I didn't feel that I had been a good daughter at all. My daughter Amy, who heard these comments time after time, became increasingly annoyed. "So, why the bloody hell didn't she tell you, then?" she fumed.

She probably did, in ways I never recognised. Sad that.

I'm sure she loved me, but never in the way I wanted. And the love that she undoubtably did give me, I didn't value enough. I swore that my daughters would never feel that way about me. But the mother/ daughter relationship is complex and I'm not sure I entirely succeeded in that.

Chapter 4: Being My Father's Daughter

"My father didn't tell me how to live. He lived and let me watch him do it."
Clarence Budington Kelland

My relationship with my father was much less complicated than the one I had with my mother. In truth, I didn't have a strong emotional connection with him. He was the traditional man and father of the house. He was the boss, and you did what you were told. Whereas my elder brother, Daniel, had his challenges and conflicts with Dad, mine were always with Mum. I always felt I had my father's approval, but never sought it. The approval I sought was my mother's.

Yet, as I reflect now, I seem to know a lot more about him than I do about my own mum. He had less to do with my life – it was Mum who came to my parents' evenings and school productions. Dad never came to one and so I learned never to expect it. Therefore, I saw him as being outside of any unmet expectations and emotional conflict and was able to see him more clearly as a result. He was a lot more outgoing and loved to talk about himself!

Dad wasn't particularly tall and had a slight build and thinning hair from when he was young. He was good looking in his younger days and had a broad forehead, deep brown eyes, a wide smile and a loud laugh that forced you to laugh too.

I remember him now in terms of *what* he liked and what he *was* like.

In terms of what he liked, cricket came top of the list. His first love had been football and he played in the reserves for Manchester United. Then he had cartilage problems and that finished his football aspirations, so he turned to cricket. He was a fine batsman and became something of a local hero. His record for the total number of runs scored in a season stood for over 50 years. He got a trial to play cricket for Lancashire County but the railway, where he worked, wouldn't give him the time off and said that if he went, they would sack him – one of the many frustrations in his life.

However, he played for his local team, Farnworth Cricket Club, every Saturday – much to the chagrin of my mother – and would even come home mid-holiday to play, which caused many a row.

He was the favourite local sportsman and was always being featured on the sports pages.

He kept all the press cuttings in a scrap book. Years after he had stopped playing, I was speaking at an event over 200 miles from Farnworth. Someone who had not expressed a flicker of interest in what I was talking about, approached me afterwards and said, “You don’t know George Bown, do you?”

I said that he was my father.

His face lit up. “Eeh,” he said, “I used to watch him at Farnworth every Sat’day. He were a fine cricketer.”

His memory rekindled such a spark of joy. What a gift my father had to be able to bring such happy memories after all those years. After he had stopped playing, he became chairperson, first of Farnworth Cricket Club, and later, of the Bolton Cricket League. He also became known as a great after dinner speaker.

His other great love was teaching. He had been ‘emergency trained’ after the war and became a maths teacher – he was definitely a numbers guy. It’s hard to teach pupils the value of filling baths with spoons of water and calculating how long it would take (mathematics teaching in the 1950s and 1960s was not very creative, to say the least!). He would tell the story of one of his classes who were supposed to be the dropouts and unteachable. One of his pupils asked Dad if he was going to put a bet on the Grand National and Dad, knowing the pupil spent a lot of his time in the betting shop, asked him for a hot tip. The young lad proceeded to work out all the odds on most of the horses, doing complex calculations depending on how much you bet, whether you wanted a win or a ‘place’ (first, second or third) and how much you might win, depending on the odds. Dad would shake his head as he told this story. “I couldn’t work out all that,” he said. “And they

say these lads are thick. It's because they're being taught stuff completely irrelevant to their lives."

He was before his time, my dad.

He was a teacher until he retired, and listening to him talk about his pupils was my inspiration when I started my teaching career.

I learned from him that success was not to be measured in exam results but in whether a pupil, as a result of your teaching, would hear something that day which would mean that they would see things differently from then on. Some of those pupils and their children, whom he also taught, came to his funeral and spoke fondly of him.

He rose to be Head of Department and would have made a great Head Teacher because he had excellent people skills with staff and pupils but, because he didn't have a degree, was told that any applications from non-graduates would be binned. The man who became Head Teacher at my dad's school was a graduate but was also so incompetent that Dad couldn't mention his name without saying the word 'idiot' in the same sentence. That frustration never left him and I'm sure contributed to at least one of his four heart attacks. But he bounced back from them all and never saw himself as an invalid.

His ability to connect with people was what made him a great speaker. His stories were legendary and we never tired of hearing them. He used to say, "The best storyteller has scant regard for the truth."

He was known for his storytelling, his wit, his humour and his speeches.

There was much laughter in our house and his telling of his stories always made us laugh. I am often accused of changing a story every time I tell it. Dad taught me the importance of holding the audience and although I heard his stories so many times, I enjoyed them afresh because they would be slightly different each time he told them. I take after him in that respect.

My daughters would say to me, "You change that story every time you tell it."

I would reply, “Well, I don’t want you to get bored. I have a duty to entertain my audience,” an answer my father would have been proud of. Any performance skills I have, I attribute to my father.

It was probably the war and the camaraderie between the men in the Royal Air Force that gave him the basis for such strong people connections. You were dependent on one another and facing life and death situations when you were up in a plane. Dad was a navigator, tasked to bring people home safely from their bombing missions. He told the story of one poor man who died in my father’s arms in great pain. He told my dad that he couldn’t think of one thing he had done in his life without expecting some reward for it. It affected my father deeply and, after the war, he started to give blood, which he did monthly for over 30 years, gaining an award for his dedication.

In later years, when his speaking engagements finished, he took to rug making and jigsaws. This suited the quieter lifestyle he adopted after his last heart attack. He did each of these activities mathematically. He would sit in his favourite chair in the front room with his slippered feet in front of the fire and design his rugs himself on paper. Then he would send for the wool and sort it into different colours laid out on the arms of his chair. He would have his earphones on, listening to the football scores and be perfectly content. His huge multi-piece jigsaws were on a table at the back of the room. The jigsaw pieces would be laid around the border, colour-coded, of course, with all the edge pieces being placed first. My daughters used to love going in to see Grandpa and seeing if they could fit in any of the pieces for him.

There are many words that come to mind when I think about what my father was like: kind, generous, methodical, religious.

I think his religion drove his kindness. He saw kindness as a duty.

He supported his sister Kathleen, whose husband had run off, leaving her with four children. She drew on the strength of my father in her times of difficulty. The eldest of her children, Tony, was someone who would be termed a joker and indeed, he wanted to be a comedian. He was getting

into trouble at school and Dad arranged for him to come to our house every night to do his homework in the kitchen with us. Of course, very little work was done as Tony would try out all his jokes on us. We loved it when we saw him coming. And Dad took under his wing another young boy from his school who needed some love and stability. He was a compulsive liar and we liked nothing more than to get him to tell us stories that he swore were true and we knew weren't! We stayed in contact with him for years and, on one occasion, my husband and I went to pick him up from prison and brought him to our house as he had nowhere to go and only a carrier bag to his name. I learned about being charitable from my parents.

Dad was very generous. Whenever I was unhappy at college I would hitch a lift home for the weekend (in those days you would always be safe if you wore your college scarf as that's how all students got around) and know that my dad would drive me back on the Sunday, even though that would be a four-hour round trip for him. And before I went back, I would raid the food cupboard and cram as many tins and packets of biscuits as I could into my bag. Never a word of complaint from Dad. And when my youngest brother, Andrew, took up tennis, Dad would ferry him around to the various tournaments he was playing in. Dad never complained when he was doing something for his children.

When we were all married and strapped for money, we could always borrow from Dad. We called it the 'Bown Bank'. We could borrow what we wanted and just had to pay back the interest he would have got on the money in the bank. We could pay off the balance whenever we could. He had a little green notebook. I and my two brothers had separate sections and Dad would adjust it every month, working out the interest for that month and reworking it if we paid off any of the balance. He set many precedents for what parents are supposed to do and from which our own children are benefiting! And although I and my two brothers have all turned out to be so different from each other, he made it clear that he was immensely proud of each of us. Our family celebrations were always very happy affairs and Dad loved being at the head of it all.

Dad was known for his counting. He counted everything. In the morning, when he cleaned out the grate, he would turn the ashes lever 17 times.

When he shaved, he started with the same cheek each time, rubbing his cheek furiously a set number of times as he planned his lessons for the day. He used to cut Andrew's chips because Andrew liked his chips crinkle cut and Mum did the chips straight cut, so Dad did Andrew's. Mum said it was ridiculous that Andrew had to have different chips. And Andrew counted like Dad did. Once, when we were at the table commenting on how Dad spoiled him (Andrew was in his 20s at the time), we commented that Andrew should marry Dad because he'd never find a wife who would treat him as well. And then I added, "I bet you even know how many chips you cut for him!" Andrew and Dad both said '46' in unison (my brother loved chips!).

But Dad's best numbers story was a war one. Each Friday in the Mess there would be a poker game and it would usually be the same men in the poker school. Lots of men would stand around and watch the games. Dad studied them all for six months – he looked at who got a red spot on their cheek when they had a good hand, who had a slight twitch if they were bluffing, whose foot tapped if they were nervous. After six months, he wrote to Mum and said that he was going to play poker and gamble, just the once. He played and he cleaned up. It wasn't the money, it was the satisfaction. He was a master card player. Playing bridge or solo with him was a nightmare because he could remember every card that had been played and who had the highest lead in each suit. It was really difficult to beat him. I have inherited his predilection for numbers. Apart from studying maths myself as part of my degree, I count every step whenever I go up or down stairs. It's not a big deal and it doesn't mean anything, it's just something I do without thinking.

His Catholic religion was really important to him. He would say, "This is a helluva hard religion to live in but a helluva good one to die in." He tells the story of when he was talking to God at an Easter service. He had conversations with God long before Neale Donald Walsch came on the scene with his best seller, *Conversations with God*. Like Walsch, my father was railing at God because his life wasn't working for him.

He said to God: “Okay, I’m going to talk to the other fellow then,” nodding to the floor where he was imagining hell to be situated. “I bet he’ll listen to me.”

At that moment the priest came on the altar to start the service, which began, “Repeat after me, I do renounce the devil and all his works.” Dad said he raised his eyes up and said, “Well you heard me then, didn’t you?”

I think his religion was why he and my mum stayed together while we were growing up.

They were never very affectionate towards each other, but people of that generation weren’t given to displays of affection. I’m not really sure how happy either of them was but they both had an attitude of ‘you make your bed and you lie in it’. They were together for over 50 years and in their later years clearly enjoyed their companionship.

It was when he was much younger that he had an affair with the deputy head teacher, Agnes Redmond, at his school, which I didn’t know for sure until after his death. Maybe it was because he was conflicted about it that his temper outbursts increased. He subsequently introduced that woman to his best friend in his card school at the cricket club, perhaps the easiest way for him to finish the relationship with her. She was single and the friend was a widower. They went off together and got married, so Dad lost his lover and his best friend at the same time.

Between his football career being cut short, his unfulfilled ambition in cricket to play for his county (or maybe even his country), his unfulfilled ambition in teaching and any frustration with Mum, who definitely wasn’t interested in sex (Dad told me that when I was a teenager – quite inappropriately, I thought, even at the time), it’s perhaps no wonder that he had an anger problem. Unfortunately, that always presented as rage. He wouldn’t just get angry, he would lose control. Once, as he was vigorously polishing his shoes (the statutory number of times for shoe polishing), he suddenly threw the brush across the room and stormed out of the house. Another time, when I was studying for my O Levels (now GCSEs), Mum excused me from doing any kitchen jobs. My father came in, saw the

kitchen and went berserk. He shouted at me and reduced me to tears. It transpired he was having a nervous breakdown. Dad took to his bed and Mum sent me upstairs, because he wanted to apologise, which he did through his tears. It was only the second time in my life I had seen him cry and I hated it. I hated his anger too. I already had a problem confronting people who were important to me and seeing my father angry cemented the feeling that I should *never* show anger because I equated anger with rage. It made me even more averse to any personal conflict. It stopped me expressing anger and I'm sure it stopped me even feeling it. And I passed that on to my daughters, unfortunately – never being comfortable with any expressions of anger and always wanting to just talk it out.

It was years before I realised that anger and rage are very different and that anger is, in fact, a healthy emotion.

Maybe his rage contributed to his fourth heart attack. At any rate, Dad became much calmer when he had recovered and considerably changed his lifestyle. He stopped going to his club on a Friday evening and stopped doing speaking engagements or dinners. He said that when he was on the table and they were trying to get his heart going with the defibrillator they tried three times but got no response. In fact, Dad said he felt those charges and they 'hurt like hell'. He heard someone say, "He's gone," then someone else said, "Let's just try one more time." That was the try that started his heart again. He tried to find out afterwards who had said that, but no one who was there could remember that being said. My dad considered that he had been given a second chance and he now had time to right any wrongs he had done in his life. He never said what these were and we never asked him, but certainly he and my mother seemed to be closer. Their roles were reversed now. She was the one going out and involved with church groups. Dad was quite happy with his rugs and his jigsaws and never got worked up over things like he had done before. He lived for another 10 years after that last heart attack. Every day was a bonus for him, and for us too.

By the time I was 45 years old with a husband and two children, I was living two and a half hours' drive from my parents'. My father was taken into hospital with a lung infection. Although he had a history of heart problems this infection had nothing to do with his heart. He had been in hospital for four days and I was in close touch with my brother John who lived nearby. On the evening of the fourth day, I asked John to ask the doctor if it was serious and if I should come. He phoned me back at 10pm when he got home (no mobile phones in those days). The doctor had said that everything was fine, there was no cause for alarm and no need for the family to come.

As I sat on the side of my bed at 11pm, I thought about whether or not I should go. The doctor had said not to and if I did go, how long would I stay? Until he came out of hospital? After that even? It was impossible to tell how quickly he would get better and, at this stage, there seemed to be no question that he *would* get better.

I asked myself, *If you go to bed now and your dad dies tonight, will you be able to live with yourself?* I knew that if the answer was, *No, I wouldn't, I would feel guilty forever*, then I had no option but to get in the car and drive to him. But, in light of all the evidence and the medical advice, I decided that in the event that my father *did* die, I *could* live with myself. That this was the best decision I could make, for tonight at least.

I got the phone call from John at about 2.45am saying I should come straight away. I dressed hurriedly and left, leaving my husband behind with the children. Apparently, John phoned my home again at 3:15am saying there was no point, I was too late. But, of course, there was no way to contact me, so on I drove to the hospital, getting there at about 5:30am. I knew as soon as I arrived at the hospital and they took me into a small room that I was too late. Everyone had already gone home with my mother. I am still so thankful that there were no mobile phones because, if there had been, I may well have driven straight to my mother's. As it was, I had a precious hour alone with my father to say goodbye. His body was still warm. And his spirit was still there. I could feel his presence in the room. He had waited for me.

And *did* I feel guilty? No, I didn't. Why? Because I had made a conscious decision not to go, knowing there was a slight chance that

something could happen (where hospitals are concerned, anything might happen). There was no guilt, just immense gratitude for who he was and the life he had lived. I sat in the semi-dark and stroked his arm and told him how much I loved him. Then I went home to my mother.

Chapter 5: Being Confident

"Nothing splendid has ever been achieved except by those who dared believe that something inside of them was superior to circumstance."
Bruce Barton

When I was five years old and in my first class at school we used to end the day with a little ritual. Sister Anselm would stand at the front and make a big exaggerated sign of the cross and say the end of day prayer. That would be followed by, "Good afternoon, children." "Good afternoon, Sister," we would chorus back, and line up by the door. Only when the line was straight and silent did we hear the, "Off you go".

Then came the day that Sister Anselm wasn't in the room and we saw an older boy clanging a bell up and down the corridor, signalling going home time. We watched – horrified – through the glass partition as all the other children filed down the corridor to go home. *We were going to be left! We'd be stuck in school until tomorrow!* I remember realising what had to happen, *we had to do the ritual*. I walked to the front of the class. I stretched out my left hand, so the other children would stretch out their right hands (I knew *exactly* how to do it) and began, "In the name of the father…" and said the prayer. Then I said, "Good afternoon, children," followed by, "Line up," followed by, "Off you go". All the children started to file out. *Good. Job done.*

Then Sister Anselm arrived. She was a small nun with pinched cheekbones and a particularly long nose. She was in such a flurry that her cane with the frayed end (which she held at all times) was getting all caught up in her robes and long rosary with its huge beads that hung down from her waist.

She ushered us back into the classroom and spluttered out, "*Who*? *Who* said you could go?"

I put up my hand. "I did, Sister."

She was beside herself with fury and banged her cane up and down on the desk in front of me using, repeatedly, the favourite phrase of all nuns, "You bold girl."

I sat and watched, head bobbing, as the cane went up and down thinking, *What did I miss out? I said the prayer, I said good afternoon*… I had no sense that I had done anything wrong, even though Sister Anselm clearly thought I had.

I think back to that five-year-old girl and wondered what had possessed me to do that (I was already terrified of Sister Anselm). All I can remember is feeling strongly that something had to be done – the ritual – and I was prepared to do it (none of the other children objected, I suspect they were all relieved).

What I lacked then was the vision to understand the consequences of my action, yet still make the choice to go ahead and do it.

And by the time I was capable of understanding the consequences, I had acquired determination and stubbornness, which are the useful companions of confidence.

It would not be the only time in my life when I would be the one to act while others watched. As I got older, more than a few times I would be in the position of being the one to stand up for something – or to someone – while others promised to do so and then reneged. The consequences weren't always pleasant, but I did it anyway. My sense of 'rightness' gave me the confidence to overcome my fear of the consequences.

I had certainly been given a strong sense of right and wrong by my parents, but 'doing the right thing' mainly consisted of obeying God and obeying your parents. Maybe my confidence developed in reaction to being controlled and a fierce desire to forge my own way and work out for myself what the right thing was in any situation. I don't recall many instances of being empowered at home where the phrase most frequently used was, "Do as you're told."

Confidence has been defined a number of ways, but most people are in agreement that confidence is a feeling of trust in one's abilities, qualities, and judgement (OED). How had I developed such trust in myself at five years old? My confidence was enabled by my being a quick thinker and very articulate. These additions to my skill set meant that I could hide any ignorance that might expose me as a buffoon (always my biggest fear) and

talk my way out of most things. The picture at the beginning of this chapter is from when I was 17 and compering a Scottish evening for the whole school. As I was about to introduce the next dancing act I glanced to the side of the stage and saw to my horror the cassette tape being painstakingly wound back into the cassette. The tape hung down in loops and ribbons. I had to adlib in front of the whole school for 10 minutes while it was fixed so the concert could continue.

The gift of thinking quickly came to my rescue many times. When I was 13 years old, I had to go to the Headmistress, Sister Olivia, with a message. She was a tiny woman who walked quickly and looked quite young when she smiled, until you got up close to her and saw all the lines on her face and the beginnings of a moustache. Her smile hid a mean streak that many a girl experienced first-hand.

Yet, whenever a priest appeared, Sister Olivia would flirt outrageously, giggling and fluttering her eyes. We hated her.

There were only two things you could get expelled for: dyeing your hair and leaving the school premises without permission. I did them both during my school days at the Convent Grammar School.

The first time was on the day I walked into the Headmistress's office, forgetting momentarily that my brother's girlfriend had dyed my hair the evening before. I had gone darker with a touch of auburn, but my hair was definitely not the dull brown it had been previously. Girls at the time were into dyeing their hair blonde but, of course, I wanted to be different (something else my confidence has always allowed me to be), probably because dyed blond hair in those days looked pretty dreadful – dry and straw-like, with dark roots showing – the mark of a 'common' girl, according to my mother.

Sister Olivia spun round in her chair and adopted a surprised and horrified expression, "My dear," she exclaimed, "Your hair!"

Without a flinch, I said, "I know, Sister! Isn't it awful?" I put my hand to my head and adopted a similar horrified look. I continued, "My brother's girlfriend is a hairdresser." This bit was true, but it was the only part of my explanation that was. "She's entering a competition and she needed to

practise and *swore* to me that this would wash out. I've washed it and washed it but can't get it out. I'm so upset." I said all this in one long breath, trying to look as distraught as I could. I thought about bringing myself to tears but decided that was going too far.

Sister Olivia was momentarily taken aback, "What does your mother say?"

"Well, she's furious, Sister. She says I can't go out until it has all washed out. But I don't *want* to go out, Sister, not with hair like this. I don't want anyone to see me like this. I'll just have to keep washing it." The truth was, my mother had never even noticed and anyway, I don't think she even knew those two school rules.

Sister Olivia concluded by trying to sound stern and saying, "Well, don't let that happen again."

"I certainly won't, Sister. I'm not letting her anywhere near my hair in future."

We looked at one another. She knew I was lying and I knew that she knew. But I had won this battle and now the lines had been drawn. My sense of achievement when I left Sister Olivia's office when I was 13 still ranks very highly on my list of 'What are you most proud of?'

I broke the second rule, three years later, when I was 16 and went off shopping with my friend Theresa after our exams and we were threatened with expulsion. Sister Olivia said she would have to bring it to the Board of Governors. My friend was terrified of the consequences she would face at home but I reassured her, "Look, there are far more important things they will discuss at the Governors' meeting. I bet she won't even bring it up. Besides which, we both have unblemished records in school and the school gets paid by the government for every student who goes into the sixth form, so she's not going to lose out on that! Don't tell your parents and watch the post. If a letter arrives for your parents with a school stamp on it, take it before they see it."

So that's what we both did and laughed at the ridiculous letter that said, "As long as there is no recurrence of this irresponsible behaviour we will allow Geraldine (and Theresa) back into school." Our parents knew nothing of it until Theresa and I were 40 years old and I was invited to

Theresa's surprise birthday party. I told this story and everyone there, including Theresa's mother, laughed.

By the time I was a teenager I had a strong sense of my own worth.

Sometimes I felt that others didn't always see it though. *Why was I the only girl not to have a boyfriend? What was wrong with me? And why were my friends so much more attractive than me, so that I always got the ugly friend?* I had no idea what was fashionable and what wasn't and was very self-conscious about my appearance. Maybe that's why I developed such a strong sense of self – to withstand any disappointments. I just assumed I was brilliant. When I was 16 and in the fifth form, our form teacher Sister Paul Mary took us, one by one, outside the classroom and into the wooden hallway and told each of us some home truths. Sister Paul Mary was a very large woman with a very red face. Her bosom pushed out her white 'breast plate' over her long black robe and she leant on the cupboard outside the classroom while she delivered her verdict on our characters. Every girl came back in crying. I couldn't imagine for the life of me what she was going to say to me. I went outside and she drew herself up to be even taller.

"I have only one thing to say to you," she roared, "You're bumptious."

I had never heard that word before and assumed it was something good. I mean, why wouldn't it be something good? "Thank you very much, Sister," I said, demurely.

She nearly had a heart attack on the spot. "It's not a compliment, child," she spluttered. But that ability to always see myself in a very good light never left me.

The confidence I displayed at school was related to my understanding the system and working it to my advantage – as well as infuriating my mother, of course – such as failing my O Levels I didn't think I needed.

Maybe I had realised early in my life that there was only me who would really have my back.

My father had always drilled into us, “You are here to save your own soul. Nothing more, nothing less.” I used to think it was a profoundly selfish attitude but now I see that it is really about personal responsibility. Not blaming anyone for what happens to you and making happen what you want to happen but always imbued with that sense of right and wrong.

When I became a teacher, I taught for seven years in various schools, teaching pupils from 11-16 years of age. It was assumed you would gradually move up the teaching grades but after two years on grade one, I applied for a grade three job. My teaching friends were incredulous, saying, “You can’t do that!” But I did, and when the head teacher asked me why I had applied for a grade three job and not grade two, I said, “Because I’m worth it and you will see that.” Those were the days when you could do what you wanted behind your classroom door. As long as your exam results were okay, no one cared what you did. I had a great time doing things with my students which would never make any curriculum, like including Edward De Bono’s *Thinking Lessons* in the timetable for my English classes, comparing the results from my brightest class with my non-exam class. The non-exam class were more creative thinkers by far. My brightest class had already been schooled into **what** to think rather than **how** to think.

I had decided that I would be a deputy head by the time I was 30 and running my own school by the time I was 35 and had no doubt at all that I would do it. But just at the point where my next position would have been head of department (and therefore, part of the senior management team of the school) I decided I didn’t want to teach for the next 30 years and there might be other things I could do just as well. I loved teaching and I was good at it but what about all the other million things I could do that I would also be good at?

I had learned I didn’t want to do anything unless I was going to be really good at it.

If I tried a new sport and didn’t show Olympic potential in about 20 minutes, I packed it in. I knew I could make it as a teacher, so I wanted to

turn my hand to something else I might be equally good at. If I didn't excel, I would do something else.

I set up my own business, which I have had now for over 30 years. It combined all the skills I had learned over the years, not least of which was being my own boss and being a big fish in a little pond. While those two principles were in play, there was nothing that could destroy my confidence. When I went to see the local bank manager for a loan to set up my business, I asked for £5000 and had a hand-written list on one sheet where the top item was 'clothes'. I hadn't worked in a professional capacity for three years while I was being a mother to my first born and I needed a new wardrobe. Dungarees and trainers just weren't going to cut it. The bank manager was a jovial Yorkshire man who was near to retirement so, with my strong Lancashire accent, we had our Northernness in common.

He leant back in his leather chair and faced me across his desk. "Tell me about yourself," he said.

I spoke about what I wanted to do, writing self-instructional materials for learners in organisations and the details about what that entailed.

After a few minutes he said, "Well, I don't understand a word you're talking about but I'm sure you're going to be very successful. How much do you want?" Of course, it wouldn't be so easy for new start-ups to get money now.

I think confidence is an external demonstration of deeply held principles.

For me, these principles are a deep trust that everything will be okay and that I will be looked after. The Catholic religion gave me that initially. I trusted that God would look after me, no matter what. My parents gave me that security regarding finances. I knew that, no matter what, I could always go to them if I needed to. My children have had the same assurances from me and their father. But that trust is still there in matters not related to money. When I was going through my marriage breakup, which took five years and was very painful I would ask God – or the angels, my guides, anyone! – why it was *so* difficult and why I was hurting so much. I would always get back the answer, "You're in the right place and you're right on

time." That mantra has always sustained me and I have passed it onto many people to sustain them too. When I lost all my savings in a foolish investment which meant I couldn't retire I knew I would still be okay. I allowed myself to be angry and miserable for three days, then I started with a new plan. I guess a love of planning helps too. If I make a plan and it doesn't work, part of me doesn't mind because I can just make a new plan and I *love* that part.

Yet, you can't be confident of your plan if you're not able to think clearly to devise a plan in the first place. So, the link between clarity of thought and confidence is established. And then the principle of 'no such thing as a wrong decision' kicks in. I believe that if you decide to do something and then you happen to get new information the next week, the next month, the next year, you just make another decision. It doesn't mean that your first decision was wrong. Your first decision was based on the information you had at the time and your attitude and health at that time. It's always: choose, and choose again, and choose again…

Maybe I developed my spiritual beliefs in order to hold up my confidence, to make sure it wouldn't be dented. Or maybe my confidence allowed me the luxury of adopting the spiritual beliefs that suited me and my lifestyle.

But maybe the strongest characteristic of what you need for confidence is the willingness to take risks – to stand up and be counted – to put yourself out in front.

In the early years of my business, the idea of women returning to work was just taking hold as an issue – women returners was what people were talking about. A big recruiting agency was putting on a series of regional conferences and someone contacted me and asked if I would speak at my local conference in Nottingham. I asked what the launch event was and was told there would be a big national event at the Queen Elizabeth II Centre in London. I said I would rather speak at that one and they said they had all the speakers for that. I asked who was speaking, the keynote was being delivered by a cabinet minister. I knew then that he wouldn't make it. He would be bound to be called into Downing Street at the last minute for

an important Cabinet Meeting. I said, “Here is what I’ll do, I’ll keep my diary completely free for that day and if anyone pulls out at the last minute then know that you can call on me.”

Of course, the minister pulled out and I did the keynote in my first major public speaking engagement. The recruitment agency took a big risk too – no one had heard me speak before!

That gig started off my public speaking life. Confidence pays big dividends! Yet, I continue to ponder that continuum between confidence and bumptiousness. Can you have one without the other being present? I know there is a certain arrogance in my nature I have to work all the time to curb. Being confident yet still humble is a challenge for me. I’ve had to learn that knowing my own worth doesn’t mean I have to insist that everyone else knows it too! And loving myself has to lie alongside loving everyone else – and not supersede it.

Chapter 6: Being Privileged

"The value systems of those with access to power and of those far removed from such access cannot be the same. The viewpoint of the privileged is unlike that of the underprivileged."
Aung San Suu Kyi

We start at school when we are children of five years old and we leave at 18, when we are adults. We move between home and school for 13 years, probably spending more consecutive hours at school than at home, where we end up sleeping most of the time anyway. School has a huge impact on how we develop as individuals and future contributors to society. I've therefore been wondering what exactly I learned while at school.

My education started well enough. I used to follow my older brother, John, to school, apparently. He had started the year before me. I would sit outside the school gates, waiting for him to finish at lunchtime. How I came to be wandering around the streets when I was four years old is beyond me to understand, but it certainly demonstrated my eagerness to go to school.

I don't remember much about my junior school, which I attended until I was 11 years old.

But the most important thing I learned, albeit unconsciously, was about privilege.

It sealed into my DNA all my privileged statuses. There was firstly my white privilege, consolidated by the fact that I never saw one black pupil or teacher, so I never had to consider anything to do with black people's lives or existence. I remember my father joking once when I came in and asked where Mum was, "She's run off with a black man," was his reply and everyone laughed, because that was clearly the most ridiculous thing imaginable. And even when I became aware of the increasing numbers of Pakistanis and Indians in the UK population, that awareness would be filled with what I was told was not 'okay' about them: they're taking our jobs; they never mix; they smell of garlic; they never wash their hair; they have tons of them living in one house. 'Paki bashing' was a favourite way for youths to

spend their Friday nights. If we *did* think about black – African and Caribbean children – it would be because they were so poor and deprived they needed white Christians to save them, so children in school were encouraged to give money for these poor wretches. Early lessons in seeing people who were different from us as 'less thans'. How can white people NOT be racist when this has been our foundation. Re-educating ourselves about how we perceive black people - and indeed anyone who is different from us - is a life long journey.

Then there was my Catholic privilege. I 'knew' I was in the one true religion. In fact, it was years before I realised just how many other religions there were. We were told that we would just have to pray that God would allow them into Heaven – Catholics would be there as a right, of course, provided you did everything the priest told you to do.

We were God's elite and that certitude settled into my soul.

And of course there was my intellectual privilege. I was clever. It was as simple as that. Other children just weren't as clever as me, so when they didn't pass their 11+ (for grammar school) they had to go to the secondary modern school. Grammar school was where you would study academic subjects and pass exams to get to university. The secondary modern school was where you did the practical subjects, like woodwork and needlecraft. Everyone knew that that was the school for those who weren't going to make anything of their lives – academic excellence was the only thing valued. The comprehensive school system, combining grammar and secondary modern school children was introduced in England and Wales in 1965 when I was 17, so it didn't affect my education. Being clever gave you access to opportunities the less clever didn't have. To this day, I am drawn to clever people, even though my experience has shown me that often there is an inverse correlation between intellectual intelligence and emotional intelligence.

The only practical subjects I studied were domestic science, where I learned how to cut the crusts off cucumber sandwiches, and art, where I learned that I couldn't draw or paint. There were no subjects like the humanities (combining history and geography), or sociology, or psychology

or anything resembling life skills. The nearest life skills class I got was in the girl guides, where I learned how to make lemon curd, how to darn socks and how to make beds with hospital corners for my homemaker badge. But, as I was 'clever', I didn't need to worry about such things. I was at the top of the academic pile and would be going on to more worthwhile pursuits.

None of these privileges were in my conscious mind as thoughts, but they were part of my being, which led me to have a superior view of myself and probably contributed to how confident I felt.

They also led me to develop a generally superior attitude to others. No mistake then that I have been teaching about diversity and inclusion the last 30 years ('we teach what we most need to learn').

The Girls' Convent Grammar School was two blocks from my house, up a steep incline, followed by a less steep one. I could hear the school bell from my bedroom and was often late. I would get into trouble for this because, "Girls have to get here on two buses and they can get here on time," and would respond with a line I got from my father, "Well, Sister, if they are late, they can hurry up, can't they? Which I can't do as I'm only across the road."

Once, not long after I had started school and when I was late and hurrying up the hill at ten to nine, a man stopped me on the corner of the first hill and asked me where some place was. I didn't know and said so. I remember he was a tall man with a raincoat on and he had a thin face and extremely thin, curly lips. He asked me again and, being the polite little girl that I was, I suggested that he just walk down the hill to the main road and ask someone there. He carried on looking me and then said, "I could just fuck you."

I froze to the spot and managed a "Pardon?" in a very small voice.

He repeated what he had said, "I could just fuck you," the whole time looking at me with a sneer curling round his thin lips. There was not a soul around. No groups of girls coming up the hill, chattering and laughing from the bus. No women out with prams. Not a car in sight. I turned and ran as

fast as I could up the second hill and into school, where I sat in the cloakroom panting, trying to find my 'indoor shoes' to put on (God forbid you would wear your outdoor shoes on the polished wooden floors in school, even in an emergency). I didn't tell anyone at school (interestingly enough, even though this happened around the time of my sexual encounters at home, I never linked the two in my mind). I didn't know this man; he was horrible; I knew what he said was wrong; I knew it wasn't my fault; and I most certainly did not enjoy it.

I think I told my mother about the incident and I have a vague recollection of talking to a policewoman about it too, but, of course, they never found him to my knowledge. Did it 'damage' me? Well, I couldn't stand hearing the word 'fuck' without feeling slightly sick, until I was well into my 20's. By then, I had heard the word so much I no longer associated it with 'thin lips man', so I started using the word myself with relish and realised what a marvellously expressive word it is! I still hate men with thin lips.

The grammar school uniform was a brown gymslip (like a sleeveless pinafore dress) with a mustard yellow blouse underneath and a brown tie. It was one of the ugliest uniforms in town. But with my new brown leather satchel containing not much more than a pencil case, a notebook and two sanitary towels (just in case), I felt very grown up indeed. We also had to wear a hat and gloves, the most important pieces of the uniform according to some teachers. The hat was a brown felt bowler with a brim and a yellow ribbon tied round the dome. By the time I was 15 and back-combed hair was in fashion, it was nigh impossible to get the hat on, so you would have to perch it on the back of your head and clip the brim down to the side of your head so that from the front you couldn't see you had a hat on at all.

Of course, the uniform just cemented my privileged status.

For a time, I wanted to join the Armed Forces – any of them: the Army, the Navy or the Air Force – just so that I could wear a uniform and boss people around. The teachers all wore black gowns (those who were graduates, that is – even teachers had their statuses). When I finally got to be games

captain in my final year (primarily because I was the only one in the sixth form in any of the school sports teams) I could wear a green gown on important school occasions which I enjoyed very much. I seemed to need a lot of external symbols to make me feel important: being Catholic, clever and white seemingly wasn't enough, probably because everyone around me was also Catholic, clever and white. But the difference between the teachers and the pupils was very marked.

The teachers had all the power. We had to stand when they came in the room. We had to do everything they said. They were always right. And they were aided and abetted by the system. The main message of the teachers and the system was, 'conform' – wear the uniform, walk on the same side of the corridor, defer to all those in authority. So, added to the lessons that all girls were getting from home and society – be good; be nice; be pretty; be quiet – there was another one: 'Don't stand out'. This message didn't suit me at all. I had stood out since the episode in Sister Anselm's class when I was five. I was learning to stand out to hold my own with my brothers at home. I was hearing about the antics they got up to at their school and was feeling as pathetic as the girl they said I was.

I learned about myself that I *wanted* to stand out. I wanted to be noticed. And one of the only ways I could do this at school was to subvert the system.

And that meant challenging headmistress Sister Olivia, which I did on more than one occasion. I learnt early on that it is easier to get forgiveness than permission and part of being clever was being articulate and quick thinking enough to get out of trouble when you had done wrong.

The power and authority I witnessed in the teachers gave me a very clear picture of how people were divided into 'more thans' and 'less thans'. The 'more thans' had the power, so the most important thing was to be a 'more than' and not a 'less than'. But, of course, to be a 'more than' you need 'less thans' around you to confer your status. When I was form prefect in the first year and we were told not to speak in between lessons (what kind of a rule is that!), I bossed my classmates around mercilessly and if

anyone spoke, I would march them down to the headmistress's office to report them. I had no power at home, so I modelled myself on the power I saw at school. It's a wonder I had any friends at school at all! But, of course, the system never gave me any real power, so the seeds of subverting the system were sown.

I'm not sure that any of the things I was learning were intended at all. I was supposed to be concentrating on my subjects. A grammar school education in the 1960s consisted of separate subjects studied until O Levels, when you were in fifth form and about 16 years old. This led me to compartmentalise all I was learning – I didn't like history but loved Shakespeare's England, which I saw as English, not history.

Most girls took eight or nine subjects at O Level. I knew that you only needed five to get into the sixth form and study A Levels, which were required if you wanted to go to university. I needed maths, a language (French), a science subject (biology) and English language and literature. I didn't care if I failed geography, history and Latin, because I didn't need them. Having been first or second in the class for five years, my mother felt humiliated having to tell her friends about my 'terrible results', when other 'less clever' girls had passed eight or nine, or even 10 subjects. My furious mother made me take them again. I failed them again just to spite her. I passed the exams I needed to get me to the next stage – O levels, A levels, my teaching certificate and my degree. Always just doing enough.

Here is what I learned from my academic studies: I learned that to pass exams you didn't need to work really hard all year, just do enough to get by and then cram for the last four weeks before the exams, stuffing your head full of facts and figures and quotations which you could vomit onto the exam paper.

Exams were a regurgitation of information. There wasn't a lot of thinking, or evaluation or analysis that you needed to worry about.

That's what I enjoyed most about maths, there weren't even any quotations to learn! It was all about seeing the patterns in the numbers and the total satisfaction of solving quadratic equations.

Another critical thing I learned was about the connection between subject and teacher. The subjects I liked best and took forward were the subjects taught by the teachers I liked most. Remembering this gave me much to think about when I myself became a teacher. My English teacher, Miss Cooke, I adored. She was small and pretty with dark curls round her face and a gap in her front teeth. She was always smiling and very softly-spoken and she loved hearing all our varied interpretations of the texts we were reading. I learned a lot from her about how to teach English Literature.

I had two maths teachers. My pure maths teacher was Sister Cecily Mary – thank God for a nun with a female name! She had entered the convent in her late twenties, so she was at least worldly wise. She was round and smiley and had a permanent twinkle in her eye. She was also very down to earth and practical. She didn't try to act holy, like some of the nuns, and treated us as the young adults we were. I loved her and because of her, I loved pure maths.

Miss Bond was my applied maths teacher. She was very tall, with a purposeful stride and a rasping voice. I liked her a lot and carried on visiting her years after I had left school. I remember the night before my maths exam, when I was going over the chapters on moments of inertia and centres of gravity, which I did not understand even one word of, I knew that I would have to answer a question on one of them. Each chapter in our textbook had about 50 examples to work through at the end of the chapter, so I chose centres of gravity and looked through the questions – no answers, just questions. I chose Number 48 as it was the hardest and the one that I wouldn't be able to even start on. I phoned up Miss Bond and she talked me through it on the phone until I got it. The next day in the exam room Miss Bond gave out the papers and at the relevant stroke of the clock said the ominous, "Turn over your sheets." I looked at it, as did Miss Bond, and went straight to the question on centres of gravity. There, in black and white, was the question I had phoned her about the night before with one slight change in one of the fractions. I read the question and looked up at Miss Bond. She looked up at the same time with an incredulous look on her face and a slight shake of her head. I grinned and aced the exam.

There were really no other teachers of note, except for our Form Mistress, Sister Alexis who was memorable for telling us things like, “If a boy put his tongue in my mouth I would… I would… *bite it off*” (this in answer to an anonymous question in the question box – the question box disappeared after that) and, “Don’t wear black patent shoes as boys can see the reflection of your knickers in them,” and, “If you sit on a boy’s knees make sure you have a telephone directory between you.” Poor woman. We assumed that she spent her time fantasising about priests.

It was at school I first realised I loved using both sides of my brain.

I could go from discussing Cleopatra’s character to solving complex calculus equations without feeling tired at all. I didn’t know anything about left brains and right brains at the time but when I did come across it some years later, I had my own experience to draw on.

I learned to be comfortable being around females; not having any sisters and having been around boys in the junior school who were just plain silly, it was a great relief to be around girls. And it was easier for me to shine among girls than it would probably have been if boys had been there too, showing off and dominating. As it was, I could adopt those roles. It was my first taste of being a big fish in a small pool, which I continued to develop as a strategy when I had left school. In my girls’ school you were expected to do well and there was no competing with boys in sports or subjects like maths. Nearly all the strong women I have met as an adult went to an all girls school – that surely can’t be a coincidence.

The last thing I remember about my grammar school days was when I was in my final year, at 18 years of age. I, together with two friends, had been in school late doing something and suddenly there was a power cut, so the caretaker showed us the way out through the dining room, using the light from his torch. As I went past him, he reached around and fondled my breast in the dark. I brushed off his hand and hurried out. I don’t remember it bothering me. I didn’t trust men anyway. Although I craved the attention of boys, I saw them only in physical terms. It was sexual expression I was

craving. Intimacy happened in my female friendships. At school was where this started, and it has continued all my life.

I told my mother about the incident at school but she didn't believe me.

"But he's such a good man," she said. "He does a lot for the church and his daughter Margaret is going to be a nun. I'm sure he wouldn't have done that, you must be mistaken."

I told the headmistress Sister Olivia the next day because I was concerned that if he was doing that with me then he might do it with other, younger girls. She didn't believe me either because I didn't seem to be unduly upset. I was obviously too calm about the whole thing. There were subsequent times in my life when I haven't been believed about something because I haven't been upset and hysterical.

We judge people according to how we think they should act.

So, my school days concluded as they had begun, with an inappropriate sexual advance.

The good things that school showed me were that I could be strong and independent and clever without having to hide it; that being quick-thinking and articulate can get you a long way; that your confidence will carry you much further than your intellect; that if you want to stand out you will need to take responsibility and be prepared to be a leader and that privilege will bring you power and open doors. The power which privilege brings also carries huge responsibilities but it would be some years before I would be willing to understand and accept those.

Chapter 7: Being Different – and An Outsider

"As teenagers, we all see ourselves as outsiders... and it's very easy to look at other people who are more popular, who have more pocket money, and it makes you feel even more like an outsider, and it does shape who you become as a person."

Maggie Stiefvater

My teenage years were the years that reminded me that, in spite of all my privileges, I was an outsider and not one of the group. I came to dislike groups because I never seemed to fit into one. Even now, if I am in any group where we have to introduce ourselves and say something about ourselves that we want others to know I am likely to say, "My name is Geraldine and what I want you to know is that I'm not a group person." The way I learned to cope with groups was by becoming the leader. That's what I've always done. It was in my teenage years that 'not one of the group' began to shape me.

Back then, playing tennis took up a lot of my time. I would spend hours hitting the wall or playing on the public courts with my brother John. When I was 15, I was spotted on the park as part of a scheme to find and encourage ordinary kids with talent (I think they do that when kids are six now!). I had to go and play in Manchester and then I was chosen to go to Lilleshall, the big PE college in the Midlands. There were 15 girls and 15 boys chosen from the whole country. I turned up in my white shorts and a t-shirt, my school plimsoles on and a wooden tennis racket. My first sight of the other girls was when they swanned into the dormitory with their little tennis skirts on, with matching tops and zip-up jackets and headbands, *two* tennis rackets each and a tennis bag – *a tennis bag?!* I had never seen one before (except on the TV at Wimbledon) – and immediately, I knew my place. They looked me up and down and then continued laughing and talking together. At the end of the week, one girl and one boy were chosen to go forward for coaching. I was the best player of the girls but, of course, I wasn't chosen. I went to the tennis coach afterwards and complained and said I was the best player but didn't have enough money or the right

clothes and had a broad Northern accent and that's why I wasn't chosen. I felt angry and humiliated. He denied it of course, but I knew.

Between being treated differently from my brothers and the tennis coaching fiasco, my crusade became 'fairness and equality' and I collected more and more examples as I got older.

No wonder I focused on equality when I finally started my own business.

In spite of knowing I would get no further in my tennis career, I entered some junior tennis tournaments, even winning a couple. I remember the tournament in 1966, in June, when we were rained off and the organisers got a TV for the marquee and I watched England play in the final of the football World Cup. I had no friends or family with me but was getting used to being on my own. The match was magnificent and England won the World Cup! I can't remember how I did in the tennis tournament.

I also used to play netball for the school team. I played goal defence, where my job was to intimidate the opposing team's goal attack and stop them scoring. That suited my increasingly aggressive nature. The angrier I seemed to become – about everything – the friendlier I would appear to be to mask it. As much as I loved playing netball, I had a Saturday job. My mother made me give it up so I could play for the school team. She said it was a question of priorities.

My priority at that time was serving in Lythgoes sweetshop in Bolton town centre. I loved that shop. There were rows of large glass jars with all colours and kinds of sweets in them, some of which I had never seen before. I loved getting those jars down and using the scoop to put some sweets on the scales, then bagging them up and cashing the till when the customer paid. I liked to remember what different customers liked and what their names were. I was getting paid for pleasing people and I loved it. The shop owner, Mr Lythgoe, was a tall man who walked with a bit of a stoop. He always wore a white coat and had a shiny face and a large red pimple, some sort of birthmark, on his cheek. He was rather gruff, even though he hummed all the time as he walked about. I was extra friendly to the

customers. His daughter used to work there sometimes. She was much older than me but much quieter and smaller, with a pale face and thin blond hair. She always wore an Avon perfume, Topaz, which gave me a headache. I asked her what it was called once and feigned interest. In reality, I wanted to know what to avoid, and have, indeed, avoided Avon perfumes ever since.

Once Mr Lythgoe could see I could be trusted he sent me to work sometimes in his other place, a cafe on the corner, which sold coffee, tea, toast and cake snacks in one part, and sweets and cake decorations in the shop part. I loved that too, “Good morning, Mr Smith. Your usual toast, butter and tea?” Customers were always delighted to be remembered. I also became quite an expert in the cake decoration department.

I didn’t bake or cook at home, yet I was able to give advice on the best decorations to use on the top of a wedding cake, like I was some kind of cooking expert.

My Saturday job was a solitary experience. I didn’t do it with any friends. My two closest school friends, Theresa and Kathleen, lived miles away from me – Kathleen in the next town. Our form group stayed the same for five years. It was the first time the school had tried that and it meant that friendships were cemented over the five years. Sister Olivia called us three ‘the Three Graces’ but we had no idea what she meant. And close as we were, our friendships stayed in school.

Theresa and I became good friends, although I quickly realised we were from different classes. She lived on the other side of town in a big house and her family had money. I lived in a terraced house with an outside toilet. Although my mum and dad were both teachers and we were the first people in our street to have a car, I always felt like a poor relation to Theresa. But because I only saw her at school, where we both studied the same subjects and wore the same school uniform, I could just relate to her and not even see all the other trappings of her life.

Once I started to go out, when I was about 16, my mother allowed me to work in a coffee bar in the town, The Beachcomber, because she had taught one of the owners, Eddie Grinrod, when he was a boy. I don’t know

what she was thinking letting me work there! That place was a den of vice. Once, I snogged one of the musicians playing in the band there. It was in a dingy room behind the bar where I was working and the guy was short with blond greasy hair and wore a white vest. The smell from his hairy armpits nearly made me gag but I snogged him anyway. I also snogged one of the bouncers, Ronnie, who was married and must have been in his 40s. It was completely inappropriate on his part, but my boundaries had disappeared when I was 10 years old. Anyway, I needed the snogging experience.

There was a church youth club which was very popular and attracted local bands to play there. It was in the school hall of the junior school and us girls would be crammed into the girls' toilets to use the cracked mirror to put our make up on. My mother would never have allowed me to wear makeup, so I had to wait until I got to the youth club and would push my way in to get sight of myself in the mirror. Panstik was the most popular face make up. This was a stick of orangey paste that you smeared all over your face until it was caked on.

Lipsticks were pale – pale orange or pale pink – and were spread thickly.

And, of course, the back-combed hair completed the picture – back-combed until it stood six inches off your head. Some girls painted black rings round their eyes as well but that would have been too difficult for me to take off before I got home. And, of course, the statutory short skirts. There were no drugs, no alcohol and not even any hot drinks – soft drinks and crisps were the only refreshments. But those Sunday nights were the highlight of my week. Of course, some people would steal out for a cigarette or to have a snog outside the reception class but that was the most we dared to do.

It was one of those Sunday nights that the Beatles appeared on TV for the first time as the star act of *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*, the most popular entertainment show of its time. As the junior school was round the corner from our house, my brother Daniel's girlfriend Norma and I went home to see the Beatles. As soon as they appeared on stage, Norma started with these noises in her throat and gripped the back of my mother's

chair. I thought she was having a heart attack or something but she was just trying to stop herself from screaming. I was fascinated. Why did she want to scream? My brother John subsequently became a member of the Beatles Fan Club and used to get a monthly A5 glossy mag. Not wanting to be the same, of course, I became a member of the Elvis Presley fan club, but my love of the Beatles outlived my love of Elvis.

The phenomenon of girls screaming at the Beatles and all the other pop stars of the day never made any sense to me. I couldn't work out for the life of me why they did it. I went to Bolton Odeon once to see Gerry and the Pacemakers, Cilla Black – just before she had her first number one hit – and The Searchers. Everyone around me was screaming and holding on to their heads. I tried to scream too, to fit in, but no sound came out, so I mimed screaming the whole show. The next day in school I spoke with a hoarse whisper and explained how I had been screaming so much I had lost my voice.

I was torn between my need for independence and my need to be part of the gang.

My mother let me go to Butlins when I was only 15 with a local girl, Ann, who I was friendly with from Church. Ann used to be taught by my father and she had lost her mother and father. My parents liked her and were happy for us to be friends. We never told Mum the stories about the redcoats trying to get into our chalets at night… Two things stand out from that holiday. The first was when I got friendly with one of the bingo callers who was a student. He used to wear a brown overall and always shouted 'Hi!' to us as we passed. Ann and I would regularly go to sit in the huge ballroom at lunchtime and have an ice cream floater (ice cream scoops on top of Coke) while the dance music played in the background. There was never anyone in there. One day, this bingo guy came walking through, said 'hi' and then stopped.

"Can either of you do the quickstep?" he asked.

I was fresh from my ballroom dancing classes and said yes, but I just knew the basics. "That's fine," he said. "Just follow me and do what I say."

We whirled around the dance floor with him expertly leading me through all kinds of intricate moves. I truly felt like a dancing queen – him with his brown overall and me in my shorts, just the two of us on the dance floor. I've never forgotten the exhilaration of that dance. It only happened once and I've never managed to find a man since who could dance.

The only other thing I remember about Butlins was the day we were leaving. At home, I had got to know the girl next door, Jackie, who was Swiss. She was working at Prestons Jewellers, learning from Mrs Morrison and staying with her for the duration. Jackie was 19 and I was 15 but the difference could have been 30 years. She was petite with short, bobbed hair, very pretty, always looked amazing and with her accent, she was the most exotic thing I had seen. She had talked to me about using tampons instead of sanitary towels. She said towels were, "So old fashioned, darling." She told me how to put one in, but I had never tried. The day Ann and I were waiting for the coach back to Bolton from Butlins in Wales I told Ann I was just going to the toilet. When I got there, I saw that my period was starting. I only had tampons with me. Well, Jackie told me what to do, so I tried to put one in. It went in about three inches then seemed to hit a wall.

Ann came into the washroom, "The coach is here, come on!"

"Just a minute. I've started my period and I have to get a tampon in."

A minute later.

"Come on, everyone has got on the coach."

Please go in tampon. Please go in. **Pushing harder and harder. But not only would it not go in, it was starting to hurt.**

"Tell him to wait, please! Don't let him go."

By this time, I was sweating. My coat, scarf and bags were at my feet and the tiny toilet was overcrowded as I managed to put one leg up on the toilet seat and squat to get a better angle and told myself I just had to do it. I gave one almighty shove up and, as I yelled, it went in. *Thank God. Thank God.* I gathered my belongings and rushed out to the coach, which had started and was starting to move. I was panting but I was proud. I had done it! I was using a tampon! Just wait until I got home and told Jackie.

My lack of a peer group was compensated for by my brothers. John was into music and had a guitar. He used to buy two records a week throughout the 60s and had an amazing collection. If he still had it, it would be worth a fortune; all catalogued and neatly stacked in the special record boxes that he had bought. He had a lovely voice. Daniel also played a guitar and he and I could sing – in that we could hit the right notes – but our voices weren't particularly musical. We could do the harmonies though. Daniel's girlfriend, Norma, was like a Marilyn Monroe lookalike with her blond wavy hair, pretty face and curvy body. She also had a really nice voice. We formed a group, The Wayfaring Strangers, and started to play in our kitchen. Our kitchen was small and we were trying to record on a tape recorder to see how it sounded. To get the sound balance right, Daniel would have to be at the furthest end of the kitchen, next to the even smaller scullery, John would be nearest to the tape recorder, I would be standing on a chair, leaning forward, and Norma would be midway between John and Daniel. We could spend two to three hours in an evening practising. We usually ended by doing a one act play, which we made up as we went along with sound effects provided by whatever we could lay our hands on in the kitchen. At some point, usually the most critical point in a recording, Mum would open the kitchen door, knock into John and say, "Daddy and I are coming in for supper now. Can you put that away and get the kettle on." There was never any point in arguing with the supper routine.

I was 17 by this time. We managed to get an audition at the new club in town, The Empress. The Empress was owned by Eddie, Eric and Norman, who also owned The Beachcomber. It was their next venture. Norma and I got new dresses for the occasion. They were bright blue satin, sleeveless, pulled in at the waist and then came out in a bell shape. We wore high heels too, the only time in my life I attempted to wear high heels. We felt very glamorous but our mood was slightly dampened when we saw where we were auditioning. We were in an empty room, the remains of the night before scattered around, and all the tables and chairs were askew and upside down. We sang two or three songs.

I 'played' the tambourine – by which I mean that I banged it with great enthusiasm on the side of my leg.

Needless to say, playing songs like 'Down by the Riverside' and 'All I Have to do is Dream' by the Everly Brothers didn't get us any bookings. John did write some songs, the best of which was 'Pretend I'm With You Tonight', which would have done Jim Reeves proud. He made a tape of that and some of his other compositions and spent a day taking it round London, hoping to get it picked up by some music publisher, but no one was interested. At John and Wendy's 40th wedding anniversary party the three of us sang that song and, remarkably, we could all remember the words.

We only had one paying performance, which was at a church hall in a nearby town on a Sunday evening. There was only one microphone, so we had to work out how we were going to group round it. As we faced the audience, Daniel was on the left, then Norma, then me, then John. But as we stood there about to start, I realised that the arm of John's guitar was right across my face. I pulled it down. He put it back up.

"Move your guitar," I hissed.

"There's nowhere else for it to go," he said.

"But it's right in front of my face."

"Well, I can't help it and anyway, I need a stool."

"What do you mean you need a stool?"

"I need to put my foot up on a stool or I can't play."

"You never have your foot on a stool."

"Well, I need one now."

All these comments could be heard by everyone and there were sniggers coming from the audience. There were no stools on the stage, so Daniel lent down and said to the man at the nearest table, "Excuse me. Would you mind if we used your stool?"

The stool was duly passed up to the stage. By this time, Norma was exhibiting her nervousness, which took the form of breathing heavily as a deep rose-coloured stain travelled up her neck and into to her face.

Daniel gave the stool to John, "Now play!"

John carefully put the stool down and put one foot on it. The stool promptly collapsed and one of its legs began rolling across the stage,

making ‘der-dum’ sounds each time the leg turned over the knotted part. The four of us looked horrified and leaned forward to watch, as did all the audience. *Der-dum, der-dum, der-dum*… until it got to the other side of the stage, then rolled off to the floor. The place erupted with applause and laughter. They thought we were a comedy act!

Shortly after that, Norma got appendicitis and was rushed to hospital. I was preparing to go off to college, so The Wayfaring Strangers never played again.

I had lost the only group I truly felt a part of.

Chapter 8: Being a Student

"I prefer being a small fish in a big pond."
Stacy Keibler

"What is this?" he said, tapping the table.

I thought he was barking mad. "A table," I said.

"How do you know it's real?" he asked.

I could have said, "Because in the energetic field, energy at its lowest manifestation is compounded into shapes that we can appreciate in the physical realm. If we are talking about the infinite field of possibility then it isn't real because nothing is real there. There is only nothingness." But I didn't say that because I didn't have a clue about any such things. I mumbled something about being able to see it and feel it.

This was my interview at York University to do a degree in maths and philosophy.

I had never studied any philosophy, or read any, for that matter. It just looked like an interesting subject from the prospectus. They offered me a place. I turned it down to go to teacher training college and do an external degree in education. I've wondered more than once how my life might have been different if I had gone to York.

I had had quite a sedate upbringing and education. I foresaw a huge campus and student population at York with boys as well as girls. I also suspected that I would be way out of my depth. I chose safety and more of what I was used to – a girls' Catholic college in rural Warwickshire run by nuns. To be fair, I had decided by this time that I definitely wanted to be a teacher and there was a new degree now – an Honours Bachelor of Education. This was considered, at the time, to be a very second rate degree. But I would be trained to teach *and* I would have a degree, so that suited me.

What also suited me was that I would be able to stand out at a smaller college. I didn't think that would be true at York University. I didn't know the first thing about philosophy and my maths teacher had spent two years making excuses for my lack of understanding in maths by saying, "Of

course, you're not a mathematician." She obviously thought that would be a small comfort to me. I was sure I would have been lost in the crowd of people cleverer than me, more socially skilled than me – more everything than me.

I felt the confidence I had acquired at school would evaporate quickly at a large university.

Off I went to St Paul's College. It was only seven miles from Rugby in the Midlands, but as no one in those days had a car, Rugby might well have been the other side of the country. The college was an 18th century country house set by a lake. It's now a listed building and is owned by the Prison Service. It's still used as a training college, although probably a step away from the St Trinians I had experienced!

In our first year it was mandatory to live in digs to make sure that we were properly cared for. There were six St Paul's students in our digs in Rugby and the college provided buses to bring us in and take us home. It was a good halfway house between leaving home and living on your own, which you were allowed do after the first year. This was my first time being away from Lancashire and, although it was only the Midlands, the cultural differences seemed huge to me. Everyone was so unfriendly. At home, if I saw the same person on the street every morning as I went for a bus, I would be saying 'hello' on the second day and starting to chat to them on the third. But in the Midlands people just didn't want to speak and, after a few days, they would cross the road and avoid eye contact. Of course, it might have been a personal thing, except that when I went to London, this was amplified to a large degree.

It was my first experience of a distinct Northern culture.

As a first year I was assigned a 'college mother' – a third year student – to show me the ropes, answer any questions I had and check that I was OK. It was a nice touch and certainly helped with the inevitable homesickness.

The nuns were fabulous! Sister Agnes, The Principal, did the best Frankie Howerd impersonation I have ever seen. Frankie Howerd was one

of the most popular comedians of his day and his distinct way of speaking attracted many impersonators. None as good as Sister Agnes though. And there was no monitoring of whether you were being a 'good Catholic' or not. They didn't care one jot if you didn't go to church, and many girls left Catholicism by the end of their first year. The atmosphere was relaxed and the girls were friendly. Students seemed to come from the North of England or Ireland and we had many similar characteristics – sense of humour, friendliness, openness. I was very happy there.

I was introduced to subjects like the sociology of education, the psychology of education and the philosophy of education. My sociology tutor, Mr Grace, was also my personal tutor for teaching and teaching practice. If I became a good teacher, it was largely because of his influence. He was tall with black hair, already thinning, combed back and he had a strong voice and an easy smile. He clearly knew his subject but was always ready to encourage discussion and to listen to our uninformed views where we expressed certainty about things we had no idea about. I formed a good relationship with him. He didn't seem to mind my strident questioning of whatever we were studying and, far from being irritated, he was permanently amused. In my third year, I did my thesis on 'the family' and argued that the only way society could survive was if the family unit remained a strong cornerstone. It was hand-written, as all work was. He gave it back to me with a low grade and asked me to redo it as there was not an original thought in it. I was furious and did redo it, arguing now that the only way society could survive was if the family unit was destroyed as the cornerstone of society. I found all kinds of spurious research to back it up.

I had learned that you could practically say anything in sociology as long as you found some obscure research to support your idea.

I can't remember the grade I got but I passed.

Professor Gerald Grace is now the Director of the Centre for Research and Development in Catholic Education at the Institute of Education, University of London. He founded the centre and it is reported that he has made the most, perhaps the only, important contribution to the

study of Catholic education in the UK. Some years ago, I looked him up and we went out to lunch in London. It had been 40 years since my college days and I wanted to tell him how important he had been to me and my career and to thank him. We laughed and sparred as we used to. He asked me if I had read his book. I said, “No, have you read mine?” We both laughed.

In my second year, I moved into the college and had a huge room on the top floor overlooking the lake. Lots of the girls by this time had boyfriends from Rugby College or Lanchester College (now Coventry University) and there were often discos there. I went a few times but didn’t like the drunk boys and music so loud you couldn’t talk. I couldn’t dance. I never got a boyfriend. The nearest I got was a boy called Terry. I really liked him but made the mistake of telling him, so he never showed up at the college to pick me up one night and he wouldn’t answer the phone. I found out later that his friends had put pressure on him and teased him for being ‘under the thumb’. *As if I wanted to marry him! Stupid boys!* The highlight of my year was when Joe Cocker came to Rugby Tech to headline at a dance. I had been roped in to help with decor so I did a huge painting of an octopus in red and blue and with crossed eyes which was plastered all over the wall behind him. It was the most creative work I did at college.

At the end of my second year, I became President of the Students’ Union. I was frustrated with the incessant talking about things yet nothing being done so I decided I would step in. I enjoyed being President. It was the culmination of my ‘big fish in a little pool’ strategy. I had a seat on the Academic Board and attended regional Student Union meetings, where I saw more of the incessant resolutions that went nowhere.

It was at college that the principle that if you want anything done you had better do it yourself, became cemented in me.

I have implemented that principle ever since.

Meanwhile, my social life at home had picked up a pace. It had taken a turn for the better just before I started college and continued throughout

my college days. I, and my two brothers, Daniel and John, had got involved with an international group of students who were studying textiles at Bolton Technical College. Apparently, it was the best textile course in the country and the students had been sent by their families in Turkey, India and Pakistan, among others, prior to their taking over the family firm back home. We used to meet on a Friday night at The Golden Lion pub in Bolton town centre and then would go to the Greeks' flat, where John and Cosmos lived, or go bowling at Walkden bowling alley. We usually ended up back at my house for coffee and long games of Monopoly, which usually ended up in a fracas because these particular Turkish students always cheated and seemed to think this was perfectly acceptable. The evening would invariably end with John and Daniel getting out their guitars and us all singing.

Our house was the obvious choice as they all lived in tawdry student accommodation. They got milk with their coffee at our house. My parents put up with this with endless patience. Once my father came into our front room (always called the front room, never the lounge) and counted eight different nationalities in the crowded room. He actually loved it and all the gang loved him (they loved Mum too) and would sometimes join them in the kitchen, where Mum and Dad would be having their supper before bed. There were no drugs and no drink, not in our house anyway.

I started dating Hisham, a Pakistani student. His full name was Hishamuddin Bhadruddin, but everyone called him 'Sham', except my mother. She called him 'hashish'. She didn't even know what hashish was but had obviously heard the word. He had told me that he would get me into bed within three months. I laughed and said he had absolutely no chance – and he hadn't. In fact, we only dated for about seven weeks. But it was the first time my parents had seen me with a boyfriend.

They took notice of this polite, tall, dark, handsome guy with a little black goatee beard and a strong Pakistani accent.

He was certainly different from the awkward, generally surly youths we were used to seeing around. His culture had given him very clear guidelines about such things as holding doors open for women, walking

closest to the road, carrying the bags, respecting your elders – all things I wasn't used to. However, his courteousness to me and them didn't seem to matter to my parents. They decided to have a word with me.

My father did the talking, "This Hisham, do you like him?"

"Yes, he's very nice."

"Do you think you will continue to see him?"

"Only until my exams in the summer."

"Well, your mother and I were talking." That sounded ominous.

"And it might be that you get serious and you just need to be aware that if you do and you marry and have children they will have a hard time being half-caste." The term 'mixed race' hadn't even been coined then.

"Whoa, hang on," I said. "We're just dating. I'm going away to college soon. I have no intention of marrying him." Then I realised what was going on. "Oh, you mean you wouldn't be able to face your friends and neighbours if your daughter hooked up with a Pakistani?" I felt humiliated on behalf of Sham, and angry with them.

We didn't speak about it again and, of course, the relationship ended that summer.

I got my first real boyfriend at the end of the third year. His name was Gareth and he was at Rugby Tech. We were set up by friends at our third-year ball. We got on really well and continued to see each other for a while during fourth year – but being good and kind weren't enough for me. I wanted the spark, the fire. And so, my pattern started: the boys and men who were nice, kind and funny were rejected by me.

I would go for the men I lusted after and would then find out that our physical encounters were unsatisfactory.

I had a hard time trusting them. I married my husband without being in love with him and we were together for 27 years. I set up home with David when I was 52 years old and wasn't in love with him either. We were together for seven years. Maybe I was never to have the full relationship I craved.

I moved to the newest residence block in my third year and it was during that year that I had my 21st birthday. I had treated myself to a long brown wig and wore it around college. I had always wanted long hair but mine would never grow the way I wanted it to – it was too curly, so I went for the long, straight hair of the wig. As I was walking through college one day I passed the Principal, Sister Agnes. She stopped to speak to me. This was unusual as she was always rushing from one place in the college to the next. She asked me about my wig. I thought it was odd. She had far more things to occupy her mind than my wig.

A few days later I was asked to go to the Principal's office. I had assumed it was in relation to my President's duties. I was wearing my wig and a black polo neck jumper and wasn't wearing any jewellery, as it happened. There were four men in her office with her, who turned out to be police officers. There was a tall older guy who looked like a regular family man. He had a kind face and he did all the talking. Nearest to me was a young guy with a piercing stare. He never smiled and never took his beady eyes off me. The older man started, "There have been a number of forged cheques being cashed in Rugby."

I nodded, there had been a spate of thieving in the college. I had been asked to suggest what the Students Union could do to combat it. I assumed that was why they wanted to speak with me.

He went on, "We got a description of the girl who cashed the latest forgery in a store in town." He paused.

I nodded, "She had long dark hair, was wearing a black polo jumper and she didn't have any jewellery on. She also had a Northern accent."

It took a minute for what they were suggesting to dawn on me. "You think it's me?" I asked, completely incredulous.

He looked at me and the young guy leaned forward to stare intently. Now I realised why Sister Agnes has been so interested in my wig. "We're looking at everyone who fits the description," the older guy continued.

I realised I wasn't afraid. I was furious. "Right, so here's my long dark hair," I ran my fingers through the wig, "And the black polo neck jumper." I pulled at the jumper, "And no jewellery." I held out my hands.

The young guy spoke, "And she had bad teeth."

"I beg your pardon?" I said sharply.

The older guy came in quickly, “Of course, that doesn’t apply to you.”

The older guy stood up and came towards the desk.

“We have a signature on the cheque. Can we ask you to sign this name on a piece of paper?” I duly signed.

The younger guy looked at it and showed me the forged one. “Well, that letter is the same, and that, and that,” he said.

“And that one is different, and that, and that,” I retorted. “So, what now?”

The older guy said, “We are going to send these two to a handwriting expert in Wales for analysis.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Do you mean to tell me that if some person in Wales says these signatures were done by the same person, you are going to charge me?”

There was silence.

“Well, send it to whoever you want,” I continued. “You have the wrong person. I didn’t do it, so build up the case as much as you want. I’ll knock it down.”

Although I was angry, I was laughing. It was all so ridiculous. My laughter probably convinced the younger guy that it was me being hard-faced and laughing to cover it up.

They subsequently found the culprit, of course. Sister Agnes told me later that before the meeting they had been so convinced it was me they wanted to bring me into the station for questioning. She refused and said they could interview me in her office and that she would be present. I wonder if I would have got that kind of care at York University.

Teaching Practice was required in each of our three years. Girls, usually dishevelled and unkempt around college, would appear at an ungodly hour in the morning to board coaches going to the various schools we taught at. We would be there looking smart and made-up, sitting in silence like zombies until we were dispatched at our various placement schools. This was our only classroom experience and it was very scary. Luckily, I had the excellent Mr Grace to advise and guide me and, by the time the final

teaching practice came, I knew I was in line for a Distinction. Mr Grace and an external examiner came to observe one of my lessons. I was teaching 12-year-olds, not my favourite age group, but I was well prepared. I'd play some music then they'd do some creative writing. One boy was messing about in class, as he always did, and I could see the two assessors watching to see what I would do. I walked slowly around the class while the music was playing and when I got to the cocky boy I bent down really low so only he could hear my words, "These men who are here are assessing me, not you. I would like a good assessment. Once they are gone you can do what you like – swing from the ceiling, jump out of the window, turn your desk over – whatever you like. But if you so much as utter one more word while they are in the room, I will hit you so hard you will never be able to open your mouth again. Do you understand?" I smiled and stood up and continued my walk round the room. The boy sat in silence for the rest of the lesson, his head bowed.

The assessors were impressed. It wasn't my finest moment, but it got me my Distinction.

The teacher training course was three years. The fourth year was for those who were studying for the B.Ed. I dropped maths and carried on with English and the sociology and philosophy of education. In my fourth year, I rented a house in Rugby with two other students, Dee and Pat. It was my first real taste of freedom and I loved it. Dee and I were two of the three students studying English with the Head of Department, Mr McArdle. He was very tall, with grey hair and a grey moustache and didn't often smile. When he did it looked unnatural, like a smile had been attached to his face.

He was like a distinguished, but unfunny John Cleese.

I loved George Eliot at the time and had spent a week during my holidays living in Nuneaton with a distant cousin so I could go to the library every day and read her original papers and letters. Mr McArdle had said I could *not* do another essay on George Eliot, "You have to show the examiners in Leicester that you know something other than George Eliot."

I turned my attention instead to *Wuthering Heights*. However, I had not really given it much attention before I had to present a seminar to the other two students and Mr McArdle. I made up a wonderful theory about Cathy and Heathcliff and their spiritual relationship.

At one point Mr McArdle looked at me and said, jokingly, “Have you read this book?”

“Er no, not really. I’ve seen the film.”

The other two stifled sniggers. Mr McArdle didn’t raise his voice or change his expression as he said, “Get out of my tutorial.”

I duly read the book and revised my theory for my essay. But for my finals, when I answered a question about *Wuthering Heights*, I reverted back to my original theory, this time backing it up from the text. My Head of Department said afterwards that I had written ‘a fine answer’ and we both smiled.

From my student days, I learned that academic achievement isn’t the most important thing. I only got a 2:2 for my degree and you needed a First or a 2:1 to do a Master’s. I wasn’t planning on doing that and so didn’t really care and in my whole life I have never been asked what classification of degree I got. In fact, people assume I have a Master’s or a Doctorate! I also learned that I like being a big fish in a little pond. And I liked being in charge of things.

And, most importantly, I learned that I loved teaching.

Chapter 9: Being a Catholic

"Catholicism is not a soothing religion. It's a painful religion. We're all gluttons for punishment."
Madonna Ciccone

In the end, it was an easy decision to leave. It wasn't a decision made quickly. In some ways, I think I had been making it all my life.

As I child, I completely accepted all the beliefs. I remember the rituals as a child, the rote learning of the catechism, the chanting of the answers. I remember on All Souls' Day running in and out of church saying set prayers each time, knowing that each time I did this I was 'saving' another soul who would jump out of the fire of purgatory into the everlasting happiness of Heaven. That particular belief made me feel very smug and self-satisfied.

I wanted to be a priest from an early age but couldn't even be an altar girl and so knelt on the front row at church making all the responses in Latin that my brothers were making on the altar.

I loved the ceremony, the incense, the organ playing, the candles and the hymns.

And I was always affected by the atmosphere created in majestic buildings with high ceilings and stained-glass windows.

But gradually, my mother and father's Catholic beliefs became increasingly inexplicable to me. I remember when I was eleven and my grandfather died. It was, at the time, only my second experience of death. I was going on a girl guide hike that morning. I knew Mum and Dad had been up with Grandpa all night. I remember taking a last look at him before I went to bed the night before – grey face, mouth hanging open, rasping breaths. I asked my brother as I came downstairs the next morning, "How's Mum?"

"Fine," he said.

"How's Dad?"

"Fine," he said.

As I turned to go back upstairs, I turned back and as an afterthought said, “How’s Grandpa?”

“Dead,” he said. I returned to my room and knelt down and said a prayer, then sat back on the bed and waited for the tears. Eventually, knowing I couldn't do anything else until I'd cried, I thought about sad things until the tears came. Then I went on my hike. The real tears came at the funeral in the church when the organ started and the incense filled the air. The combination of organ and incense still makes me cry now.

Still, at the time, I was vaguely uncomfortable. Why was everyone upset? Why was I upset? My grandfather wasn't hugely important in my life. And anyway, wasn't Grandpa in Heaven? Why weren't we celebrating, for goodness sake? Something wasn't quite right.

At this time the Friday abstinence was still in force – no meat on Fridays. It wasn't such a great hardship, although bacon did smell so much better on a Friday. It was a very minor sacrifice to go without it. So why, if you had a special dinner to go to, were you able to go to the priest and get a dispensation? *Oh, Father, I'm going to the firm's dinner tonight, can I eat meat? Of course, my child.* What's the point of having the rule if the only time it might be hard you get permission to ignore it?

Much later, when I was at college, I remember approaching the counter and seeing wonderful crisp battered fish and measly, wizened pieces of meat. Great, I thought – it's Friday – fish day. Then I thought again. If this fish thing is supposed to be some sort of sacrifice, I'd better make it hurt. I had the meat. Months later, I casually mentioned this to my father in a conversation about something else. My father went absolutely mad. He told me I was on the road to Hell, that my job on Earth was to save my soul. That I should just follow the white line down the middle of the road and deviate to neither right nor left. That I was to follow the rules. I was not to question them. It was not my job to think. If it so happened that the rules worked to my advantage, then that was my good fortune. My unease continued.

I had a growing awareness that the church's teachings were antithetical to who I was becoming as a woman and as a spiritual person.

Although I was attending a Catholic College, none of the nuns cared if you went to church or not, and many of the girls didn't. In my first year there, when I was living in digs, I used to walk on my own to the other side of the town, in the rain and snow sometimes, to attend Mass on a Sunday evening. I seriously thought about leaving the Church. But I knew that if I stopped going to church, I would get out of the habit. I thought I should continue to go while I made up my mind. I decided to remain a Catholic. Attending Mass was one of the few ways I had of feeling a deep peace in my heart and soul.

Next time I was home I told the priest I wanted to be confirmed next time the Bishop came to our parish. He said I couldn't as I had already been confirmed and you can only get confirmed once. I protested, "But I was 13 then! I didn't know what I was signing up to. But now I do and I want to declare it. I know I won't get 'the mark on my soul' again but it's important I stand up and profess my faith." He refused again. Now I was frustrated and irritated, as well as uneasy.

After college, I met my future husband Martin during my first year of teaching. Martin had to sign a document saying he would agree to the children being brought up Catholic. That was fine. I wanted the children to have some base to start with and we had both agreed that when they were old enough they would decide for themselves. Many years later, when Emily was 14 years old, she stopped going to Mass. Amy followed a year later. Emily remembers now that when I said she could stop going to church, I said to her, "Yes, you can stop going to church but you have to find God in your life." She told me this in her 20s and said she was still looking.

After my seven-year career as a teacher, my professional work took me into the area of developing and training people, particularly women. My company advised organisations on how to develop the potential of all employees, how to establish quality and diversity in the organisation and

how to free employees to think for themselves. Much of the work I did with individuals was about accessing the inner strength within them and helping them to develop a sense of their own worth.

Yet, here I was, belonging to an organisation, the Catholic church, based on male hierarchy and with power invested in a few elites.

Its purpose is (still) to make sure that people do what they are told so that it can preserve itself as an institution. Yet, I continued to attend Sunday Mass wherever in the world I was. I loved the familiarity of the ritual, which I understood, however alien the language or the culture I was in.

I often wondered what kind of 'hold' the Catholic church had over me. *Was this what indoctrination looked like?* Yet, as soon as you begin to question, I think indoctrination ceases. Was it the fear of hell and damnation if I left? Was I feeling guilty that I somehow couldn't grasp some essential Catholic truths? I had reached out to my aunt, who was a Carmelite nun, and asked her to tell me why I should remain a Catholic. I was looking to be persuaded to stay. But she wrote to me and said that she was at such a higher level than me that I wouldn't understand anything she said so she couldn't help me!

There were two things that stopped me from leaving. The first was my mother. I knew that at some level, breaking with the church was to risk my mother's acceptance, validation, inclusion and being part of her world. Her faith seemed to be unshakeable. My relationship with my mother was not great and I dreaded what the impact would be on her and on our relationship if I told her I was leaving the Church. The second thing that held me back was that it would have been a negative act. An act of rejecting something rather than moving towards something else. And I felt I would be losing a core part of my identity.

For a long time, I ignored the organisation of the Church and concentrated on Christ and God beyond it. My religion became a very personal one. I tried to make sense out of the goodness of God and not be bogged down by the sinful nature I kept being reminded I had. I took my turn at reading at Mass, always changing 'mankind' to 'people' and

'brothers' to 'brothers and sisters' and changing 'men' to 'all' in a very loud voice in every hymn it appeared in.

Three things were instrumental in forcing me to act. The first was my younger brother's death.

Well, not his death exactly, but my mother's reaction to it. Andy was 29 years old and still living at home. His car skidded on his way to work one Sunday morning, climbed the central barrier on the motorway and crashed onto the other carriageway below. He died immediately, on the hard shoulder 70 yards away – he was 'flung into eternity' as my mother put it. No one else was involved. Now, although I have seen at first hand the grief when someone loses a child, I cannot really imagine it. But during that time something shocked me more than his death and it was this, the religion which she had followed all her life, all those novenas she had said on her knees, all the sacrifices she had made didn't seem to help her now. She had faithfully kept the rules, even when they were difficult. She had told us that when my eldest brother was a baby, she was up with him on Christmas Eve. He was screaming with colic and she tasted some warm water to make sure it wouldn't burn him. But then she couldn't go to communion on Christmas morning because she'd broken the midnight fast. She went and saw the priest on Christmas morning and told him what had happened and asked if she could still take communion. He refused. She was denied Communion on Christmas Day.

But now, she was tormented for years after my brother's death as she agonised over where he now was. She couldn't be sure that he was in Heaven, because, after all, he didn't have a priest to give him absolution at the moment of death. In the Catholic tradition, if you go to Mass on the first Friday of the month for nine consecutive months you will be guaranteed a priest at your death. Andy did 'the nine first Fridays' many times but he still died alone – lying on the hard shoulder of the M56. In addition to that, she knew he had had sex once ('once' is what he told her!) and he wasn't married. That's worth a ticket to Hell. All those years the family had deferred to her faith… and now, when she needed it, her faith deserted her and she suffered while we could only watch, quite helpless. What kind of

God would banish my brother to Hell so easily? Not one I cared to believe in.

The second thing that happened was my growing awareness of what I *didn't* believe in which can be listed as follows:

- The Church's position on birth control, which I saw as the systematic oppression of women.
- The pomp and ceremony of the Papacy (not to mention the infallibility question). If Christ came now, he would surely come as Mother Teresa and not reside in the luxurious Vatican.
- The bread and wine becoming the Body and Blood of Jesus. It didn't matter to me anymore whether they did or not. It didn't affect how I felt about God.
- The Church's position on homosexuality, married priests and women priests.
- The emphasis on fear, evil, sin and guilt, as opposed to joy, love, forgiveness and union. It's interesting that Christ only gave two commandments: 'love God and love your neighbour as yourself'. God, apparently, gave ten, and eight of those are about things you can't do. When I told my parish priest of my decision to leave and tried to explain some of what is here, he wrote me a nice letter and spoke of our fundamental differences. He said, "I believe the Catholic Church is a church for sinners." I offered to continue to print the parish newsletter but he made other arrangements.

I had a growing sense of the fact that if I couldn't accept the main principles of the club, I shouldn't be in it.

And all of this before the child abuse scandal became known.

It seemed very clear to me that the Catholic Church was really not interested in helping people grow towards God. It was interested in people knowing their place and accepting it with humility and asking God's

forgiveness for everything along the way. And this was – and is – especially true of women.

But finally, what made me leave was a growing sense of my own spirituality – the books I read and the people I talked to who enabled me to free my spiritual self. For a long time, I had been afraid to really listen to God, to really open my heart, because I had been afraid of what might be asked of me, of what sacrifices I might have been expected to make. I realised how naive this view was of God and my relationship with him/ her/ it/ them.

I was introduced to *A Course in Miracles* and in there found a different kind of Christ, one I could relate to, one who showed that responsibility for one's own evolution comes from every thought, word and action. Now, I had something to turn to, not something to run from.
Now I am not afraid. I know that God is within me – *is* me – and that I am a part of the whole. I know that love and forgiveness are the only important things and through these my Higher Self will seek to join the perfection that is the oneness of all things and all beings. I know that my purpose in this life is to learn whatever it is I need to learn to move me towards this perfect state, and that if I don't achieve it this time around, I will keep on coming back until I do. This is purgatory, not too far removed from the Catholic version, really. I know that on a moment-by-moment basis I need to tune in to the God in me and connect with the God in others.

So, ultimately, the Catholic Church was too limited, too confining… and too easy.

Easy to feel like you're living a fairly good life and to feel pretty good after church on Sunday. Now, all thoughts, words and actions are moments of truth. I am aware of my spiritual self constantly and the more I tune into it, the more peaceful I feel and the more awakened to the best part of myself, the God in me.

I waited 18 months after I had left the church to tell my mother because I was afraid she would confine me to Hell and never get over the upset – and never get off her knees praying for me. I used to go round and see friends

at Mass time when she was visiting me. I would pretend I was going to a different church.

My friends would say, “You’re 45 years old and you run a business about empowering women and you are hiding from your mother…”

Finally, I found that my own faith, growth and maturity, and the possibility of upsetting my mother was no longer a calculated risk. It was just the truth of who I was and a clear step into that. I wrote my mother a letter explaining why I was leaving the Church, ending with, “The Church is working for you, Mum, and you couldn't have it any other way. I've found another way and I hope you can accept that. Now I feel that I can help you to accept it and I hope you will let me. And I *will* see you in Heaven.”

I took her the letter so we could discuss it, but she wouldn’t read it while I was there. She read the title only – ‘How do you Tell Your Mother, a Staunch Catholic, That After 45 Years you Have Decided to Leave the Church’ – and said, “Dear God,” and put it down and said she would read it later. She didn’t read it for some time but meanwhile she started having panic attacks. It didn’t help her when I told her I was going to become an interfaith minister. She referred to it from then on as, “That cult you’re in.” I remember being out for a walk with her brother, my only uncle, who I loved very much. We had flown him over from Canada as a surprise for her 80th birthday. We were in one of the beautiful woods near where my mother lived. It was cold but sunny and the leaves had all dropped from the trees and our feet swished through them all as we walked.

He suddenly stopped and looked at me and made a comment about my leaving the church, “You know,” he said, “You stuck a knife into your mother and then you twisted it round and you will never be forgiven.”

I felt the truth in what he said like that same knife twisting deep into my gut. My mother never understood what she considered the ultimate betrayal.

We never discussed it again but, even though we became closer in the last few years of her life, I think she went to her own grave 11 years later, still praying that I wouldn’t go to Hell.

Love and kindness and forgiveness are the things that link all religions and spiritual philosophies. I had nothing to forgive my mother for as she had

tried all her life to act from her beliefs, hard though it was. But I was finally able to forgive myself – for the guilt I felt from having caused her so much pain.

Two years after she died, while studying a postgraduate course in Spiritual Development and Facilitation, we were asked to do a meditation imagining our mothers on our left and our fathers on our right, also sitting in meditation. This was already weird as it was so hard to even imagine them sitting in meditation, but I visualised this picture and looked to my left. My mother looked back at me and smiled with the most beautiful, shining smile – a smile I had never seen in her physical life. I suddenly realised that she finally understood everything. And I wept.

Chapter 10: Being a Bride – Memorable For All The Wrong Reasons

"The day of the wedding went like these things generally do, full of anxious moments interspersed with black comedy."
Janet Street-Porter

My wedding day was one of the most disappointing days of my life.

I was 24 when I got married. This is young by today's standards. In 1972, I considered that I was very late to the party. Nearly all my friends were married or in relationships and had been through numerous boyfriends, beginning when they were about 13 years old. I had only had one boyfriend for a few months in my last year in college and I had never had sex.

The thought of my wedding day had occupied my mind from when I was a teenager. I knew I didn't want a veil, although I suspect that was because I knew that my mother would want me to have one. Being a child of the 60s, although the free love and abundant sex and drugs had passed me by, the long flowing skirts and permed hair hadn't. I had an image of what I would look like on my wedding day. I would be wearing a long cotton cheese-cloth dress, the kind you used to be able to buy at Laura Ashley (well known in the UK for her flowing cotton dresses) and would have flowers in my hair. We would be at a small chapel in the countryside with only a few people there, no official photographer and everyone would be off to the Chinese afterwards. Non-traditional and informal. I had been telling my mother and father about this for years so it should *not* have been a surprise to them when I announced it.

I guess they had already been surprised, not to say shocked, when I announced that I was getting married to Martin. I had met Martin in the school where I was teaching and where he came to do a term of supply teaching. We met in January 1972 and, three weeks later, we decided to get married, which we did five months later. I'm sure there were people, including my parents, who thought I must be pregnant. They were disappointed it was seven years before we had Emily.

Most people thought I had been swept off my feet and was head over heels in love – I hadn't, and I wasn't.

I was in love with the fact that I was going to be married and have a husband. He was the only man I had had sex with and the first time was on the floor at my brother's house – a fumbling, speedy affair – not at all like I had imagined it would be.

But as time was running out (I thought) and Martin and I got on really well and as I was desperate to leave home, it seemed like a good idea. There was no proposal and no engagement ring. Martin went off to Greece in May for a pre-arranged holiday with his best friend. They had been planning this trip for two years and his friend Kevin had saved two years of holidays so they could take this four-week trip. I insisted Martin still went as it seemed to me it would be most unethical to let Kevin down just because he was marrying me. Besides, we had a lifetime ahead of us. So, I was left to make the arrangements. Well, that couldn't be too difficult, could it, given the simple wedding I wanted?

First of all, the church. I refused to get married in my local Catholic church. I couldn't stand the parish priest and didn't much like the church itself. But I *did* want a Catholic wedding (at least my mother could be happy with that!). So, faced with the fact that there were no Catholic chapels in the countryside I would be able to use, I arranged that we would be married in the church near Martin's parents that I used to attend if I was staying at his house. It was small and modern, with lots of wood and it was in the round. The priest was lovely.

Next, the date. We announced that we would get married on Thursday August 10.

We chose a Thursday because we didn't really want anyone there and we thought people wouldn't take a day off work. We were wrong. They all came, as did many people who weren't invited to the reception but came to the church anyway. One of my brothers, John, who had been engaged to Wendy for some time, suddenly announced that they too would be getting married three weeks *before* us. I didn't care one bit about this, but it turns

out I should have cared a lot more! John and Wendy were getting married in the local Catholic church and their reception was a buffet at the local cricket club, where my father was something of a local hero. In terms of the buffet – think ham sandwiches, sausage rolls, crisps, trifle and wedding cake. This was typical for the time but spoke boredom to me from every plate. They were also going to have aunts and uncles who we hardly knew, also traditional.

I refused to budge on the choice of church and had a big row with my parents about the reception and guests.

I wanted to be different and *didn't* want to be traditional.

My mother felt that all the relatives who were coming to John's wedding had to come to mine because the invitations to *my* wedding would come from my parents, and she couldn't possibly snub them all. And there was nothing wrong with Farnworth Cricket Club. I reminded her that I had been telling them for years what kind of wedding I wanted.

"Well, we didn't believe that daft idea," was her dismissive response.

My father was mostly silent during this row between my mother and myself until I raised my voice and said, "Well, suppose I say they're not coming!"

At which point my father said, "Well, suppose I say that I'm not coming to your wedding."

Yes, he really shouted that.

I burst into tears and ran upstairs. My father followed me and came into my bedroom, where I was sobbing and leaning against the bed.

"What you have to remember," he said, "Is that you are going to be married and leave here. I'll be left here with your mother." Enter stage left – emotional blackmail.

Completely outraged, I drove to my other brother's house and ranted and raved at Daniel. I said I wasn't giving in to them because I was right. I was an adult and it was *my* decision.

Daniel looked at me as he handed me some coffee, "You *will* give into her simply because you are right."

I paused to take in this statement. "How does that work?" I said.

"Because you can see her point of view and there is a cat in Hell's chance of her seeing yours. So, you will have to be the one to give in."

It was the only pearl of wisdom I heard from him in his whole life.

I conceded. I would allow these people I didn't even know to come to my wedding, but I was determined that it *would not* be a buffet at Farnworth Cricket Club. Instead, Martin and I found a really nice hotel/ restaurant in the countryside and got an estimate for a three-course meal for about 80 people.

If I had to have people there I didn't know, I would ensure that I wouldn't have to go round chatting to them.

We would have a very nice sit-down meal. It was not cheap. If I couldn't have 'informal', I would have formal and expensive. I gave the estimate to my father. He looked at it for a long time then walked out of the room. I don't think he spoke for about a week! It was only the second time in my life I had seen him speechless. The first time was when I crashed his car, with him in it, when he was teaching me to drive. I don't think he spoke for three weeks that time!

The church was fine, the meal was going to be okay. Now, the dress. I had seen the dress I wanted on a girl at a party. It was white, cotton and long, with a white embroidered pattern in it. It was *exactly* what I wanted. I managed to track the girl down through multiple enquires and phoned her to ask her where she got the dress. It was, indeed, a Laura Ashley dress. The nearest Laura Ashley shop was almost two hours' drive away, so I phoned them. I had the make and size. Yes, they had one in stock. No, they wouldn't let me send them a cheque and post it to me. No, they wouldn't keep it for me. I drove there the next day but they had sold it. I had to find something else and went shopping with my bridesmaid (I was still angry at my mother and refused to let her be involved in any aspect of my personal preparations, thus depriving her of *her* dream wedding of her only daughter – not something I am hugely proud of now). I chose a cream dress with enormous puff sleeves. It needed altering but I subsequently decided I hated it anyway. I cancelled my order. The wedding day was

approaching and I still had no dress so, finally, on my own, I bought the only wedding dress I will ever have. White, little angel sleeves, waisted, round neck, completely plain with a chiffon overlay and a frill round the bottom which was slightly shorter at the front than the back. Not at all the sort of dress that I liked or have ever worn since! But I had to have something.

Next, the headdress.

My flowers-in-my-hair idea wouldn't work at all with the dress I now had, so I decided to wear a hat.

What was I thinking? I *never* wear hats. They don't suit me. In fact, I look ridiculous in them, borne out by my daughters years later who used to insist we visit the hat departments in stores if we were out shopping so I could try on hats and they could laugh. But if it wasn't going to be a veil or flowers in my hair it was going to have to be a hat. I chose a white hat with a dome and a wide brim which curled all the way round made of whatever you make hats out of and a chiffon overlay. It looked awful. Of course, on my wedding day everyone said it looked lovely, but they would say that wouldn't they? Martin wore a brown suit. He never wore suits, so we both looked ungainly and slightly ridiculous on our wedding day which was the only one either of us ever had.

My vision of how I would look on my wedding day was now tarnished and distorted. I thought I could rescue some of it with the flowers. I wanted to hold a simple basket with wild flowers and ferns spilling out of it and hanging down. I visited the local florist and told her what I wanted and took my hat and asked if she could put some of the flowers on the hat as well. I went to collect the hat and flowers on the morning of my wedding. The basket was small with a very long handle. Standing up in the basket was a stiff card covered with silver foil which was about 12 inches high. Stuck onto the front of the foil were individual carnations in dyed, crazy, unnatural colours. I looked at it in horror. It was colourful that's for sure, just not at all what I intended.

All my girlhood dreams about my wedding day were now shattered.

On my way to the church in the car with my father we both sat in silence. The only thing I could hear was a voice in my head, “It’s not too late. You can stop this right now. Your father can tell them at the church. Yes, they will be upset but, as you’ve said, you will only ever get married once in your life. Do you want this to be it? Better end it now, rather than later. And your father doesn’t like him very much anyway. You’re not in love with this man. He is nothing like the ideal man you had imagined for yourself. He isn’t romantic in the least. He’s anti-Catholic. He is aloof and honest to the point of being insulting. Stop the car now. Now!”

I didn’t stop the car. There was a smaller voice coming from my heart and whispering in my ear very slowly, “You are supposed to be with this man.”

So, I married him.

The Church wedding service was as expected, there’s not a lot you can do to ruin that. As Martin and I walked out of the church, our four parents followed us to kiss and hug us and offer their congratulations. My mother cried. I expected that. Martin’s mother didn’t cry. I expected that, too. Martin’s father cried. I expected that. Then my father hugged me tightly and started sobbing into my shoulder and wouldn’t let go. I had *not* expected that. It was only the third time in my life I had ever seen my father cry. This emotional, wordless outpouring was more than I could bear and I insisted on driving straight to the reception and said we could take photos there. And so, all the people who had taken a day off work to come and wish me well, came out of the church to find that there was no bride and no groom. It was only when I saw friends’ photos later and saw the people who had bothered to come to the church, who I hadn’t seen at all, that I felt bad. I assume that the meal was fine because it is completely unmemorable.

I went upstairs to change into my going-away outfit, which consisted of a maroon mini skirt which was extremely short (to be fair, my legs *were* my best physical attribute). The skirt waved at the bottom with a broderie anglaise trim round the bottom edge. There was a matching maroon top with short sleeves and a similar trim round all the edges and down the front of it. Underneath this was a white frilly blouse with huge sleeves which

billowed out from the short sleeves and had a big, fussy frill all the way down the front of it. At the time, I thought I looked great, even though I actually looked like a glamour girl who had burst out of a Christmas cracker – all sparking and overdressed – teetering about on platform shoes that she could hardly walk in. Martin changed into his trademark jeans and went to get the car, which he had hidden in a garage round the corner, asking the owner to stop anyone from 'decorating' it.

I stayed at the venue, drinking wine and waiting to be driven off into the sunset for my honeymoon. Surely this part of the dream would come true!

My brother Daniel came into the room where I was packing my things. He was serious and slightly pale. He told me to sit down and said, "Martin has been bitten by a dog."

I laughed, "Don't be ridiculous!"

He took me to the window and, sure enough, there was Martin sitting in the passenger seat holding his leg up with blood running down it. Our guests were starting to gather round. Apparently, the garage owner, had put a chained dog to guard the car. Our friends were in the office trying to persuade him to take the dog off when Martin walked up to the car holding his wedding suit. They shouted and waved to Martin to tell him to keep away but he just waved back. As he tried to open the car, the dog came tearing round the car and bit his leg cleanly, in and out. Luckily, it didn't bite and tear or the damage would have been much worse.

So, instead of being driven away on my romantic honeymoon, the first stop was the emergency department at the hospital to treat Martin's leg.

The next stop was my parents' house for me to change my clothes. When I had gone out to pack the car, I had gathered up Martin's wedding suit, which he had dropped in oil at the garage. Martin hadn't noticed and I didn't realise until I saw that the frill on my whole blouse and my top were now covered with black oil. My going away outfit was as ruined, as my wedding day was turning out to be.

It was approaching 10pm when we reached Hereford, where we were spending our honeymoon night, and the light was fading fast. We tried a number of places which were full, including the biggest hotel, which we decided to splash out on but, unfortunately, there was a big conference and all the rooms were taken.

We finally found a pub/ restaurant which had some bedrooms. Martin hobbled in and then came back to the door and beckoned me in. I followed him in, shedding confetti at every step, to the amusement of the men sitting sniggering at the bar. The landlord went ahead of us, up the stairs, followed by Martin.

Halfway up the stairs, Martin turned round and quietly said to me, "It's single beds."

I stopped dead on the stairs, "I'm *not* sleeping in single beds on my wedding night!"

"It will be okay."

The landlord ahead turned round. "Everything alright?"

"Yes," said Martin, "We're just coming."

I repeated, "I'm *not* sleeping in single beds on my wedding night."

"We'll push them together, it will be fine."

"Yes, we're just coming," Martin said to the landlord, who had stopped to ask us again if everything was okay.

We got to the room and the landlord opened the door. I peered round Martin to look. There were two single beds right enough, with a floor to ceiling wardrobe in between them. My mouth dropped open.

"Thanks very much," said Martin. "That's fine."

I was tired and dejected. The last of my dreams was disappearing before my eyes.

"Well, let's just go downstairs and eat," I said. I suddenly realised how hungry I was.

The landlord looked at his watch, "Oh, we've just stopped serving," he said.

"Okay," I snapped. "Then we'll go out and eat."

The landlord thought for a minute and said, "Okay, I'll wait up for you."

We hobbled down the street, Martin trying to cheer me up, saying things like, “You’ve got to admit, it’s funny.”

I was trying not to cry, saying, “I dare say in time I might see the amusing side to this but right now I can’t.” Everywhere was shut, except the local Chinese restaurant. We had to painstakingly climb three flights of stairs and eat our wedding night meal in a near empty restaurant where the only occupants were local drunks who were bending over their plates as they shovelled food into their slavering mouths.

Well, I guess I got my Chinese meal…

Now, I can see my pattern of having expectations which ultimately end up causing me pain and which could have been avoided. Certainly, I had expectations about my wedding day which were probably based on romantic teenage magazine fantasies. I had expectations about my mother and father, probably based on stories of happy families I must have read growing up. I had expectations about my husband and my marriage – all unmet and increasingly painful to recognise. My head knows that all emotional pain is caused by expectations not met. Yet my heart constantly leads me astray and I am driven by desires.

My wedding day stories are funny now and it might have been that this early catalogue of evidence about expectations causing pain could have been a wake-up call to save me from future pain. But it wasn’t – and it didn’t.

Chapter 11: Being a Teacher

"I cannot teach anybody anything, I can only make them think."
Socrates

I loved teaching. I had my career set out before me. I would be a deputy headteacher by the time I was 30 and have my own school by the time I was 35. I had no doubt that I would succeed. But after seven years, I resigned – with no job to go to.

My teaching career had started back in my hometown at the school near where I lived. I decided I would go back home after college just for a year. The school was a secondary modern one with the grammar school on the same campus. There wasn't much integration between the schools though and even the staff sat in different areas of the huge staff room. At my interview with the education guy on the council, I said I wanted to work at that school. He was very frosty and said, "Well, Miss Bown, no one is going to resign because you want a job there."

I replied, "Yes, but it's an expanding school and you're bound to need additional teachers."

So that's where I ended up.

I was teaching English and all the English teachers were women. It remains my best example of team working and that was *because* it was all women – no jockeying for position, no talking over one another and all of us sharing ideas and resources.

I have continued to rate women-only groups and teams very highly ever since.

The Head of Department, Barbara, demonstrated the art of *seeming* to be angry with children without actually *getting* angry. It was the first thing I learned there, how to remain emotionally unattached from the situation in hand. It was also the first time I saw that the demonstration of anger was safe – it didn't have to descend into rage.

I also realised that I really didn't like 10 and 11-year-old children. They would ask stupid questions like:

"Shall I turn over the page, Miss?" (*Yes, unless you are going to write on the desk*, I'd think to myself);

"What's the date, Miss?" (I'd just written it on the blackboard);

"Can I underline the heading in two colours?" (I really didn't care).

Of course, I didn't voice these responses out loud and kept my sarcasm in check but I did establish a rule – whatever question you are going to ask, ask yourself first, "Will Miss Bown say this is a stupid question?" And, if you think the answer to that is 'yes', then please don't ask me – you can answer your question yourself." I would see kids at the back putting their hands up and then down and then up again and then biting their nails. I probably terrified them and stopped them asking questions ever again.

My classroom was next to the art room where the art teacher was an older guy, Ken. He was friendly and easy going and his smile never left his mouth, even when he was talking. He guided me when he saw I was trying to be too domineering with my pupils. He showed me that it wasn't necessary. He also explained to me, with great amusement, what his fourth-year pupil actually meant when he kept asking me about my pussy. I was *so* naive and had no idea what the boy meant or why he was smirking. It wouldn't be the only time my naivety about sexual language would get me into trouble.

It was in the second term that I met Martin and who I would marry five months later. After the wedding, in August, we moved to London to take up our new teaching jobs for the following school year. We planned to teach for two years, then travel around South America for two years, having a baby along the way. Of course, both sets of parents were completely horrified at this idea and weren't shy about telling us.

I had taken Martin's name when we married (a move I later regretted) and so was known as Mrs Robertson. We lived in a small upstairs flat in Wimbledon. I was teaching at a huge school for 1800 girls in Tooting Bec and Martin was at Wandsworth School for Boys.

That year in London was one of the worst in my life. The school was chaotic.

The girls were unruly. Discipline was non-existent, except for Miss Henry (I never knew her first name). Miss Henry was a very tall, formidable, black woman and the girls were terrified of her. I don't know whether she knocked them about in the classroom or whether she reminded them of a mother or grandmother who did, but they were quiet and polite and respectful around her – as were the staff! There was a lot of 'knocking about' going on – mainly by the pupils. This was 1972/3 and it was a period of school violence. One teacher in my school was held while five others kicked her. Another ended up in hospital with concussion. A boy was stabbed in the playground in Martin's school. I had to lock my classroom door (which was actually illegal) to stop pupils from leaving. I could be in the middle of teaching when the door would be flung open and a group of girls would appear in the doorway. They would shout to their friends, "You're not listening to this fucking bitch, are you? Come and have a fag," and a group of girls would get up and go and join them. And every now and again you would hear the voice of Miss Vaughan-Davies, the Headmistress, echoing though the tannoy in every classroom, "June, June. We can all see you on the roof, dear, come down now," and girls would rush to the window, trying to see the roof. Once, I saw girls hanging out of the windows on the third floor, shouting down to prospective parents who were walking around outside, "You don't want to fucking come here. It's a fucking awful school." Some teachers blocked their tannoy so we wouldn't hear Vaughan-Davies' voice booming out from the wall at various points during the day.

My worst class was 3K. I only had them for a double period on a Thursday morning but I used to dread it. The first lesson I had with them I got there early with my tape recorder so I could play them some music from my lesson plan for the writing part (the same lesson that I had got a distinction for on my final teaching practice). The girls drifted in, glanced at me, then sat in groups, chatting and doing their nails. I said, "Good Morning," and raised my voice and clapped my hands – nothing. I had to go round to each group of girls and ask them if they wouldn't mind turning around as we were about to start the lesson. They didn't turn, but fidgeted in their seats and still did their nails.

Just as I was about to start the lesson, Jean spoke up,

“We’re going to break you.” She stared at me, “We’ve broken every teacher we ever had, and we’ll break you too.

And don’t think you can go running to the headmistress because she is useless, she won’t do anything.”

They were right on that and she did nothing to support me in the following months.

The school consisted of mainly black students and there was not much tension between white and non-white students. There were tensions, however, between the black pupils and white members of staff, which would become very personal before the year was out.

The next few months were extremely stressful at my school and Martin’s. We would arrive home, drag ourselves up the stairs to our flat, drop our bags and just sit in the dreary, dark front room, which we never used, for over half an hour, not speaking, before we could even make a coffee. We had a tiny kitchen which we ate in and then we would go to our bedroom with just enough room at the foot of the bed for two small chairs in front of the electric fire and listen to John Dunn on Radio 2 and play Canasta. Every night.

I started to put on weight and get very tired. My eyes swelled and looked like they would pop out of my head. My heart rate was right up and I was so exhausted that I had to sit down to comb my hair. I could only go upstairs one step at a time and, as my teaching room was on the second floor, there were a lot of steps. In addition, I had large purple welts appearing all over my legs. I was a complete mess. Sometimes there was a group of girls near my room that I would have to pass. I would go up to the next floor and down again at the other side and approach my room from the other side, so as not to have to pass them. Our instructions were that if there was a fight we had to go into our classroom and lock the door and *not* try to intervene – the police would be called.

The staffroom was in another block altogether and once, when I had locked my class in, their friends started banging on the windows in the corridor and chanting. I started to feel very afraid. I knew I had to get out of

there with some dignity, so I walked out of the classroom slowly and down the corridor with girls from two classes shouting abuse after me. I knew that if one of them had jumped me they would all have piled in. I kept walking and didn't look back.

Had I not taught successfully for the year before, I would have left teaching altogether.

Finally, after I had gained 42lbs in weight, I was diagnosed with an over-active thyroid. My symptoms had fooled the doctors as you would normally lose weight with an overactive thyroid, not put it on. Within two or three weeks of starting the medication the weight dropped off and I was back to normal, i.e. my normal stress levels at that school.

The final straw was the following May when a girl came into my classroom and hit me. I had tried to stop her running down the corridor at a breakneck pace and put my arm out.

She told me to take my 'fucking white hands' away from her and called me a 'fucking white bitch'.

I looked at her and referred to her as a 'slut', not something I am proud of in the least, but my naivety about sexual language had got me into trouble again. I had no idea that 'slut' had a sexual connotation. I meant it in the same way that my mother used the word 'common'.

The girl followed me into my room and whacked me on the arm. I stumbled but didn't fall. I didn't take my eyes off her and never spoke. Eventually, she left the room.

I reported her to the deputy headmistress but she had already sent me a letter about another matter telling me to 'sort out my own problems'. Nothing happened, so I decided to act myself.

Martin and I had already decided that we would leave our respective schools at the end of the school year as we couldn't stand another year teaching and living in London. I wrote a letter to the Headmistress summarising my experiences at the school ending with, "I will not stay in a school where I am forced to lower my standards in order to survive. Indeed, why should I stay and be subjected to the things I have described? Judging

from the high turnover of staff in London schools perhaps I'm not the only one who feels this way. However, as I am leaving the country for a year or more in August, perhaps I am one of the few who can afford to speak out about it?"

I waited three days for the headmistress to see me about the letter. I heard nothing, so I sent it to the Chairman of the School Board, the Chief Education Officer and the two London newspapers – the *Evening Standard* and the *Evening News*. It was meant to be a letter about why yet another London teacher was leaving and about the situation in London schools in general, and my school in particular. Where I had come from in Bolton, the local paper would never print the names and addresses of teachers in this situation. But hey, this was London so there it was in print on page three of the *Evening Standard* and on the front page of the *Balham and Tooting News* with my name and address right in there. The paper used the phrases 'blackboard jungle' and 'jungle tactics', which I had never used in my letter, so they added a racist element into the mix.

The following day, I had girls following me round the school chanting 'traitor' and telling me they knew where I lived and their brothers were going to get me.

Then the *News of the World* (the sleaziest of the tabloids) turned up at our door. I hid on the landing while Martin dealt with them. He said there was a photographer wearing a leather jacket and with a scar down one cheek. They were both smoking. They wanted an interview and a picture, no doubt with me sitting on a table in a short skirt with my legs crossed. Martin told them the information had been in a private letter and if their editor wanted to chance lifting it from there that was their decision, there would be no interview. I hardly slept that night then went out early to get all the Sunday papers, including the *News of the World*. I thumbed through every page but mercifully a much more salacious story had broken and there was no mention of me or my school.

Of course, it caused a terrible storm at the school, culminating in a large staff meeting where most people defended the school and refuted the allegations I had made and avoided any eye contact with me altogether.

Finally, Miss Henry rose to speak. She rarely spoke in the staff room and certainly not at staff meetings. There was immediate silence as everyone turned to look at her.

"What this young teacher has said is absolutely true about this school. I find it a disgrace that she came here as an inexperienced teacher and has had no support from the senior management of this school. The pupils in this school are undisciplined and the senior management shut themselves in their offices and leave young members of staff to deal with it themselves. Finally, it has driven Mrs Robertson to take the action she did." She concluded, "It is *your* responsibility and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves."

She directed her comments to the headmistress and deputy headmistress. I could have fallen at her feet and kissed them. Miss Henry had obviously been paying much more attention than everyone thought. The meeting finished quickly and then we all carried on; nothing changed at the school.

I stayed in the school for another two months and then we left to go travelling for a year. It was six months before I had a night's sleep where I didn't dream about that school. We were away for 10 months, travelling in Europe, culminating in living in Spain for 11 weeks. It was one of the happiest periods in my marriage.

When we returned to Bolton, we did some supply teaching for a term. The school Martin was placed in had a fire so, because he had been given a contract for a full term, he got paid to sit in the staffroom every day and play cards. I was sent to what was considered to be the worst school in Bolton but, of course, after London, it was an easy ride. One year in London was worth 10 years anywhere else.

After a spell in a small rural school, I applied to a school in Oldham. This was where I applied for the job that was two pay grades above the basic one I had started on – unheard of in those days to do that. I got the job because I argued that I was worth it but didn't realise until I started the job that it was actually the worst school in Oldham and no one else had applied! At my interview I was prepared for the inevitable questions about

my moving schools so much and not having a track record at any one school. I made sure I turned all these concerns into advantages.

"You've moved around a lot," commented the Headmaster, frowning.

"Yes, that means I've taught all age groups, all levels and single sex as well as mixed gender classes. I have gained a lot of valuable experience and know that whatever situation I find myself in, I have the skills to do the job well."

I have given this advice to so many women going for interviews - that whatever you think they will see as a weakness, sell it as a strength!

The Headmaster in Oldham wasn't very good but as long as your exam results were good, he didn't care what you did in the classroom. My brightest class had been put in for their GCE English Language exam one year early but I had no intention of doing comprehension and essay writing for a year so I told them that we would be doing a variety of things as part of their education. However, whatever they did, they should not miss the last six weeks before the exam, that's when I would teach them how to pass the exam. They all passed. What time we would have wasted on their education if all we had done all year was essay writing and comprehension!

I managed to get Edward De Bono's *Thinking Lessons* on the timetable and did the course with my brightest class and the ROSLA kids. ROSLA stood for Raising of the School Leaving Age and these were the children who thought they were going to leave school at 15 years of age but then found out they were being forced to stay until they were 16. They weren't happy! But they were brilliant in the *Thinking Lessons*. One of the lessons was called 'Short, Medium and Long Term Consequences' and one of the questions was, 'Suppose all the cars in the world were yellow.' My bright class, already being channelled into *what* to think not *how* to think said it was a stupid question. My ROSLA class said things like:

"There would be a run on yellow paint."

"You could set up a business making yellow paint."

"You couldn't tell which cars were taxis in New York."

"Your eyes would start to hurt."

They had so many examples and were so creative in their thinking, yet they were classed as the dropouts.

I was beginning to get more and more sceptical about the purpose and process of education.

In this school, I was supposed to be in charge of pastoral care for the girls. This meant that anyone who had a problem with any girl could – and did – send them to me. I remember I was sent a girl who forgot her gym kit. I knew of her and had seen her around. She wasn't pretty, with misshapen teeth in a mouth too big for them. People suspected that as soon as she left school at four o'clock she went out on the streets to join her mother on the game. And I was supposed to punish her for forgetting her gym kit! We looked at each other carefully. We lived in worlds apart and we both knew it.

I just said, "Make your life easier, bring your gym kit," and dismissed her. For that girl, education was just a period of time she was forced to spend in school while waiting to earn money on the street. But I still preferred difficult 14-year-olds to enthusiastic 11-year-olds!

My final school was at a large, new comprehensive in a nice suburb of Preston. I had applied to teach English. At the interview I had been asked what I thought about drama. I expounded at length on how important the subject was and how you should have specialist drama teachers to teach it and not just add it onto an English teaching post. They offered me the job and asked me if I would teach drama to two classes. I said I would. So much for living your principles!

One of my classes was composed of mainly 15-year-olds – 14 girls and one boy. They had been promised they could do a CSE in Drama. These pupils had never done drama before and it was way too late for them to do free drama. They were already in the teenage throes of acute self-consciousness. We had been timetabled for the whole of Friday afternoon, which was very handy. I designed a theatre appreciation course and, as well as studying some plays, they learned about staging, directing,

lighting and scripting and all the things to do with putting on a stage play. We used to go to Preston theatre for them to observe and talk to people there.

For their final assessment they chose a play to produce about two friends who wanted to stay in a hotel and one of them was refused because people with the name Brown were discriminated against. My group found the play themselves, decided who would be in it, who would direct, who would do the lighting, who would prompt and who would do costume and make up and so on. They all had to have a part and they had to write up the project as they went along. When it came to the final performance, an external moderator was present. She started taking notes but after a few minutes she stopped and said to me, "I'm just going to enjoy this." 13 of the 14 students were awarded the top grade. I was so proud of them and of what I had been able to do with them.

It was while at this school, four years after my London experience that I was able to express my deep-seated anger at the lack of support for young teachers and at incompetent headteachers.

I was invited to be on a *Panorama* programme on the BBC called 'Facing the Class'. All the audience members had been chosen to express a particular viewpoint: lack of resources, lack of training, classes too large, and so on. My angle was about headteachers and I made it clear that I wasn't referring to my present school. I could never have said those things about a current headteacher, the repercussions would have been too great.

David Dimbleby used to present *Panorama* (and is still presenting on current affairs programmes for the BBC, 44 years later!). He only appeared just before the programme was due to air yet he knew where everyone was sitting and he called on us by name to make our particular points. It was very impressive. While I spoke, some of the headteachers in the room started shaking their heads and sniggering. But I pressed my point and felt my anger rise as I remembered my London experience. Afterwards, many of the teachers there came and thanked me for speaking up. The producer of the programme sent me a note saying that I had been the 'star' of the

show and wished I had had more time to ‘stir up your colleagues’. They sent a cheque for 50p, which I still have.

I’ve watched education in schools change over the years. Within 10 years of leaving my last school, the National Curriculum was put into place. Everyone studies the same thing and does the same exam. Teachers are more and more constrained in what they can do in the classroom. They now have no freedom to be creative. Today, I wouldn’t be able to do *Thinking Lessons* or design a theatre appreciation course.

Teaching in the 70s was one of the hardest jobs to do if you did it conscientiously and one of the easiest if you wanted to get away with doing very little.

What’s more, a headteacher’s role seemed to consist of admin and management and little teaching. No wonder good, creative, teachers became disillusioned and dissatisfied.

I have been asked many times how I judge my success as a teacher if I don’t count exam results. I remember what my father had said and I say that in any class of 30 pupils, if at the end of a 40-minute class just one of those pupils has changed their perspective on something so they will never see that something in the same light again – *that* is success. And I’ll probably never know it. No accident that when I set up my consultancy it had ‘Perspectives’ in the Business Name and the strap line was “Change Your Perspective – Change Everything”.

Had I stayed in school teaching, I think I would have grown to hate it. Martin had gone off to do a Master’s degree in Educational Technology and I didn’t know where I was heading. I knew that once I joined the senior management team my career would be set but after seven years, I was restless and wondering what else I might do. I cringed at the thought of looking back on my life at 60 and realising that I had taught for 40 years. I loved teaching and was good at it. In fact, I did carry on teaching, and still do, but to adults, not children, and in organisations not schools. But after seven years in schools I needed a change of workplace and maybe there

were other things I could do as well as teaching, if not better? I had to find out.

Chapter 12: Being Married

"I find to my astonishment that an unhappy marriage goes on being unhappy when it is over."
Rebecca West

Emily was about 18 months old and we were going to see friends for the weekend. We had a rare conversation in the car about our relationship.

Martin said at one point, "Suppose 100% of my giving is only 70% of what you want. What then?"

What then indeed?

I had reduced my expectations since we had married eight years previously. In the beginning, from my teenage years, I think I *did* have expectations. I had feasted on girls' magazines like *Romeo* and *Mirabelle* (although both were banned in my house by my mother because they showed cartoon girls and boys kissing). I had very romantic notions about what a relationship should be like. And I yearned to be romanced – flowers, sweet notes, lovely surprises – sadly, none of these materialised.

It was years before I realised that we give what we want to receive.

I wanted all the things I was giving to Martin. He didn't really want any of them, so he gave none of them back.

I was 24 years old when I met Martin when nearly all my friends were married or engaged. I was already feeling that maybe marriage was going to pass me by altogether. Every man I looked at I considered as possible marriage material. Although I was striking and confident, I had only had one real boyfriend and I had never had sex. My Catholic and convent schooling had put the fear of hellfire in me about sex and pregnancy. I didn't even know what masturbation was and had never touched myself. So, when I saw Martin in the staff room at the first breaktime of his first day, I, of course, assessed him as a possible husband and went over to him and introduced myself. He was tall, dark and skinny with long sideburns, green eyes and one of those droopy moustaches that were popular in the 70s. His mass of black hair was curly and untamed. He had a strong Northern accent – he was from Bolton

too – so I was predisposed to like him for that reason alone. He had a knack of not saying a lot but what he did say was always succinct and, somehow, carried authority. He sat in the staffroom in a circle with everyone else but seemed aloof. He always looked like he was judging people. I was aware of how loud I was around him and was sure that he saw my ignorance and naivety shining through. Later, I would find out that he wasn't judging people at all. He was sitting thinking about his beloved Bolton Wanderers, or his other passion – steam engines.

I had bought a cheap second-hand car and Martin offered to give me driving lessons after school, so we started spending a lot of time together. After three weeks of seeing him every day after school and at weekends, I remember being at his house and commenting on how ridiculous it seemed that he had to drive me all the way back across town then come all the way back again to his house. It felt so natural to be with him. We were sitting on the thickly piled patterned carpet on his parents' lounge floor in their nicely appointed bungalow in a desirable residential area of Bolton.

"Well, there's only one thing we can do about that," he said.

"What's that?"

"Get married."

So that was that. No proposal. No declaration of love. No engagement ring.

Everyone thought we were madly in love and he had swept me off my feet but that wasn't it at all. I was going to be married! Finally, I was going to have a husband.

The first 23 years of my marriage were largely happy and we settled into an easy relationship. I had tempered many of my romantic notions and there was a lot to enjoy. We were both very independent and never pressured the other to do something they didn't want to do, wear something they didn't want to wear or go somewhere they didn't want to go. Martin liked strong women and I learned to appreciate this more and more as I observed my friends and their relationships. He was always hugely supportive of my career and, for my part, I didn't mind when he wanted to

leave teaching and go for a Master's degree when I was pregnant. I never assumed that he should be financially responsible for me. The respect that we had for each other was a foundation of our relationship and his respect even extended to my Catholic practice at the time. Even though Martin had no time for the Catholic Church, wherever we travelled, Martin would research where the nearest church was. He would take me and then wait outside until it was finished to make sure I was safe.

We also shared the same values and the same politics, so there were few disagreements. On the other hand, we had few deep and meaningful conversations about ourselves, our fears, our hopes or our marriage and which became, over time, a double-edged sword.

We kept the peace at the expense of being able to fully understand each other.

We talked mainly about our jobs, family and the children. Martin rarely talked about his feelings, so we didn't have a strong emotional connection and as he was anti any formal religions we had no spiritual connection either. If ever we differed on anything personal that might have led to a big argument, we would say what we each thought but stop before it developed into an argument. I would think about it afterwards and make slight adjustments in my thinking – and I guess Martin did the same – which enabled us to continue rubbing along together. We would rarely go back and revisit the conversation.

I was always terrified that an argument would turn into rage, like I had seen with my father, and/ or that Martin would reject me. It was easy to ignore the hurt I sometimes felt and to just concentrate on the good. And there was plenty that was good. But I think that hurt about petty things never really goes away – so when a really big hurt comes, all the little ones come trotting out behind it like children walking obediently in line behind their parents, waiting to be counted.

Martin was probably the cleverest man I have ever met and, although I was always slightly intimidated by this, it was one of the things I loved most about him. I was always drawn to clever people. He knows a lot about many things. He's the one you would want to have as your 'phone a friend'

on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*. Martin could read something and remember it for ever. I would read something and forget it within five minutes. I always felt slightly stupid next to him. He also had a very powerful presence, in spite of his mild manner of speaking. I was the loudmouth. I saw him as being the powerful one in our relationship. Interestingly, he told me before we parted that he had always seen me as the more powerful one.

If we both felt intimidated by the other, it's no wonder that there was little space left for intimacy.

Emily was born seven years after we were married. Martin had completed his Master's degree and got a job in Loughborough, advising companies on educational technology solutions, and so we moved there to start our family life. It was our 'poor but happy' period. We loved our little house, a three-bed terraced house which looked small from the front but was like the Tardis from *Dr Who* when you walked through it. It had a long hall with a tiled floor with painted geometric patterns on it. There was a cosy lounge which looked out onto the street, then a room which became the playroom where Emily and me and the other mums and their children would spend many a happy hour. Beyond the playroom was the breakfast room where we would eat all our meals. The kitchen beyond was tiny and 'L' shaped – two people would have to squeeze past each other. Then there was the small outhouse and the long garden. The yard ran from the playroom down the outside of the breakfast room, kitchen and outhouse. It got the sun and that was where I put Emily, in her buggy, for her morning sleep.

I had finished teaching and decided to be a full-time mum. I was curious about what it would be like and was so excited about this new being we had created. But I was also clear I would have things in my life other than nappies! We didn't have much money, so we only had bacon every third week. No alcohol, no cheese and we only cooked with half an onion, so a pound of onions would last longer. We prayed that no one would suddenly show up who we would have to feed and had more than one argument about whether we could afford a can of lager to share on a Friday night. I would regularly walk down to the local market at the end of

the day with Emily in her pushchair to collect the fruit and vegetables the market traders were about to throw out and walk back with Martin after his work.

I made all Emily's food myself – for example, pureed carrots that I would put dollops of into ice cube trays and freeze – and I made baby rusks that Emily sucked into spikes which could have caused serious damage if she missed her mouth and poked out her eye instead. My view was, and is, that a child joins an existing unit and they are only one of the pieces of the jigsaw – as are we all.

I became something of a creative genius (self-labelled) making Play Doh, collages and clothes from cloth kits (the ones where they sent you all the pieces already cut out and you just had to sew them up). It was very much a middle-class badge to have your children wearing cloth kits. I also made all my Christmas presents which, unfortunately, usually fell to bits about a month after Christmas.

Our life was happy in lots of ways in those years but Martin never told me he loved me, and hadn't done since I had become pregnant with Emily.

The news of the pregnancy had impacted him hugely, even though it was planned. I think the crushing responsibility he felt about caring for this individual for the next 18 years weighed heavily on him. That was the only conclusion I could reach about his rejection of me. We didn't make love for 18 months after Emily was born. But then, when we were on our way to see friends, we had that rare conversation about our relationship where Martin made his '70%' comment. We talked for the whole car journey, and the fact that we had had a conversation about our marriage, elated me. Up until then our conversations about the two of us – always instigated by me – consisted of me saying, "You know I'm thinking of leaving you, don't you?" and Martin saying, "Yes." That was it, those were our conversations. So, our conversation in the car that weekend was a breakthrough to me. It's not that anything was decided, it was just that we had actually had a conversation! We had a lot of sex that weekend and it kickstarted our relationship again. Our relationship stabilised. Our patterns became more

cemented. We started to develop our own lives and shared intimacy only in sex. But still, I loved Martin and thought he loved me. I was very relieved not to be entertaining any more thoughts about leaving him that I had had for the first 18 months of Emily's life.

Emily adored her daddy and would rush to meet him when he came home from work and fling her arms round his neck saying, "I love you, Daddy." Martin started to use the word 'love' again, in relation to me.

Meanwhile, he was enjoying his job and I was playing squash and starting to volunteer for the probation service and at the Refuge (in the 80s, safe houses for women who have been abused used to be called 'Refuges for Battered Women', a frightful name). I had made some friends and was helping Emily to make her own memories. We were settled and happy.

After three years in Loughborough Martin got a new, much better paid, job as a consultant in educational technology solutions, so we went to Teddington in Middlesex. I persuaded Martin to have another child and Amy was born while we were there. It only took one year in his job in London for Martin to realise that he was now ready to set up his own management consultancy with three colleagues. We couldn't afford another house in London, and neither of us felt at home there, so we moved back to the Midlands when Amy was 10 months old. We moved to a small village in Leicestershire, near Loughborough, where we had lots of friends from our previous time there. We lived there for 17 years and it was a very happy place. The house was old and rambling with a huge garden, a massive kitchen and bathroom, four bedrooms, a large lounge, a dining room and an office. We built a big conservatory onto it in due course. It was a great family home and I'm glad our daughters had their childhoods there. The thing I am most proud of in my life is helping to produce two daughters who grew into amazing women and for trying to provide a stable, loving environment for them.

I started doing freelance work for Martin's company and it was he who suggested I start my own business providing self-instructional materials that could replace expensive face-to-face training in organisations. We converted the garages behind the house into offices and I started to focus on building my business. Martin gave me total support, both from a business point of view and with the girls. He would be there to

bath the children and put them to bed if I was going to be late, although as soon as they heard my car they would start to call out for me and want me to take over bath time. Martin would try to insist that he would do it, but the girls weren't having that. Sometimes, I would walk in the house after a long drive back, drop my bag and go upstairs for bath time and reading and bed. I could be in the house for well over an hour before I would even get to make myself a cup of tea. But it was all worth it. I was loving my job and loving my life with Martin and the girls.

We both played at the local squash club and once, when Martin was there on his own, someone asked where I was. He said that I was working away. They asked him if I had left his meals in the freezer and he said, "No, but then again, I don't leave her meals in the freezer when I am away."

He was my champion. He was proud of me and I felt blessed.

And the support worked both ways. I helped to care for his mother when she was dying of cancer in our house. I was the one who sorted out the meals and the childcare. I thought we made a good team. And we spoke every day on the phone for 23 years, wherever in the world one of us was.

We had enough money to be able to buy our way out of any trouble. I didn't want to continue doing the largest share of the housework once I started my own business, but Martin didn't want to do it either. So, we had a housekeeper who came in every day. We had a gardener who made us a beautiful garden with a pond. I hired someone to cook homemade food for us that I could freeze and hired a local schoolgirl to do the after-school care for the girls. We had two holidays a year, a very nice car each, and wanted for nothing. We took the girls with us to conferences in America and on holidays abroad every year. We entertained a lot – a far cry from our days when we couldn't afford to feed any visitors – and went away as a family at weekends to see friends. Our lives were comfortable and, I thought, happy.

I had long come to the realisation that you didn't need romantic love for a marriage to be happy.

It was surely ridiculous to think that two people marrying in their twenties could maintain an all-consuming relationship for 50 years? I wonder how many people who are together after even 20 years are really happy or whether one, or both, were living a lie – the lie they tell to themselves every day about how happy they are – or the reasons they give themselves about why it is a better choice to stay unhappy. I never felt a strong emotional connection with Martin. But I thought it *was* possible to maintain a happy, stable relationship built on trust and respect. Martin and I shared work interests, financial responsibility and the desire to create a happy, stable environment for the girls. We also shared a love of football, squash and good food and wine. I could never quite get into his love of steam engines.

Having started off shakily, our sex life was great. When you live well and have busy lives and the sex is good you can miss all the signs that your marriage is in trouble. Or maybe there were no obvious signs at all. If someone doesn't tell you they're unhappy and there are no observable signs, then how would you know? I was oblivious. Or maybe I just chose not to see.

My needs for intimacy were met by my female friends.

My increased interest in spirituality, after I had left Catholicism, was met by books, courses, new friends and then, ultimately, by my decision to train as an interfaith minister. For some reason this made Martin angry and contributed significantly to the growing chasm between us.

In November 1994, the last phase of our marriage began. It would last four and a half years and was the most painful period of my whole life. I won't be writing about that period in these memoirs. Suffice to say that by the end there was no trust or respect left. I believed Martin was my soul mate. I believe you make a contract with a soul to come into this world and push each other right to the edge – and over it – and so either you fly or die. Well, I lived, but learning to fly and finding emotional and spiritual freedom proved to be extremely difficult at times. And although I wasn't in love with Martin when we married, I did grow to love him very deeply. Once I had

gotten over my need for romantic love, I thought that the love we had was solid enough. It obviously wasn't for Martin.

I had settled for 70% of what I wanted but I'm not sure that Martin gave 100% of what he could have.

Still, I often wonder how it could have happened – two supposedly happily married people, considered by their friends to have the ideal marriage, both successfully running their own businesses, with two stunning daughters, a lovely big family home and a very nice lifestyle. As it turns out, Martin wasn't happy. I saw something today which said that for relationships to work it takes healing from our pasts, owning our triggers and having hard conversations. We did precious little of that. I used to wonder what 'irreconcilable differences' meant – now I know. It's a completely different understanding of what a relationship should be like and a completely different analysis of why it has broken down.

But, through all the pain of our final years together, I learned the resilience to bounce back from set back after set back and I found determination to continue my spiritual path. I held onto the trust that everything would be okay in the end because the Universe really is kind. I learned that self-love is the only love I would ever need. I learned that anger takes energy and eats you away from the inside. I learned that pain can be transcended by always seeing the bigger picture. And I learned the only route to happiness is gratitude.

I regret nothing. My marriage brought me my daughters and provided the most fertile ground I can imagine for my self-development.

Now, 22 years later, I choose to remember the many happy times we had in our marriage, our two wonderful daughters, and the things I loved best about Martin. And occasionally, very occasionally, I cry.

Chapter 13: Being a Volunteer – Learning about Unconditional Love

"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."
Mahatma Gandhi

I was called to the Refuge. The house had a pay phone and sometimes when I picked up and heard the beeps I knew it was the Refuge and my heart would sink as to what I would find as they only called in an emergency. I could hear children screaming in the background. I raced down there to find a guy at the door screaming at a woman inside, the woman screaming back and both of them in a tug of war with a screaming child – everywhere screaming. I managed to push the woman and child inside and slam the door and then spent an hour calming her and everyone else down. I had to hope that he would be gone by the time I walked home. That day was the only time I left the Refuge and wept as I walked home – for that woman, for all the women in there, for the life they didn't have that I was going back to, for the system that was stacked against them.

I had been involved at various points of my life with a number of projects as a volunteer, partly because of my left-leaning views on helping those the state was neglecting to care for, partly because of my Christian principles of helping those less fortunate than myself and partly because of the 'feel good' factor that comes from volunteering. But the volunteering that had the most impact on me was being part of a support group for the women living in the Refuge.

My life at that time was easy. I loved living in the small market town of Loughborough. Martin would walk to work and I would spend my days playing squash at the local leisure centre, meeting other mums and toddlers and making memories for Emily. I had decided to take three years off work to care for her and I loved my life with her. I was also making friends with some great women, including Stella next door.

Stella was friendly with a roar of a laugh and was always positive, despite the awful things she saw in her job as a social worker. She introduced me to the Refuge Support Group not long after I moved into my

house. Emily was not yet six months old. I met with them and they accepted me, so I joined them. The support group consisted of 10 to 12 women who met regularly to discuss the residents, their needs and how we could support them. The women who turned up at the door were always welcomed into the Refuge and the person on the support group who was on the roster that week would be called.

The Refuge was a couple of streets away from me. It was a large, old, detached house in its own grounds with trees around it. Its stately exterior belied the chaos that went on inside.

Women would arrive at any hour of the day and night, usually with small children in tow, who would be shivering and crying.

Sometimes the woman didn't even have the chance to grab her purse – much less any clothes –she just grabbed her children and fled, fearing another beating as soon as her husband returned. The police at that time were of no help at all and rarely responded to calls reporting screams coming from the house next door. "It's just a domestic," would be their response.

Life inside the Refuge was somewhat chaotic. It was always noisy – children shouting and crying and fighting and women shouting at their children and swearing as they recounted stories to each other. The lounge was large, with comfy sofas on every wall. It always had assortments of clothes hanging over the backs of the sofas and in the middle of the floor. Toys would be strewn all over the room. There would be children on potties and nappies being changed. The large kitchen never seemed to be free of a sink of dirty dishes and there were dirty mugs on every surface. There were house rules for the women which were largely ignored. The person on the rota for the support group would tidy up and clean up and make endless cups of tea for whoever wanted them and sit and listen. She would stay for a couple of hours.

My nature was very much as a rescuer at first – I'll take you to the doctor; I'll find a solicitor for you; I'll make your appointment for the dentist. The women on the support group held me back and explained that wasn't

the way we worked. The women who came into the Refuge had spent their whole lives being controlled and told what to do. We were not going to do the same.

We would help if we were asked, but not unless we were asked.

Sometimes the women didn't want our help, thus exercising the first bit of freedom they had. Sometimes they did.

I remember one of the women, Linda, who asked me to go with her to an appointment with a solicitor. Emily was in the buggy sucking her home-made rusk spear when we set off. I was watching the bumps as we went along to minimise the real danger of Emily missing her mouth and taking her eye out. Linda was tall and very slim. She was quite striking to look at, with a narrow face, high cheek bones, huge, warm brown eyes and long brown hair that she usually tied back in a ponytail. She had a deep rasping voice, owing to her constant smoking and her eyes were darting right and left as we walked. I asked her if she was okay.

She said, "He knows where I am and said he would come after me." This was new information for me. I tried to stay calm.
She continued, "But it's okay because I picked up a kitchen knife and it's in my bag." She opened her bag and showed it to me.

There wasn't a trace of drama as she said this but my heart started racing. I was starting to look around me as we walked. Many years later, Emily was horrified to think of the danger I could have put her in but, at the time, my concern was for Linda. I never doubted my ability to protect Emily. We were fine that day but the day she went back to the house to pick up some clothes, we asked for police protection, which duly arrived. I took Linda in my car (without Emily!) and gave her some black bin bags.

"You have five minutes to get in there and stuff these bags with clothes and come back."

She did so, and all was fine.

We were lucky that day.

Eventually, I became the first part-time paid worker they had, partly because I lived nearby and was always available. I learned many things working at the Refuge.

One of the greatest things I learned was about being non-judgmental.

We never judged the women for the decisions they made. I remember Diane, in her 20s, small with brown hair and a round smiling face who asked me to come into her room and sit on her bed.

She said, “I’m going back to him tonight.”

I knew full well that she was heading straight into another beating but the only thing I said was, “Are you sure that’s the best thing for you to do right now?”

“Yes,” she said calmly. And off she went.

The next day she was back with a bruised face, a lopsided smile, an eye that didn’t look like it was in the right place on her face, and a broken rib. No one said, “See, that’s what happens,” or, “Why did you go back when you knew what he was like?” or, “That was a silly decision you made.” No, she was welcomed back into the Refuge, where she would be loved and supported. This scenario might be played out a number of times before she had the strength to make the decision to never go back to him.

The other thing I learned about was unconditional love. It was my first experience of seeing unconditional love in action and seeing the impact it had when you just provided an environment of love and allowed people to experience it and grow within it. No story demonstrated this better than Brenda’s.

When Brenda arrived she looked like she should still have been at school but here she was with two small children. She was tiny and frail looking – pale skin, listless eyes that looked down most of the time, straight, lifeless hair that clung to her scalp and hung limply down the sides of her thin, angular face. She always wore a black polo neck, with long sleeves and trousers. Winter or summer, she dressed the same. She rarely spoke to the other women or to those on the support group. We just made sure she was comfortable and would ask if there was anything she needed. She would always shake her head and look down. Every now and again,

especially in summer, one of us would suggest she wore something else so she wouldn't be so hot in her usual attire. She would always shake her head. Bit by bit, day by day, she started to engage with the other women who were there. She saw many women come and go during her stay. Held in the love that the support group continuously fed into the house, Brenda gradually opened up.

It was like watching a flower blossom from being a tight bud.

One day she told me the story of her black jumper.

"My husband wouldn't let me wear anything else. He said he wanted every bit of skin covered so other men wouldn't see the smallest square of flesh. I couldn't even roll up my sleeves. He ordered me about from morning until night, demanding cups of tea or food or to pass him a magazine so he didn't need to get up. I would have to stop what I was doing immediately and give him what he wanted or else he would beat me and know that the bruises wouldn't be seen because I was covered up all the time." Her voice was low and she spoke in a deadpan way – no dramatics or expression in her telling. She continued, "One day, when I was pregnant, he kicked me downstairs and I started to miscarry. He had gone to sit in the lounge and I was crawling into the kitchen when he shouted at me, 'Brenda come here.' I crawled on my hands and knees into the lounge. He said, 'Turn over the TV channel.' He couldn't reach the remote control from where he was sitting. I crawled, bleeding all the while, to the TV and switched channels for him. That's when I decided I had to leave or I knew he would kill me."

I had heard many stories from the women in the three years I was involved with the Refuge but somehow, Brenda's story stayed with me. She had been reduced to a non-thinking punch bag for her husband. But, gradually, she came out of her shell. She was safe and the environment she was now in – loud though it was, was 100 times better than the one she had left. All the women staying there respected each other. Women were listened to if they wanted to talk and left alone if they didn't. It was the first time many of them had ever been accorded any respect at all.

We would each take an area of responsibility – I volunteered to be the representative to the Council for Women's Aid (the organisation that set up all the Refuges). Loughborough, at that time, was a conservative council. Had it been a Labour Council, I would have been able to go in, raise my voice and demand housing for the women in the Refuge, as was their right. But that approach wouldn't work with the Tories. I needed a different strategy. The chair of housing was Mr Whittaker. He was a tall, corpulent man who had attended too many dinners and drunk way too much in his life. He presented a jolly, friendly face but his eyes were dead and, as I got to know him, I realised that his friendly face did not reflect his steely heart. I made an appointment to see him and dug out the clothes I used to teach in – I knew that dungarees, sandals and no make-up wouldn't cut it.

I always referred to him as Mr Whittaker and he always referred to me as Mrs Robertson (I was still using my married name at that time). I made sure I looked like one of his wife's friends might. I gave him nothing to take exception to. He would send for tea and biscuits, which we would have from china crockery and our conversations would always go the same way, "How are things at, what do you call that place again?" and he would smile kindly at me.

I would tell him who was in there currently and what their housing situation was. I knew it would be up to him who he moved to the top of the list to be rehoused urgently. Although the Council had a statutory obligation to rehouse women and children who have left their marital home because of abuse, it was an obligation they usually ignored and it was down to Mr Whittaker's whim as to whom would get rehoused.

Once he told me, "You know, Mrs Robertson, I think that some of these women get beaten on purpose so they can be rehoused and then their husbands join them. It's just a way to get a house ahead of the queue." He smiled and continued looking at me and took another sip of his tea from his china cup.

I'm not sure how I stayed in my chair and stopped myself from running at him and head-butting him.

I smiled back and said, “That’s very interesting, Mr Whittaker, because of all the women who have come through the Refuge I haven’t come across one woman who that would be true of. You must have come across different women than me. But if you find such a woman, please do let me know because I would be fascinated to meet her.”

After my meetings with Mr Whittaker, one of the women would usually be housed within two weeks. Once, when I was leaving his office I said, “Oh, by the way, Mr Whittaker. I’m doing some volunteer work for the probation service and am visiting one young woman with a small baby and a partner in prison. She is living in a council caravan which is damp and mouldy and the baby isn’t well. She’s a very good mother and I’ve been passing her a lot of my baby’s clothes but it’s very hard for her to keep warm in the caravan. If you could do something for her I would be *so* grateful.”

He smiled and took her details and said confidentially, “Leave it with me, Mrs Robertson.”

She was housed within a week.

Some of the support group weren’t happy with my sycophantic approach to Mr Whittaker. We would have fiery discussions about whether the means justified the end. I always held on to my position, “Look, my job is to get these women rehoused. They won’t thank you for your left-wing rhetoric when they are still living here in 18 months.” We never agreed on the strategy, but I got a lot of women rehoused.

My learning about being non-judgmental and the effect of unconditional love has been instrumental in my own development.

I saw so many women in the Refuge who seemed unable to leave abusive relationships. It taught me a valuable lesson that we can never really understand anyone else’s pain and it doesn’t help people to be criticised for decisions they make when *they* feel like they have no choice. The best thing we can do is to stand – or sit – in solidarity with them. I would hear people speak about abused women and they would comment that such women had no courage. Yet how many people are called on to find that kind of courage – to leave a home and a husband who they loved (because

they usually did) and take their children who he loved (because he always did) to go with nothing – absolutely nothing – to a strange location, a strange house, strange housemates and not know where their next meal would come from, never mind their clothes. The women who came and stayed and started a new life for themselves and their children had an inner strength that I have rarely seen demonstrated so definitively. Those of us who are privileged and have not had to face such trials sometimes find it hard to even understand them. Sometimes it is nigh impossible to 'walk in another's shoes'.

But since my time in the Refuge, I can see the strength in every woman I meet when I look into her eyes.

There was another great impact on my life from working in the Refuge. I had previously been a teacher for seven years and was used to telling people about things I knew a lot about and they didn't. Yet, I didn't know anything about these women's lives. I wasn't there to teach them anything. I was there to facilitate their learning and self-development by providing support. This distinction between training and facilitating would be instrumental in my future work as a management consultant, especially when running focus groups for women in organisations. That learning from 40 years ago is still with me. A trainer gives people information and tells them how to perform better. A facilitator draws information out of people and creates a space for them to have their own insights and identify their own areas for improvement.

And Brenda? She became a part-time worker for the Refuge after I had finished and a huge support for women newly arriving at the Refuge. I saw her in the street months later and she crossed the road rather than acknowledge me. A friend pointed out that after we have seen someone at their most vulnerable, when they come out of that darkness they don't want to be reminded of the darkness they used to inhabit. Nothing to take personally here. Brenda was fine. Job done.

Chapter 14: Being a Friend – Understanding The Nature of Friendship

"A friend is someone who understands your past, believes in your future, and accepts you just the way you are."
Unknown

JoJo taught me a lot about friendship. He wasn't my dog. He was an elderly collie with long black hair, some brown patches of fur and white paws. He had deep brown eyes and the kindest face I had ever seen on an animal before or since. He lived near me and spent a lot of time around the five houses where I live. I named him 'JoJo' because his owner was called Jo. I had no idea what his name was, but he answered to 'JoJo'. For the first few years I lived here in Connemara, I never let him in the house, as was the custom in Connemara. Then one day, when it was raining (I'm in Ireland – pick any day of the year) he looked so forlorn outside that I let him in. I dried him with a towel and he lay gratefully at my feet and went to sleep. The next time it rained he barked outside to let me know he was there and when I appeared with a towel, he lifted up his paws to be dried.

Whichever room I was in he followed me to lie at my feet. When he wanted some affection he sat by me with his paw on my knee or rubbed his head on my hand. I never fed him and he refused water. When I was going to bed I called him to the back door and he stood still while I hugged him and said goodnight then he went out he went into the night – who knows where.

He was the perfect dog.

I think he had a number of other houses on his circuit, and some of them did feed him, so he was well-loved and well-looked-after.

Whenever I went for a walk he popped up from wherever he was and joined me. As he rushed towards me to greet me I swear he would be smiling. We walked down the lane to the new pier and when we came back, he sat on the wall at the end of the entrance to the houses where I

live for me to hold him and cuddle him. I think, actually, he thought he was fulfilling a need of mine – and maybe he was right.

But here are the things I learned from JoJo:

- If I didn't want to let him in when he barked he just went away. And if I appeared 10 minutes later to go for a walk he would still run to me, delighted to see me. No grudges. No, 'Why didn't you let me in?' Just delight that I was there.
- He had no loyalty to me. When the occupants of a small cottage returned for a visit, I didn't see JoJo for days. He had no obligations. He went where he pleased and where he was welcomed. And he was welcomed everywhere.
- And he spontaneously gave and received affection.

I think of my people friends and how I am in relationship with them. I used to always be the one to contact people ('you're so good at keeping in touch', they'd say). I decided a few years ago I wouldn't contact people anymore and would wait for them to contact me. I waited six months and no one contacted me! I missed them. I had a choice to make. Should I go on resenting that it's always me who reaches out and making an issue of it when I spoke to them again?

Or should I just delight in the friendship without counting who contacts whom?

Of course, I contacted them and they were delighted to hear from me and, without fail, always apologised for not being in touch.

JoJo demonstrated what unconditional love looks like. I didn't have any expectations of him and he certainly didn't have any of me. And because of that, spontaneous affection could be given and received freely. I think all emotional pain is caused by expectations not being met. We have a need and expect others to meet that need and we judge them when they don't and make them the cause of our pain. Intimate relationships are different in that there is usually a contract of some kind that both people

agree to and are constantly re-negotiating. *But we don't have contracts with friends do we? Or do we?* It's hard not to have expectations.

There was a time when I thought I had no expectations of my women friends – then I hit a crisis. It was many years ago when I had just set up my business. My girls were very young, and my mother-in-law was living with us for six months until she died. She saw me as her main carer, even though her husband was in that role. I was very stressed and wondered where all my friends were who I had supported over the years. My situation was inherently stressful and I expected them to reach out and support me, but they didn't. Sometime afterwards, I spoke to them about this and they said things like, "But you were coping so well," and, "But you seemed so strong," closely followed by, "And by the way, why didn't you *ask* for help?" Why indeed?

I had expected them to notice and to realise.

I learned right then that friends *are* there and it's okay to ask them for help instead of being proud and stressed.

I have one particular friend I feel very close to. I know how dear I am to her, yet I also know that she has absolutely no need for other people. If she were transported to an island and never saw people again it would probably be her idea of Heaven, although as she is a Buddhist, she has no notion of Heaven. She told me once that she had a very good friend who was continually upset with her because, to quote the friend, 'you don't act like a proper friend'. The friend wanted to see her regularly, speak regularly, do 'friend things' together. Ultimately, this other friend let the friendship go because she was continually feeling hurt. I could see exactly what she meant. When you feel close to someone and they don't seem too bothered about you it's easy to feel hurt. But this friend is too precious to me, so I decided to deal with my own issues of attachment rather than let the friendship go.

It is said that we have different friends for different purposes – a friend to laugh with, a friend to go shopping with, a friend to cry with, a friend you can ask for advice from. And some friends belong to the different

stages in your life – your student days, for example, or they can be linked to a particular job, or the early days of being a mum.

I realised early on that it was really important just to have a friend. When I was 11 years old and in my first lesson in the grammar school, I had asked Jennifer Moore to be my best friend for no other reason than she was sitting behind me. I was keen to just get a friend quickly. That friendship lasted about two days. I had had a friend at the Junior School, Marion Barton, who used to be bussed into the Catholic school. She was bubbly, with a round red face and brown straight bobbed hair. She was always smiling. But she didn't pass the 11+ (I remember her crying in class when the results came out but guess I felt too delighted in my own success to care much). I went to the Grammar School and she went to the Secondary Modern School.

"Poor Marion," my mother said. "She isn't clever enough to go to the grammar school."

How easily and quickly intellectual superiority settles into your bones.

I only saw her once after that. It was too difficult with her living in the next town. I'm sure my mother wouldn't have encouraged it. I still remember her birthday – October 16th – and think about her every year on that date, even though I haven't seen her for 60 years.

Once at the grammar school, I became particularly close to Theresa. Theresa's parents had paid for her to go to the kindergarten of the grammar school from when she was five and Mrs Deane, who lived in my street, right next to the school, would collect Theresa and look after her until her mother collected her. When Mrs Deane, Theresa's mother, and my mother realised that I would also be going to the grammar school, they introduced us.

Theresa was blonde, with a long face and high cheek bones. She didn't speak with a pronounced Northern accent like me and had a high laugh that sounded very false when she was nervous. Her natural shyness

meant that she would never be the first to speak in any exchange, so people thought her stand-offish and snobby. I was always telling people, “She’s not like that, really.” I saw Theresa every day at school and spoke to her on the phone every night, and even went on holiday with her family, but never mixed with her socially. I was chief bridesmaid at her wedding but always felt out of place among her ‘posh’ friends.

Theresa and her parents were always really nice to me and, although they took me on holiday with them, I always felt out of my depth.

I didn’t move in money circles and didn’t have easy social skills.

Once, I was invited to a dinner dance because someone’s girlfriend was ill. Theresa’s mother lent me a ball gown – green satin with a large black velvet collar – and I had my hair put up in curls and piled on my head. I was 17 and looked about 35. My ‘date’ was lovely. I knew him and his girlfriend slightly from being on holiday with Theresa. All Theresa’s ‘set’ would be there, but Jonathan and Cathy always chatted to me – unlike some of the others who would ignore me. That night at the dinner he did his best to put me at my ease but must have noticed my face. When we sat down, I looked at the array of cutlery and glasses and had no idea which to touch first. My discomfort must have been plain to him but he was gracious and able to put me at my ease.

I went to ballroom dance classes as part of my mother’s strategy to make me into a lady. Theresa and a lot of her friends also went but they were never really interested in talking to me. One time, there was a ball in the town that everyone was going to. I wanted to go too. I had nothing to wear, so Mum got her sister-in-law in Canada to send over a dress which was pink and frothy with a big pink sash round the middle. It was much too small so had to be altered for me.

I felt like a Christmas fairy without a tree.

When I got to the ball, I saw that all the other girls were: 1) a lot prettier than me, 2) had modern dresses and looked sleek and, 3) had lots of friends and lots of dances. I felt completely stupid and ugly and hated my

mother for even thinking that that dress would be okay. I hardly danced, hardly spoke to anyone and went home early.

The next day my mother asked me if I had enjoyed it.

"No," I said, "I hated it."

"Well, never mind," she said brightly. "I hated my first ball too."

And that was that. It was also my last ball. And the last time I ever consulted my mother about dress.

But, in spite of my misgivings about her friends, mine and Theresa's friendship has endured and we have followed each other's careers and families throughout the years. I am godmother to her oldest son but have neglected my duties shamefully. And whenever I visit Bolton, Theresa and I always meet up for a lunch.

There is a special quality about longevity in friendship.

To still care about someone after 60 years who you have known since you were eight years old and who still cares about you, is precious indeed. Once a connection is made, even though it was made at a particular time in your life, it's the connection that endures even though lives drift apart and physical distance separates. There are a handful of friends I have (all women) each of whom I have known for over 20 or 30 or 40 or 50 or even 60 years and all of them are very special to me.

These friends and the ones currently in my life, actually serve only one purpose – they hold my story. They see me in my entirety in my story.

Our stories are containers for our friendships and it's always comforting to meet my friends there.

No matter what the story, the container is solid. There is a comfort in revisiting the container and seeing our friends there who love us, no matter what the story. And there is a definite comfort in connecting with someone who knows the family you were brought up in and who has seen you change over the years.

I am likely to be closest to the friends who I feel aligned to on all levels, including the spiritual level. They are the ones who see me without

mask or pretension. We all long to be seen – to be *really* seen – and our friends see us. They are also the truest mirror to reflect our own souls. Soul connection is really about soul recognition. Once there has been soul recognition and a soul connection has been made, the friendship can be maintained across miles and across years. My friends are the ones who supported me in the tough times I have had as an adult and who continue to support me because they see my struggles and know how to comfort me. When I was going through my marriage break up, which lasted five years, my best friend Mary in the US held the whole story for me. Things were changing by the day so I would write to her at the end of the day and when I got up the next morning there would be a response from her.

I was trying to deal with the situation from an unconditional love perspective, which led me to make some less than wise choices.

She knew how and why I was acting like I did and she counselled me from there – not from the perspective of what *she* would do. Her support sustained me throughout the breakup.

And what of friendship break-ups? Of course, some friendships just die away slowly – people move, they have different priorities, and the friendship just fizzles out naturally. But I was devastated when one particular friendship was broken.

It was some years ago that there was an acrimonious split with my co-director, Cath. Acrimonious in that she just left, suddenly, and wanted to sever the friendship as well as the business relationship. I had no idea why the business partnership wasn't working and absolutely no idea why the friendship had to go too. As the families were very close – she had three girls, I had two – that meant that a lot of our social life was wrecked as the two families used to spend weekends, Christmases and summer holidays together.

I was angry for a long time (about 18 months) and would go over and over conversations in my head – what I **did** say, what I **should** have said – all usually ending with the wail, *How could she?*

As it was a small town and we both used to travel on the early train to London, I would arrive on the station and look round nervously. *If she is there, will I speak to her? Will I ignore her? Will I tell her I'm not speaking to her? Will I shout at her?* Then I would see that she wasn't there and would breathe a sigh of relief.

I read books on forgiveness so I could forgive her. All of them began, "First you have to forgive yourself." I would throw the book down in exasperation – it wasn't *me* who did it!

About 18 months later, I was on a workshop and the facilitator said in passing, "Of course, if you remain angry at someone it is *you* the anger eats away at – they are carrying on with their life. It is *your* life that is affected." Finally, I saw the light. I went home and sat on my own, picked up that book on forgiveness again and said, "For whatever I did to help to create the pattern of relationship between us such that the only thing she felt she could do was to leave like she did, I truly forgive myself." My anger stopped that day and the next week I saw her twice on that train to London. We spoke about the children and family and stayed away from any mention of work. It was a start.

Now I realise what had been wrong – two things in fact.

Firstly, it took me a long time to accept my responsibility in creating the relationship between us that ultimately led to her needing to break free of it in a dramatic fashion.

Secondly, while we continue to try and forgive someone, our emphasis will be on the other person – what they said, or what they did. We have to change the emphasis and look at what we need to do to regain our state of peace. Who knows why people say and do things? And, of course, we initially react from an emotional level and we can be upset, hurt, angry, furious, distraught. And these feelings need to be expressed. And sometimes, they can take hold of me in a flash with one thought. But my job is to keep open the connection to my soul and the soul is not concerned with such emotions.

Whenever I find myself on that level, what draws me out of it is realising I cannot allow someone else to have control over my soul connection and my peace of mind and heart. As such, the *need* for forgiveness is superfluous. We can replace forgiveness with the understanding that people do the only thing they can do in that moment, coupled with the acceptance that it takes two people to create a dynamic in the relationship – but only one person to change it.

And my friend? I realised that I really missed her friendship. She knew me so well and we had shared so much. We laughed at the same things. We had great discussions about books we were reading. We came from the same backgrounds. I had no energy to rehash everything before we could be friends again just to make myself right, so – ten years after the breakup, we began again – and the friendship is now as strong as ever.

The people I count as my friends have all 'held the story' for me at various points in my life and for varying periods. They all allow me to reveal myself to them.

They all see me, know me and accept and love me anyway.

Finally, I wonder how many of us let our friends know how important they are to us? I am always struck by how people at funerals tell stories about how wonderful the deceased was and how important they were to them. I wonder if they bothered to tell the person that when they were alive. Some years ago, I decided I would let my friends know exactly how I felt about them. I wrote a letter to a friend I have known since I was 10 years old – she is in her 80s now. I told her what I loved about her and about the impact she had had on me. We are living in different countries now, so I hand-wrote the letter and posted it to her. I didn't hear from her for three weeks and wondered if my letter had arrived. I phoned her and she said she hadn't responded because she didn't know what to say! She was so moved by the letter. I realise now that I only did this exercise once but I try to remember to tell my closest friends why I love them and how important they are to me. I think I need to write some more letters…

Chapter 15: Being Available for Internet Dating

"Above all, Internet dating has helped people of all ages realize there's no need to settle for a mediocre relationship."
Dan Slater

So, at 59, I decided I would try internet dating. My friend Mary decided that the internet would be my salvation because she was sick of me complaining about how I couldn't believe I might never have sex again.

What exactly do you write about yourself on your profile? The first bit is easy, you know: height, smoker or not, eye colour – general assorted questions. Then there were a load of questions about education, favourite music, attitude to stress – those sorts of things – with drop down boxes, one of which said 'ask me later', which is fine when you're being asked about your income, for example, but some people chose that one for everything! One guy e-mailed me to ask me what I was 'into'. I emailed back and said, "I just checked your profile to think of some questions to ask you and it was almost completely blank, so why don't you complete your profile first…"

Now comes the tricky bit, where you have to share some personal stuff about what you're really like.

Does anyone do that honestly, really? Here's what I said about myself (with comments about why I chose to say those things):

I would describe myself as: fun, spiritual (might as well get that in right up front), *contented, joyful, unconventional* (no one has asked me in what way yet) and *independent. I've done a lot of travelling for work* (I wanted to show I have had a life). *Now enjoying living in the heart of Connemara, taking two years off to decide how to spend the next 25!* (I wanted to show that I still intend to have a life) *Great sense of humour. Like most sports, especially football* (I didn't say anything about my damaged Achilles tendons – I'd spent more time hobbling than walking those past 18 months). *Love reading and films and good conversation.*

What I didn't say was: I'm a celebrant (that's 'celebrant' not celibate) and conduct weddings; I'm open to relationships with men and women (not that those two necessarily go together). I decided that was way too much information and there would be a good chance I would never get any replies at all – I've had precious few as it is. Of course, some people cop out entirely and say, "I could make anything up here, so just ask me…" Like once you get asked you are compelled to tell the truth…

So now, the next part:

My ideal partner would be: not sure I want another partner actually. So, why on earth am I doing this? I really enjoy living on my own. But I'm looking for a creative relationship with someone who is fun to go out with and easy to relax with. Someone who is comfortable in his own skin and is interested in his own spirituality. Someone I get excited about seeing. Someone who makes me laugh. Someone who makes me feel special.

That last sentence sums it up really –

- basically, I wanted to fall in love and I wanted someone to fall in love with me.

I wouldn't trust it, of course, and would recognise it for exactly what it is – a strong magnetic attraction, not seeing faults, the butterfly business. Although I had had two serious relationships – one for 27 years and the other for seven years – the fact is I was never in love with either of them. I loved them both very much, but I was never 'in love' with them. It's the 'in love' thing I wanted to experience – the nearest I've come to those feelings was with a much younger guy (and a woman actually, but that's another story entirely). What I didn't say was that I wanted someone who was a really good lover. It's a while since I had sex, even longer since I had great sex and a very long time since I had fantastic sex. If I'm going to have any sex at all, it had better be really good. Which begs the next question, how do you tell that from a profile? I wanted intimacy also.

I wanted to be really seen – to be really known – and still loved. I wanted to see and know… and love.

I don't think that's so unusual, is it? Doesn't everyone want that? The problem is that we think that's what we have signed up for when, in reality, we have probably signed up to an idealised version of someone who doesn't exist.

The last thing to do is upload a photo. As I am on Facebook, I had also been through the dilemma of which photo, so choosing is easy – except that, in uploading it, it cut the top of my hair off… too bad, there is only so much time you can spend uploading photos.

So, the whole page gets uploaded and within an hour, 89 people had viewed me. I could only see five of them though, unless I paid to join the site properly. I then get punished further for not paying by having to wait 15 minutes before I can read any messages. It's better than one of the other sites I tried where you had to complete an eight-page profile to get a good match – which doesn't really answer the question how you are supposed to understand what your chemistry might be like through words alone – then submit your page only then to find out you can't send or receive messages or even exchange 'winks' without paying (they call them 'icebreakers' on this site as it's more of an upmarket one…)

I can't believe that this is the pick of eligible men in Ireland. I find another site, one that is completely free and even lets you put phone numbers in your emails, if you feel like it. That was where the laughs really began…

For a start, the photos. These included photos from so far away you can't make the person out, pictures with other people (so you weren't sure who the guy was and who his friend was), pictures with women (are you kidding?), pictures with children (come on, be serious now), the back of the head… lots of them looked like mug shots from a police file.

Now, in my professional life, I present to people in organisations on how we all judge people by appearances and how we should beware of doing this when at work because, if we don't like someone, we pull back from them and treat them less well than those we like and that this could

have a negative impact on their performance. I even use a picture exercise as part of the session. I can't help but notice the irony of me looking at these pictures for two seconds, saying, "No, no, no, next, next, no way, move on…"

To be fair, my hypothesis is that we all do this and should at least realise what we are doing. I think it's different assessing a work colleague and imagining their head on the pillow next to you –

I'm not necessarily just looking for sex but I'm not discounting it either.

Anyway, on this site there were loads of men who put up profiles with no photos, so either they were very unattractive (sorry, not interested) or can't cope with the technology of uploading a photo (in which case, I'm also not interested) or think that looks are unimportant (maybe the only people who think that are people who don't look very good?). Some of these men described themselves as 'handsome' – ahem – put up a photo. I'll tell you if you're handsome…

But what really made me laugh was how people describe themselves, here's a selection:

nnnnoojwpeokmkwejfjnwnxergwtyvwtyvweywet
rqtjgjtjhtji jykktqwr 4[[4]o5]]]14 1]45i][i ipi1[i9p[4u694u6791 u01==3uu6 ==1utj jrtj 0 9 ii-i35-96i 10490 6u690134u6i1349u6409u0 ui25190245u1 0-023 15u0 u5104u350u 0u50043 4105uu04u5ii-12ii6059j

Presumably he couldn't see his own copy.

I am a decent man who doesent suffer fools gladly, lies,deception, and injustice I wont tolerate yet you will find me a loving understanding and caring person.

Tell me again how understanding you are...

Hi Looking for excitement in my life I am married and plan to stay married.I am looking for some afternoon delight with an exciting woman.Looking for relationship no strings just a bit of fun

Do women really respond to this?

Just see how we get on.....I am a funloveing man, love to please a women in every way.....i do have respect for women.

I suppose he had to say that last bit in case we thought he might get carried away pleasing us…

This is the difficult part, have never filled out anything like this before so I don't know what to say.

Well. you sound *really* interesting…

Am I looking for you ?
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXX

Well, with no photo and that in your profile, probably not!

I am looking for someone to talk to or email.Am in need of a good friend right now. Someone to share a laugh and a joke with. I am supposed to be a good listener.

In other words, I hope you've got some problems too because I sure as hell have a lot to tell you…

One man said he wanted to, "Explore the outer reaches of human consciousness and human potential."

I messaged him and said that he was either very brave or very foolish putting that on his profile. I didn't think I was his soulmate but I bet we could have some cracking conversations… safe to say, he didn't respond. Another said he was 'very well endicated' (I assume he meant 'educated', enough said…)

And the number of men in their late 50s who want children… and the number of men in their 50s and 60s who are looking for women in their 30s and 40s… If I was 40, I don't think I would be looking for someone who was 60. On the topic of age, the number of young guys (in their 20s and 30s) who viewed me was amazing. When the summary next to my picture says '59-year-old woman, Galway', why is a 25-year-old hot guy even *looking* at my profile… and why are the guys contacting me all less than five feet tall? I know that size doesn't matter, but it seems to be very important to me.

There are too many to put in more, but you get the idea. Anyway, the same night I put my profile up I got a message from a guy who is 39 and looks very attractive in his photo. Here are his first three messages and my response:

Jon saying hello
hello hows life with you jon here x

r u online

My response:

Yes. I didn't reply to your earlier notes as if you are only going to send between 2 and 5 words in each communication then it's going to take years to have a conversation. In this message I see you have gone down to 2 letters and one word…

Anyway, he said he wanted to meet me if I ever came to Dublin but our email communication is sparse, to say the least, and then he sent me another photo and I am glad I wasn't going anywhere near Dublin…

The last site I joined was the one where you had to pay for everything – they send matches for you to look at, but you can't contact them. I was sent the details of a guy who was a doctor, goes skiing and has a boat and clearly a lot of money – I could maybe have a nice life with him – but he's in America and I don't ski and don't like the water (so much for the eight page personality profiling) There was one who does look perfect for me but he's in Vancouver, but wait, here's one in Dublin, oh, he's in the statutory 'less than five foot tall' category…

Suddenly, I have mail – a 45-year-old Irish guy who looks very serious and wants to meet up for coffee.

He says he likes my picture and profile and that I only look about 45. I message back and tell him he looks very serious and what does he do for laughs and how do I know if I want to meet him, given that he says nothing about himself. He tells me it's a portfolio shot and to check him out on Google. Turns out that he's an actor and has done lots of TV work and was even considered for James Bond after Pierce Brosnan left. I say, okay, let's meet up somewhere and he suggests that he comes over to my place for a bottle of wine or two, a good movie and a chat… yeah, right! I say, "Why don't you call me and let's see how the chat bit goes?" Needless to say, I haven't heard from him.

When I got round to actually dating, I only met two men in person for coffee. I forget the name of the first one. Let's call him Keith. I had arrived in the coffee bar first so I could see everyone arriving.

I spotted him ordering his coffee. He was tall with a beard and at least looked like his profile picture – that was a good start. But he had cord trousers on, which were faded at the knee, and a shirt that didn't match his jacket. He reminded me of the men I used to teach with (male teachers were *not* known for their dress sense). We had exchanged quite a bit of email correspondence, which had gone well. Ever the eager beaver, I used to respond to his emails almost immediately, while he tended to wait a while first. I would have done well to remember this. We sat, stirring our coffees, and he began to tell me about himself. He spoke in a measured tone – the kind of tone a news reader would use.

It was already hard to imagine him as being passionate about anything.

I asked him what he was looking for in a relationship. He said he wanted companionship, comfort, friendship, shared time together and fun. I said, "I had all that in my last relationship but walked away from it after seven years." He was clearly bemused about why I would do that. I was beginning to wonder that myself! "I wanted more," I said lamely. I tried to elaborate, "I want to be 'met' at all levels – physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. I don't want to settle for less."

It's important to say that our relatively short conversation took quite a bit of time, mainly because after everything I said there was a pause, then Keith would say, "So what you're saying is that…" and then repeat back to me everything I had just said! The first time he did this I thought he might have had a hearing problem and he needed to be sure he had heard correctly. Nope, he did it after everything I said until I was wanting to scream at him and say, "Don't tell me what I have said – I *know* what I just said. I want to know what you *think* about what I said." Of course, I didn't say that! Our 'date' was short, as was our 'relationship' but it made me realise I had built up a picture of Keith based on his profile and emails and the reality was nothing like my creation.

I resolved to meet people as soon as possible into the process to prevent my imagination from ruling the show.

The second guy – let's call him Bernard – I met for coffee in a local hotel lounge. I saw him walking towards me as I whispered to myself, *Please don't let it be him*. He was smaller than he appeared in his pictures and at least 10 years older. I decided that it would be a very quick coffee and asked him a safe question to be polite. He was from Birmingham in the UK, so I asked him what had brought him to Ireland. I don't think I spoke for the next 20 minutes! Bernard was one of those people who, if he was telling you a story about someone he bumped into at the cinema, would start his story with, "Well, I left the house to get the 7pm bus but I didn't

realise they had discontinued that route, so I needed to go to…" So, Bernard told me, step by agonising step, how he had ended up in Connemara. By the time he had finished I had lost the will to live. Bernard also had a very unfortunate speech impediment which meant that as he was speaking he would breathe in, making a kind of juicy sound as if imitating someone slurping a drink. I began to count the seconds between slurps and lost the thread of the conversation completely. That 'date' was also short lived.

It's a fascinating world this internet dating. I only looked at four sites and there are *so* many. It could be a full-time occupation – and maybe it does need to be taken seriously – for how *do* you meet someone if you are in your 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s? There must be so many people who could be matched up perfectly. I have a couple of friends who this has worked really well for.

Meanwhile, how do I find romance without it seeming like I am looking for sex?

And there is the bigger question of course – given that I believe we are more than our bodies and I am committed to my spiritual evolution – why am I just not ready to be content with I have (which I am), do my spiritual practice (which I do) and consciously decide to stay celibate from now on? I have the nagging doubt that engaging in a physical relationship will mean I take my eye off my spiritual development and I will lose ground somehow. But, the fact is, I believe passionately in life and I believe in living it passionately and that must be on every level – physical, emotional, mental and spiritual – and so I'm not done yet with the physical, and that's the truth of the matter. I take heart from the fact that I had a tarot reading recently and was told that my 'Knight of Wands' was on his way – full of passion and adventure – and a relationship with him would enhance my purpose in life and not detract from it. I didn't need to look to find him, he would find me. Okay, so I was on four dating websites, surely that would make me a little easier to find?

I didn't bother meeting anyone else. As time went on, I became happier and happier on my own and gradually became so selfish with only

having to cater to my own needs and wants, that I suppose I would now be difficult to live with. The last fortune teller I saw told me some interesting things and, at the end of the reading, asked me if I had anything to ask. “Will I have another relationship in this life?” I asked. She looked at me then looked away, then looked at me again, then away again then finally she said, “The thing is, you’re not really bothered, are you?”

In truth, I’m not.

Chapter 16: Being a Consultant: Finally Finding My Niche

"Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do."
Steve Jobs

It was my husband, Martin, who suggested I set up my own business.

I laughed and said, "I can't just do that!"

"Yes, you can," he said

I was 36 years old and, at the time, would have been described by my friends as being very confident. Yet, instead of saying, "That sounds interesting, how would I start?" I was incredulous at the idea and said immediately that I wouldn't be able to do it – how deep gender conditioning runs.

After we had returned from London to the Midlands, I had been working for Martin's management consultancy as a freelancer, designing and writing self-instructional materials. His newly formed consultancy was getting contracts creating learning packages and helping companies to train staff using performance technology solutions. I had worked with Martin on the training package for a large supermarket chain – the first retail organisation to introduce barcode scanning at the checkout. I worked two days a week from home and a girl called Sunilla came in to look after Amy who was 12 months old.

After a year Martin had persuaded me that, of course, I could go solo. I decided to look at how I could put the skills I had learned from him to use.

Many organisations at the time had been given a lot of money to produce 'open learning' materials – training that was essentially self-instructional – but none of them knew how to do it.

I got the list of every organisation who had been given a grant and chose four of them that I liked the sound of. I wrote four letters on plain paper and basically said three things: 1) I see you've been given money to produce

open learning materials; 2) I can help you to do this; 3) I can teach you how to do it also. I ended by saying that they should call me if they were interested. I hadn't realised at that point that you never leave it for them to call you, you should follow them up yourself with a phone call a week later!

Within a few days I had two replies and two meetings. Martin was very excited. I wasn't. I said, "Well, two of them never even bothered to reply!"

He said, "That's a 50% return on a cold letter out, that's fantastic. You don't understand."

I didn't. But one of those two people became my major client for the first year of my business. My business was called Instructional Materials Development (IMD).

I remember my first client meeting. I was so nervous.

The project was a training package for nurse managers. I talked the client through how I would work with her to identify the modules needed, then how I would work with the subject matter experts to identify the content. I knew nothing about the technicalities of a nurse manager job, but I did know how to identify clear, performance objectives, identify the relevant content and put it in a form that people could understand – and learn from.

After I had talked about the projects I had been working on for Martin and the methods and tools I would use, we came to the point in the meeting where the client said, "And what's your daily rate?"

Martin had advised me what figure to say. It sounded extortionate to me.

"£265, plus expenses," I said.

The client was making notes on her pad. I fully expected her to jump up and shout "What?! Are you crazy?" But she didn't. She just wrote down the figure and we started to work out how many days I thought we would need. I made £10,000 from that contract in my first year. I was up and running.

As I started to build my IMD business I realised all the organisations I was working with had many women employees but very few women managers. I decided to look into why this was the case.

I realised that women weren't having access to the same training that men were and many women were lacking the confidence to put themselves forward.

I had seen at first hand the power of encouragement in helping women to grow, when I had worked in the Refuge. I set up an additional business called WIM (Women into Management) and started running workshops for women. I sold the idea that workshops for women would enable them to reach management positions so they could contribute more fully to the success of their organisations. I had a different headed notepaper from IMD and ran both businesses at the same time. There was only me – I didn't even have a computer, never mind a secretary. People told me that I couldn't have two businesses but I was already realising that in my business I could do what I liked!

I was the boss – the only boss – and I was loving it.

I joined women's business networks and used to travel from the Midlands to London for evening meetings. I eventually did two years as president of the European Women's Management Network (EWMD). I made influential contacts and found out what the issues were for women in organisations. Having slopped around in joggers and jeans since leaving teaching, I invested in some smart clothes and a briefcase. The persona of being a professional woman and a business owner suited my ego very well. Suddenly, I had status. I wasn't just a mum. And, much as I loved my children, it was my new career that was personally fulfilling me.

In the late 1980s, organisations weren't investing in women. The high-fliers might be put on a fast track but they had the problem of having to imitate men to be taken seriously. And if they also had children, it was nigh on impossible for them to succeed. There was no such thing as home/ work balance then. Women's groups had to meet in the evening, in their own

time, using badly copied materials. I remember seeing, in the offices of senior male managers, fancy training packs for communication skills and sales and marketing skills. I vowed that one day there would be fancy packs for women's management training, right up there on the shelf next to them – a few years later, there were.

I persuaded my friend Cath to join me. She was teaching back in Lancashire and her husband, Stewart, was in the police. They had Emma, who was seven, and a baby on the way. I liked Cath's energy and her creativity. We decided to form a company which we called Domino Training Ltd. (later Domino Consultancy Ltd.) and she was a director. They moved down to Loughborough, Stewart got transferred and Cath began working for me. I got on well with her and it was great to have someone to bounce ideas off.

Our idea was to develop the women's workshops and promote them nationwide.

I had mentioned the idea to a couple of people who said that women wouldn't be released for a one-day training and most of them were part-time anyway. So we designed 10 different half-day workshops and approached Leicestershire City Council. We offered to do the workshops for free if the participants would give us feedback that we could use in marketing materials. Our HR contact said she would try but didn't think there would be any demand for them. Within two hours of sending out notification of the workshops they were all fully booked. We were on our way! Now we could produce a leaflet with the comments included and it looked like we were running them all over the place. We eventually wrote three books for women managers which were translated into 10 languages.

Pretty soon, I was asked if I did workshops on race discrimination too. Back in the 1980s, there wasn't race training as such. There was equality training, focusing on law, discrimination and harassment, and race was only mentioned in relation to discrimination legislation. But no aspect of the equality legislation was being implemented well. This was primarily because managers didn't have a clue what they could and couldn't do and

resisted being ‘wrist-slapped’. I found specialist consultants – Asian, black and white people who became part of Domino’s associate team.

Running workshops on discrimination and harassment became Domino’s bread and butter for years.

I was developing the workshops and consultancy side of the business and Cath was building up the design and development and production of materials, including training materials, handbooks and communication leaflets and posters. We were a good team. We were constantly changing with the market to stay current. Over time we widened our focus from workshops for women to equality workshops to diversity workshops looking at every kind of difference, not just those covered by the legislation. Our Domino Consultancy strapline was, ‘From Equality to Diversity to Unity’. I knew, even then, that ultimately, we would have to start to look beyond what differentiated us to what connects us. With my friend Mary in the US, I wrote a book called *From Diversity to Unity* to start to explore this.

Cath and I realised that we didn’t have any business experience or qualifications, and no sales and marketing training either. Richard Sutton entered our lives. Richard was the chairperson of my husband’s company. I had met him a few times when he had come to meet with my husband. It transpired that he was very interested in helping start-ups and was keen to help me, at no charge initially. I arranged for Richard to come and see me.

At that first meeting, I was terrified! He was tall with the easy way of walking and moving of someone who knows how good looking he is. He was smartly dressed and in an expensive suit. I never saw him without a shirt and tie. He was also charming and always smiling. I never saw him irritated or cross. I expected him to ask me all kinds of technical questions about sales forecasting, projections, profits and marketing strategies – words and phrases I had heard of but didn’t have any idea about what they meant.

There I am, in my jeans and t-shirt, and in he walks. Strong handshake. Clearly at ease with himself. I made him tea and he took out his notepad and pen. *Here we go*, I thought.

"Tell me about your life in five years' time," he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Tell me about your life. What car do you drive? How many holidays do you take a year? What do you like to spend your money on? How many days do you want to work during the year?"

I was much more comfortable with these questions and was able to prattle on.

He made notes as I spoke. After I had finished, he said, "Well, in order for you live the life you have just described and work only the *x* days per year you said you wanted to, you need to be earning *x* per day on the days you work, so we'd better look at how we are going to achieve that."

He remained the only non-executive director of my company for many years.

He always came to monthly board meetings. Board meetings?! There were only two of us. He seemed always to be typing into his calculator. We would get our monthly accounts from our accountant. We didn't even bother to look at them before board meetings at first as we had no idea what anything meant. Richard could look at our monthly figures and say, "That figure is too high and why is your gross profit so low? It should be 70% in a consultancy business."

To his credit, he was never patronising and, pretty soon, with his patience, I realised I could look at the figures and see what was wrong too.

He also always asked the right questions. He knew absolutely nothing about diversity and equality or women's issues, but he knew what questions to ask us.

Once he asked, "How big do you want to get – the UK? Europe? The World?"

"For goodness' sake, Richard," I replied. "There are only two of us."

He said, "Don't bring me your management problems. You are directors now and you set the vision for the company. That's the director's job. Once you set the vision *then* we look at how you are going to achieve it, that's management."

He gave me many insights about business, getting the sale and giving great customer service. I can still hear his voice in my head. I will always be profoundly grateful for his help and have passed on his tips to many people starting their own businesses.

In the beginning, I knew that as far as equality consultancies went, I was the new kid on the block. I knew who the main five were and vowed to be up there with them in five years. It took three.

I realised that visibility was critical in building a reputation before we could even get to the excellence of what you are delivering.

It was visibility I concentrated on in the early days. Pretty soon, that gave the impression I was more successful than I actually was. Customers don't buy a product, they buy the promise that you can bring about the outcome they want. Customer perception of you is as important as excellence of delivery. I remember once being at a network meeting and realised that one of my main competitors was there. I had never met her in person so, at the coffee break, I went over and introduced myself to her and said how delighted I was to meet her as her company was such a leader in the field.

She stopped in her tracks. "No, it's your company which is the leader. Everywhere I turn, I see Domino's name," she said.

We both laughed. But, clearly, my visibility strategy was starting to pay off. I offered to speak anywhere and everywhere – for no money. And a big part of my strategy was my personal appearance. I deliberately chose to wear expensive and smart clothes. As most of the people with power were men – I suspected many of them were conservative as well – I dressed to look like their wives: smart, fashionable, smiling and always wearing make-up. I didn't want to give them any reason to reject me before they had even heard what I was going to say.

Once they had accepted my appearance they were forced to react to my views, which I knew they would think radical.

Women on the Board? Very radical in those days. I had started to dye my hair purple and pink before I became involved with diversity training. I kept it for over 20 years and it got brighter and brighter over the years as the colour soaked into my greying hair. More than one client thought I had deliberately dyed it to make a point about diversity. I hadn't, but it certainly challenged people's assumptions! I loved my hair. I loved being different and wouldn't compromise on it. Once, at a conference in the US, as I was walking from a keynote into a coffee break a guy fell into step with me. We hadn't spoken before.

He said, "I've seen you around this conference. You are so professional in how you carry yourself, so smart and impeccably dressed. But your hair…" He leaned forward and said quietly, "Your hair says, 'Fuck you'".

Was that what I was saying? I think I probably was.

I continued to give interviews to newspapers and magazines. We produced monthly newsletters, which we distributed widely. Someone once told me that everywhere they looked they saw a Domino Newsletter, one was even seen in a telephone box – a telephone box! That's how long ago this was. Once, I received two letters in the morning post. One was from a competitor congratulating me on my success as they heard my name everywhere. The other was from the bank threatening to close me down as I wasn't making enough money!

I didn't let not having any sales and marketing training or a business degree hold me back.

There were some simple principles I based my work on: my job was to make my client look good to their boss, if there wasn't a need for what I was selling I needed to create the need for it; initial client meetings were always about what was hurting the client, not what I had in my tool bag; you don't own the problem, or the job – you do good work and walk away; if a client wants a Mini then don't give them a Rolls Royce or you'll under cost the project or over deliver – either way you'll lose money. I learnt to involve my clients in partnership. NatWest (the first company in the UK to establish

women's management training) agreed to give me a member of their staff in Loughborough to come to my office one day a week so she could see first hand how a small business was operating. When I was President of EWMD, British Airways agreed to give me six flights a year anywhere in Europe so I could visit a lot of the countries where we had members – and promote BA in the process.

As the business expanded, I took on staff. Diane, who had doubled as my childcare support after school and my secretary, became full-time in the office and Paula took over her initial dual role. Then Paula became my full-time secretary, and we had an office manager as well. At its largest, there were 15 staff at Domino, nearly all of whom were women.

When I would be asked why I had so many women, I said, "Because we always hire the best person for the job."

We took on marketing students to do specific three-month research contracts. We hired freelance trainers for long term contracts with particular clients. We said yes to contracts first, then worked out how we were going to deliver them. Flexibility was the key in my life, whether it was juggling childcare arrangements or hiring the right people. We took on Ann when she was eight months pregnant because we wanted her skills; we allowed people to work from home and not relocate; we took a nanny on the payroll to care for the children of Cath and myself and other staff who needed to come to the office for a meeting. For this we got a mention in the *Financial Times*. It didn't last long. Cath was charged an extra £2000 in tax because the nanny was based at her house and a nanny was seen as a benefit. Of course, Domino paid the tax – and stopped the scheme. Had the nanny been a chauffeur it would have been classed as a legitimate business expense! We paid well and gave five weeks holiday a year, plus statutory days. We had a generous sick pay scheme – full pay for six weeks, half pay for the next six weeks, then a permanent health care scheme which paid 70% of the salary for life if they had to stop work completely. The fridge was always full and staff ate well every lunchtime. People could choose their own job titles, except for the title Managing Director. I never used that title either. I thought it was pretentious.

When I hear small business owners now complain that they can't afford to give their staff a decent wage it makes me think that they shouldn't be in business then.

I wasn't easily stressed and understood that business would fluctuate from month to month. My mistake was in sharing all the financial information with the staff in my efforts to establish transparency. Some of them would freak out if the figures looked bad. I stopped sharing the information. It was my job to be responsible, and my job to fix it. I remember one particular client, Sarah. We had done work for her already – training packs on a variety of subjects. I got on well with her. A day came just before one Christmas when I realised that if I didn't find £20,000 very quickly, we would go bust. I called her and said I was going to be in her location on a particular day and could I take her to dinner for a catch up. Of course, I wasn't anywhere near her. I drove for two hours to get to her. It was good to see her. We were in a fancy restaurant she had chosen which was full of Christmas lights and good cheer. We chatted and laughed about personal things. My stomach was tight and I could hardly eat anything. I said casually, "So, what's going on for you here then? What are your priorities for next year?"

"Oh, you know how it is here," Sarah said. "Things are changing by the day. I'm snowed under."

I looked at her and said, as casually as I could, "Well, we have some spare capacity at the moment because a project was cancelled." It wasn't. "Anything we can help you with to ease your stress?"

"They've decided they want a new induction programme and I have to roll it out. I just haven't the time to do it."

"Oh, we can help you with that," I said smiling.

"Really?" She was interested now.

I suggested the approach we might take to designing it and outlined what some of the elements could be. It would be a self-study booklet and audio with briefing notes for the team leaders. I said we could deliver it in three weeks.

"How much?" she said.

“Well, I would have two or three consultants working on it and pull out all the stops.” I did a quick calculation in my head. “We are talking in the region of £40,000, with 50% payable up front and 50% on completion.”

“Great,” she said. Send me your invoice for 50% tomorrow and I’ll pay immediately.

I sat back. “Glad to be able to help,” I said. Then I enjoyed my dessert.

I had loads of business support and advice from Richard and Martin as I built the business and took in everything they said to me. I’ve passed on many of those tips to others. One of my favourite tips was about when we would pitch for a job and be told we were too expensive. By this time, we were quoting for complete jobs, not days. A time-related cost doesn’t take into account the expertise-related cost. We might be able to do something in 10 days because of our expertise. Someone else might take 20 days, so if the client wanted a breakdown based on number of days, we would say 20. And if we got the sense that a client was going to be difficult we added on a 10% ‘hassle factor’ to account for the extra time we would have to spend on them.

I remember a client saying to me once, “We have your proposal and it’s between Domino and one other consultancy and to be honest, you are much more expensive than they are.”

“If we came in at the same price, who would you give the contract to?”

“Oh, Domino definitely.”

“How would you be able to decide so quickly?”

“Well, you really know your stuff, you’re a pleasure to work with, you keep to deadlines, you keep to budget, we know your work is excellent and we know we can absolutely rely on you.”

Pause.

“Well, that’s what you’re paying the extra for.”

We were prepared to walk away rather than reduce our costs. Sometimes, I would add, “If you can get what I can do for you cheaper, you would be foolish not to take the alternative. I don’t think you can find that,

but that's your decision. If the project runs into trouble, I'll be here, ready to support you. But the price will be the same."

More than once a client spent money on a 'cheaper' option, only for them to come back to us later, when the other supplier completely messed it up.

I learned so much about myself during my consultancy years. I learned that having been used to doing everything at the beginning, I *had* to delegate and not interfere. I learned that my ideas weren't always the best. I learned that although I did all the right things, as regards to managing the staff, I hated it. I would talk to people, checking how they were and how things were going for them, all the while thinking, *I could have made three sales calls while having this one conversation*. I spoke at conferences all over the world and delivered workshops in many countries. Once, I ran training in eight different Middle Eastern countries in 10 days. By the end I didn't even know what country I was in! And I learned that when considering any contract, I had to make sure I could answer 'yes' to at least two of the following questions – Is it easy? Is it fun? Is it lucrative?

I also made many mistakes. Once, we produced 8000 Health and Safety glossy booklets and then saw a mistake. We reprinted them all. Another time, three of us stayed up until 5am to be able to finish a huge report that eight of us had been working on for two months. It had to be couriered at 7am. When I phoned the client to say it was coming, the person at the other end of the phone told me that she wasn't in until Monday and she'd get it then. That was the last time I ever worked late like that. We also had some notable staff hires that were a disaster. One was a business director who just wanted to swan around seeing people but hadn't the first idea about sales and marketing, so never capitalised on her contacts. Another was a designer who we had worked with and then offered a job to. It was only when he joined us that we realised that he outsourced all his work. And then there was lovely Joanne – so sharp and insightful but she was a perfectionist. And she used to get very stressed. I knew it wasn't going to

work when clients were phoning me to ask how she was as they were worried about her!

But I loved it all.

However, ultimately, I realised that although I had achieved a lot of my goals with my business – spreading the word about equality and growing a successful business, for example, there was starting to be something missing. I had had enormous personal growth, but I realised something else: my need for praise from strangers who met me or heard me speak but didn't really know me at all was merely satisfying my ego and filling a gap I had inside of myself. It was time to look at how to fill that gap without being driven by my ego. That proved to be more difficult than I thought. Dropping my 'consultant' persona plunged me into an identity crisis.

Chapter 17: Being in an Identity Crisis

"My former identity was lying around, somewhere, fragmented and buried, like shards from an earlier civilisation."
Laurie Nedal

Of course, I had heard about identity crises. Any transition in life or roles we adopt and drop involves change and adjustment. But 'crisis'? That description always seemed a bit extreme to me. Until I had one. In fact, I had three.

The first one didn't happen until 2011, when I was 62 years old. I had raised two daughters who had developed into fine women. I loved being a mother and I thought I had made a pretty good job of it. I reckoned that I had not only been a great mother, I had been a near perfect mother. I think I had held on to this idea during the last painful years of my marriage. *Well, whatever mess I have made of my marriage*, I would think to myself. *At least I have done a great job with those girls.*

I didn't only hold on to that idea – it took root in me.

They had both left home and were carving out their own lives. I had never suffered from 'empty nest' syndrome. I still had my work and my own life. So, when one of my daughters told me, when she was 28 years old, what a shit mother I had been, it was like being spoken to in another language. And she wasn't just talking about the last years of my marriage. She gave examples from when she was nine years old. I am not prepared to talk here about the specifics of what she said. That conversation will remain confidential and anyway, those details are not relevant here. What *is* relevant is the impact the conversation had on me.

We were in Manchester to celebrate my friend Cath's 60th birthday. She was also my daughter's godmother. All the family were there, as were about 100 other people. Cath had hired a huge hall with drinks and food laid on. I reconnected with people I hadn't seen for many years and knew through Cath. It was a great evening of fun, reminiscing and dancing. My daughter asked if we could stay over that night. Therefore, this shattering

conversation happened in the lounge of the hotel we stayed in that night. We continued it over brunch in a local eatery the next morning. I was completely unprepared for it. Everything I tried to say sounded like defence or excuse. I had no idea where our relationship would go from here or if we would ever recover from it. She was meeting her sister the next day, so I left both of them in the street. I didn't look back. Probably because I was crying so much.

I had held onto an illusion about myself which was ridiculous and unsustainable.

When I reflected on everything she had said, of course I could find some truth in it. But what caused the crisis was not just the criticism but the attachment I had had to my identity of being a mother. I hadn't even realised I *was* attached to that identity. But it was so rooted in me that when I was stripped of it, it was like part of me had been ripped out of my core without an anaesthetic. It was an identity I had held onto throughout my marriage that had shored me up through a lot of difficult times. Now I had to face a different kind of pain – and a lot of guilt. But over the next two years there was also enormous growth as I was forced to evaluate everything I had done and not done as a mother. My daughter had acknowledged that I had done a lot of good also, but she was working through the impact on her of what she saw as all the bad stuff and I had to reflect on that honestly. We did get our relationship back on track, but it took some years. Now, I thank God for my daughters who face things honestly and courageously. I continue to be inspired by them.

The second identity crisis came when I was winding down my work as a management consultant. I had relocated to Ireland in 2004 but was still continuing to consult on diversity issues. I had also been ordained as an interfaith minister in 1998 and was conducting wedding ceremonies in Ireland, and spiritual exploration workshops from my home. I didn't 'retire' from consultancy, as such. Contracts came to a natural end. I hadn't done any marketing for many years. People found me – usually through recommendations. The last big contract I worked on was in 2015-2016. I was happier to think of living a quieter life. I wanted to read more and to

write and conduct more weddings in Ireland. I decided I was happy not to take on any more contracts and the Universe responded kindly by not sending me any. I was involved in the new spiritual intelligence tool – SQ21 – and in training new facilitators in how to debrief the assessment tool. But if I was ever asked what I did I still said, "I'm a management consultant." I never said I was a minister.

So, along with my decreasing workload was my increasing realisation of how important my identity as a management consultant was to me.

It became clear that this was how I wanted to be seen in the world. I had a reputation. My work was valued. I was valued. I loved being seen as an expert. I loved flying the world staying in nice hotels. I loved dressing well for my speaking engagements. I loved it when I got great feedback after a session and people told me how great I was. It was all one big ego trip.

So, if I wasn't a management consultant, then who on earth was I?

Although I was already ordained during my latter years as a consultant, I rarely mentioned this to my clients. I remember once a group of people at a conference asking me what else I was doing. Someone said, "You're always into something new – what's the next thing?" I said I was an interfaith minister and the conversation stopped. People were nervous about anything to do with spirituality being anywhere near the workplace. It had been 1996 when I first spoke at a conference on 'Spirituality at Work – Soft or Strategic?'. No one was biting. It was a taboo subject and nothing had changed in 20 years. As an interfaith minister, I don't have a church, or a congregation, or a set dogma to follow. It is up to each minister to work out for themselves how they are going to serve their communities. So, my weddings were increasing and I ran a few spiritual exploration workshops. But still, I would introduce myself, if I was asked, as a management consultant.

My head had made the decision to work less and lead a simpler life. But I was unsettled.

My blood pressure wasn't responding to medication. I didn't feel well. I had started to have cranio-sacral treatments every month from a wonderful therapist called Karen. She would treat me with a mixture of cranio methods and acupuncture. She always knew what was going on for me by looking at me! One day I started to tell her about my decision to lessen my consultancy work. She knew about the life I had been leading from my need to constantly be rearranging appointments. As I was lying there and starting to speak, I also started to cry.

"What's the matter with me?" I wailed. "I have decided that I want to do this, so why am I upset about it? What's going on? This is the second time I have told someone about the new, simpler life I am planning, and I cried when I told them too." I couldn't understand it.

Karen still had her hands on me and said gently, "Your head has made this decision but your cells are holding the memory of how you have lived for so many years."

"What do you mean?" I still didn't understand.

"Your cells are all on edge. They are waiting to jump into action – get another visa, book that flight, prepare that workshop, get to the airport. This is the memory your cells are holding of how you live. Now your head has decided to stop that. But the message hasn't got to your cells yet. They are still waiting in readiness for the next spring into action. Just give your cells time to catch up with the decision your head has made. Be easy with yourself. Be gentle with your body. Don't be so impatient for everything to work so smoothly so quickly after such a big change. It will all be fine."

That was such great advice. I decided to slow everything down – how I walked, for example, and to stop doing a million things a day and start to enjoy the beautiful place I am living in, surrounded by the sea and the mountains and silence. I have a black leather reclining chair in my office looking out through two huge picture windows at an ever-changing scene of landscape and water and colours. I would sit in the morning and think and read and reflect and meditate. I would often not shower and get dressed until lunchtime and if I had any work to do it would not be started until 2.30pm or 3pm. I began to really enjoy the tranquility of not only **where** I was living but **how** I was living.

But then the third crisis came along. I started to think, *So, is this it then?* I am planning to live for the next 20 years (no reason why I shouldn't live until I'm 90). *So, will my life be sitting looking at the mountains? How is this serving anyone?*

My ego was jumping up and down on my shoulder breathing lots of 'shoulds' into my ear.

I shared my thoughts and feelings with my peer group minister supervision group and again, I was crying. My thinking now had taken a downward spiral. *I wasn't useful to anyone. Had I ever been useful? All those workshops I had done for women – what did I know really? I was a charlatan. All those women who said they admired me – they didn't know me at all.* This thinking triggered my original crisis with my daughter. *I was useless as a mother, I've been useless as a consultant and now my life is worthless.* How easily the ego can contaminate all our thinking. My confidence had carried me through all of my life and I had never had any doubt about whether I was doing the right thing.

But now, in the last third of my life, I was wondering about my soul purpose.

Have I done what I came here to do? Is there some purpose I have not yet fulfilled? And isn't it more than sitting in beautiful Connemara looking at the sea and the mountains?

My peer group were immensely helpful. They said that I had not given myself permission to stop. I had worked for 50 years. I deserved to enjoy some quiet time. They suggested that I bought myself a special wrap to use when I sat in my black chair, to remind myself that it was okay to sit and be quiet. My friend Mary in America told me, "Your job is to sit in your black chair, look at the mountains and save the world."

I bought a beautiful red wrap and started to enjoy my new quiet life, instead of feeling guilty about it. Still, I had this nagging feeling that I wasn't finished with actually doing something. I brought it up with good friends Mary, from Canada, Helen, from Denmark and Graziella, from Italy. We had

all met at a conference over 20 years ago and used to see each other at least once a year – sometimes twice. We were from four different countries so meeting was no mean feat but the friendship was important to all of us. These amazing women knew me very well. This time we were meeting in Graziella's stunning penthouse overlooking all of Geneva. Graziella was talking about Rwanda and a centre she had founded. Its aim was to help women rebuild their lives after atrocities which had taken their menfolk and used the rape of women as a tool of war. Mary had been to that centre and, like me, had been involved in women's empowerment work for many years. Graziella said they were always looking for people to come and work with the women.

"Why don't you come over for a couple of weeks and help to empower the women?" she suggested.

"Come for a week or two and run some workshops and see how you like it."

The idea was immediately exciting to me. It sounded interesting. I had never been to Rwanda. I could do that. I said it would probably be the following February I would come. Maybe this was what I had been looking for.

When I got back home I started to think about this suggested trip. I realised that I actually didn't want to go. I had been taken up by the excitement of the idea, of the moment. I realised it would be a long flight, that we would most likely be in very basic accommodation, have to do early starts in the morning and non-stop talking all day long to the women. *And wouldn't it be very hot? And what about insects?* Apparently, the temperature is lovely and there are no insects but that didn't allay all my other fears. I would be exhausted while there and even more exhausted when I got back. My, *So, how are you serving?* thoughts came back. I called it my dilemma.

I decided to talk with my dear friend Claire about it. She is not only a coach and a consultant, she is also a Zen Buddhist Chaplain and an interfaith minister. And she is very wise. We had dinner in London and I told her about my dilemma and what I was thinking of to solve it.

She stopped me, “Hang on a minute,” she said. “Before you go rushing to solve this dilemma as you are calling it, let’s look at this dilemma itself.”

I took a drink of my wine and looked at her.

She continued, “What beliefs are holding up this dilemma? This idea of serving. Where does it come from?”

I thought for a moment, “Well, I guess it’s firstly from the Christian principle of helping those less fortunate than yourself.”

“What else?” Claire said.

“Well, from the esoteric principle that says ‘there is no spirituality without service’. I see myself as spiritual, so I had better be serving.”

“And you don’t think you are serving now?”

I looked at her blankly and she proceeded to list all the ways in which she knew I served.

“What about how you helped your niece and nephew when their mother died. Wasn’t that serving? What about the visits you do to people who have Alzheimer’s in the community? What about being there for Brid next door? What about responding to your daughters whenever they need something? What about the women you mentor free of charge when they ask you to? What about the support you have given to the homeless women in the halfway house in Galway? And that’s before I start with the beautiful wedding ceremonies you create and the spiritual workshops you run and the online ceremonies… should I go on?”

She looked at me hard.

“What I want to know is why you are not counting any of these as service,” she continued.

“And be careful that your desire to go rushing off to Rwanda in a grand gesture isn’t driven by your ego. You don’t need to serve with a flourish in an extravagant act. Maybe you just need to continue to do what you are doing and serving those who cross your path.”

Oh my God, she was right!

My good friend Brid had already said to me wryly when I mentioned about going to Rwanda, “You don’t need to go all the way to Rwanda. There are plenty of people you can help in Ireland.”

Thank the Lord for good friends who will tell you the truth. I was relieved that I could release the idea of going to Rwanda. I just needed to say *yes* when things crossed my path.

Then COVID-19 arrived and the lockdown came everywhere. Everyone started living a quiet life! Everyone’s identities were dropped and changed and re-evaluated.

Now, I am reading and reflecting and writing and the identity I show to the world is that of being a minister – it’s enough.

Chapter 18: Being a Minister

"I was going to stop pretending that just because we were in ministry we were perfect. I was tired of wearing the mask of ministry, and knew that I needed to start living the life."
Anna Aquino

I had wanted to be a priest from being a little girl. The incense, candles, music, the robes – I wanted all of it. I knew I could never be a priest within the Catholic Church, so I put my dream away. It would be 40 years before it was realised.

I actually thought I had a vocation when I was approaching 18 years of age. I absolutely didn't want to be a nun but 'knew' that you had to go where God called you. I prayed every night, "Dear God, if this is a vocation, please take it away. I really don't want to be nun." I went to talk to my favourite teacher – Sister Cecily Mary – about it. She explained that my brain had worked out that the highest, most 'religious' thing I could do was be a nun, so that's why I was drawn to it. She said, "Go off to college, live your life, get your degree, become a teacher. If you *do* have a vocation, it will return. Don't fret about it."

The release I felt was immense and all thoughts of a vocation vanished.

My vocation *did* come back again 30 years later when I started to train to be an interfaith minister.

I had left the Catholic Church three years before I began my two years of interfaith ministry training, in 1996. Two different people had sent me an advert from two different places saying simply, 'Did you ever want to be a minister?' and giving notice of a meeting in London. The New Seminary, as it was called then, was being set up in the UK by a woman called Miranda Holden who had completed the training in the US and was asked to set up a training in the UK. It had been running in the US since 1981. Its core principle was simply to affirm the truth in all faiths and spiritual paths.

This is how they described it, "To use the metaphor of a tree, we are each rooted in our own tradition and they branch out toward the teachings of

other paths. All authentic spiritual traditions express the same universal teachings using different words and symbols – the rainbow's beauty consists of its many hues – unity does not mean uniformity."

There is no set interfaith dogma to be followed and no fixed ministerial role. Each interfaith minister serves in their own way in their own communities. Some ministers choose to offer services of worship and celebration, others concentrate on spiritual guidance, some focus on a specific area such as working with the dying or the bereaved – and some might want to bring a spiritual perspective to the workplace. I wasn't sure when I started what my focus would be but, by the end of the training, I knew that I wanted to conduct sacred ceremonies for special occasions. I wasn't sure about the spiritual counselling.

I knew none of this at that first meeting in London. I just knew I was compelled to go. There were about 30 of us in the small meeting room, together with Miranda and the founder of the New York training, Diane Berk. We each had to stand up and talk for three minutes about our own spiritual journeys and why we wanted to be ministers. *Good Lord!* I couldn't condense my life into three minutes and had no idea what this ministry training was even about. Whatever was I going to say? One by one, each of us stood up and said a variation of the same thing, "I don't really know why I am here. I just saw the advert and knew I had to come." We had to write a letter of application and get two letters of recommendation (I never understand this requirement – of course you are going to ask people who will say wonderful things about you!). We were all accepted into the programme, although only 18 of us were ordained.

The training was for two years. There would be one weekend every month in London, plus an end of year retreat after Year One and an end of year retreat and ordination at the end of Year Two.

The period of training, 1996 – 1998, was in the middle of my marriage break up and so was a welcome distraction from the tension and trauma at home.

I could focus on myself and my forthcoming ministry and try to stay connected to my spiritual self while my human self was struggling and in conflict.

In the first year we looked at the major religious traditions and philosophies and the similarities and differences between them. We were expected to visit different worship locations and to form study groups. As I lived in Leicestershire at the time there was no one near me and so I studied on my own. This suited me very well. I never liked group dynamics which always seemed to lead to groups becoming dysfunctional.

An important part of the training in that first year was to reconcile with any religious tradition we had rejected which seemed to apply to a lot of people who had left the Catholic Church. I was still angry with the Catholic Church, not only for its own actions but for providing the sword that seemed to sever the relationship between my mother and myself. More than a few people had left an organised religion and were harbouring hatred towards it – some of them had been abused by priests and elders. The work was hard but I was finally able to be grateful for my introduction to Christ, the hymns, the candles, the incense and the ceremony.

I had always seen the Church much like a dating agency in that once you had met 'the one' you didn't need the agency anymore.

But I will be forever grateful for the introduction.

In the second year we learned about spiritual counselling and creating ceremony. The training was the most intense personal development training programme I have ever undertaken. I quickly became very friendly with Reema. She was also going through a marriage break up and it seemed that each month as we would update each other on what had been happening for us, our stories ran parallel. We had the same kind of setbacks, the same kinds of revelations. I used to know what was happening to Reema because of what was happening to me. Her background was Muslim. She had been a marketing executive but finally dedicated herself full-time to her son who is at the severe end of the autism spectrum. I was in awe of her generosity. She was like a Goddess to me – and still is. We supported each other and kept

each other laughing, even through the hard times. I remember one exercise we did in class where we had to identify our most basic negative belief about ourselves and describe how it had shown up in our lives. Mine was, 'I am unworthy of being loved' and Reema's was similar. I wondered if all women raised in a religious dogma were likely to hold this negative belief about themselves. My belief was played out with a mother who didn't love me in the way I wanted and needed her to, and with a husband who took over where she left off. He also didn't love me in the way that I needed him to.

I think that was probably the first time I started to make sense of the patterns that were showing up in my life.

Our ordination was in St James' Church in Central London. It was packed with families and friends and well-wishers. I was ordained by Rabbi Gelberman – one of the original four people from different traditions who wanted to serve as leaders in their communities in a new way. It was from their original ideas that the New Seminary was set up first in New York. It was such a special day. We had been given white satin stoles, which are like long scarves, with gold embroidered symbols sewn down each side. The symbols represent all the major traditions. A plain gold circle at the bottom represents the spiritual thought of all peoples on the planet. I wear that stole in every ceremony I do. Lots of ministers choose to have a stole made specially for them after their ordination but I want to wear the one I was ordained in to help me remember my vows to serve. It's the only gold thing I wear. I only wear silver jewellery and I look awful in gold clothes but that stole is precious to me.

A couple of years later I happened to meet a few of the ministers I had been ordained with. We were reminiscing about what a special day our ordination had been. Someone mentioned angels and a second person said, "Oh, did you see them too?" I asked what they meant. They both said that when they looked up in the church the ceiling was covered with angels. Quite a few people said they had seen them. I hadn't but I didn't doubt they had been there.

The ceremony I was drawn to conduct was the wedding ceremony. What better way to serve than create beautiful, personal wedding ceremonies celebrating love and joy and commitment? There are many couples who don't want to or can't get married in a church but want something more than a civil or humanist ceremony (which can't have any spiritual references in it). They want a sense of the sacred in their ceremony. I can create a ceremony that can include spiritual elements if they wish. But they can also have a ceremony that centres on nature, love, relationships, connections without any explicit spiritual references at all. However they want it to be, so it is created. It will be inclusive of everyone who is there. I have married a Christian with a Jew. I have married couples where their families are strong Catholics and are worried about the wedding ceremony their daughter/ son is planning. No one feels alienated from a ceremony centring on joy and love and family members can be included at various points in the ceremony.

I realise that when I conduct a wedding ceremony, it is one of the few times I am totally present.

There is no other thought in my mind, except the words I am saying and the couple before me. I'm not wondering what time I will leave, or what I am doing that evening. It's like a 40 minute meditation and I feel full of the love and the joy that the couple have been expressing to each other.

I don't feel called to conduct funerals. Probably because in Ireland the death, the wake and the burial all happen in three or four days. The minister has to be available immediately. I was still heavily involved in my consultancy work, where sessions were arranged months in advance. I never held the intention of being involved in end of life ceremonies. The only cremation and memorial service I have conducted was for Sonja, who was in my esoteric study group. She was a single mum, only 49, with four children. She had cancer. She texted me a few days before her death to ask me if I would conduct her funeral service.

I never spoke to her about the service but I understood from her children and close friends that she had agreed with her local vicar that her

memorial service would be held at the parish church and her cremation would be held in Dublin two days before. In Ireland, most people are buried in the Catholic tradition so, until recently, the nearest crematorium was a four-hour drive from where Sonja was.

Sonja's body came home for the wake and I asked for a meeting with the vicar and Sonja's four children which took place in her kitchen. The vicar, Rev Denis Sands, came in. He was an elderly man with a slight stoop and a white beard. I sensed that he would be very traditional. I stood and greeted him.

"I'm Reverend Geraldine Bown and I'm delighted to meet you. I would like to thank you for being so gracious as to allow me to do the service for Sonja in your church. That is so kind of you." He looked at me slightly puzzled. "I understand that you agreed this with Sonja," I continued.

He frowned. "Oh, that's not what we agreed at all," he said. "I thought that you were just going to do a couple of readings. Are you saying that you want me to turn my whole church over to you?"

"Well, yes," I said, hesitantly, "That's what Sonja wanted."

There was a pause while he thought about this.

I said quickly, "Why don't we sit down and have a cup of tea and talk about it."

He questioned me about who I was and where I had been trained, maintaining an amusing, sarcastic smile.

He told me I would have to see the Bishop and he couldn't say if I would get permission. I said I was perfectly happy to see the Bishop. Sonja's children were getting restless and mused about going elsewhere. I thought to myself, *Well, Rev. Geraldine, if you want to do more of these ceremonies then you will be having many conversations like this, so you had better get it right – and now!*

I showed the vicar the outline of a ceremony I had prepared that I had brought to show the children for their input.

He started to read it and said, "Have you written these prayers?"

"Well, yes," I said.

"Well, we have our own Church of Ireland prayers," he said and promptly showed me the little standard leaflet he had brought.

I took a quick look and my heart sank – if this was the format, I could imagine Sonja rising from her coffin at any moment and coming herself into the kitchen. I had to think quickly. "And I don't see any mention of Jesus Christ in your ceremony," he said.

I smiled and replied, "You know, Sonja was a great lover of Jesus and he is mentioned later, but I'm going to put him in right at the beginning."

He continued, "And I see you have readings from various texts. I don't see one from the Bible."

I nodded and said, "You know, Sonja was a great lover of the Bible so let's put one in – do you have a favourite one?"

He was looking to find fault with everything, "And I see you have musicians playing and singing but I don't see any hymns."

I smiled again – I smiled throughout this exchange – "You know, I think it's a great idea for the congregation to sing together – what hymn do you suggest?"

I sensed he was looking for a way to back down as I was adjusting the ceremony to take account of all his concerns.

Finally, I looked at him and said, "What would this ceremony have to look like for you to be happy for me to do it?"

Long pause.

I continued, "I would love for you to welcome people into your church to begin and also think it would be wonderful if you would give people a blessing before they leave."

Whether it was this exchange or the realisation that Sonja's coffin wouldn't be there and it was actually a memorial service – I don't know – but the vicar changed completely. And even when I said that for the homily I was going to explain to the congregation Sonja's beliefs about death, which were based on the esoteric tradition and would absolutely not be in line with the Church of Ireland – he didn't want to see it.

The ceremony lasted over an hour and was beautiful. There was the choir, of which Sonja had been a member, who sang and also led the congregation singing, 'The Lord is My Shepherd'. We had a fiddler and a harpist. We had her children reading. We had a eulogy from her eldest son's partner who read what Sonja had written in her diary about death just the week before she died. We had everyone holding a lighted candle while they listened to a beautiful musical rendition of, 'Make me a Channel of your Peace'. There was a part of the ceremony where the congregation were invited to share a memory of Sonja. And although speaking out in church is not usual, in the event, about 10 people shared what Sonja meant to them. And throughout the whole ceremony, picture after picture of Sonja was projected onto a screen through a laptop that her children had brought. After Rev Sands had blessed everyone, people sat still, unsure as to whether it was finished or not. I stepped forward and suggested that we give Sonja a traditional send off and people stood and clapped and cheered.

The Irish have a strong, traditional, religious history.

The community in my little hamlet were very welcoming to me personally but shied away from attending any service I tried to offer.

The priest from Rosmuc had been at Sonja's memorial service. He came and introduced himself after the ceremony and said what a wonderful ceremony it was.

The next day in the local church in Rosmuc the priest announced, "Well, it's all been about death this week. Yesterday, I was at the funeral of John O'Donohue (a very well-known Irish poet and priest and philosopher) and then a memorial service in Clifden for a 49-year-old woman who left four children."

My good friend and neighbour, Brid, was listening to this and knew he was talking about Sonja. She hadn't been able to go to the memorial service.

The priest continued, "And standing on the altar where I am now, and conducting the service was a woman! Imagine that! What's more, she lives here in Rosmuc! She's one of us!"

The person sitting next to Brid whispered to her, “Who is he talking about?”

“Geraldine,” whispered Brid.

“Geraldine!” The woman’s mouth fell open, “Well, I never.”

A few weeks later, I asked the priest if I might have permission to use the tiny quaint Catholic church at the top of the lane to do a service.

He readily agreed and the week before he announced at all the Masses, “Now, next week there is going to be a special service at Gort Mor. It will be conducted by Geraldine. I can’t remember her last name, but you all know who I mean. She’s a very good person and I want you all to go.”

But except for Brid and her family, no one came. Even when the priest had not only given permission but directed them to attend, they still didn’t go. They knew I conducted weddings for people and would ask me, “How many weddings have you got?” but they didn’t see what I did as in any way connected with them.

I tried to set up a support/ prayer group for the women and asked Brid if she thought people would come.

“No,” she said immediately. Then, as my face fell she added, “Look, even the priest couldn’t get a prayer group going.”

I had explained on the notice I put up in the post office that the group was so that women could ask for prayers for some particular intention and the others would pray for that intention every day for the week. I realised that in a small rural community there was not enough trust for the women to share like this with each other, never mind me. I was just glad to be accepted so well, personally.

Old Catholic traditions linger on for a long time. One couple wanted me to do a wedding in a beautiful Catholic church overlooking the Connemara landscape. They had asked me if I would do the ceremony and I told them, of course, and the problem wouldn’t be with me, it would be with the priest. The priest whose church it was was happy for the church to be used but he was too busy to do the wedding. At that time, I wasn’t allowed to do a legal wedding, so we needed a priest to do the legal piece and give communion to those who wanted it. My local priest couldn’t do it as the Bishop wouldn’t

allow it, so Brid suggested I ask the priest in a village about 30 minutes away.

"He is known for breaking all sorts of rules," she said.

I went to see him. He was in his 60s or 70s with a greying beard and a kind face. He agreed immediately. I felt obliged to point out that the bishop had refused permission once.

He looked at me and said, "I have a different bishop and besides, it's not wise to tell the bishop everything." He smiled.

As people arrived in the church for the wedding he was standing on the altar and I was next to him in my white trousers and top and white and gold stole. People were expecting to see him but the majority of the guests had no idea who I was.

The priest gave the introduction, "I thought this day would never come but, after 40 years, standing next to me on this altar is a woman, Reverend Geraldine Bown, and I am absolutely delighted. She has done all the work in putting this ceremony together and she will conduct it. Now I'm going to do what every good man should do which is to sit down and let the woman speak."

Things *are* changing in Ireland, albeit slowly, and the recent 'yes' votes on abortion and marriage equality are testament to that. There may be a day when the community calls on me. I'll be here.

My organisational skills didn't disappear altogether. All the skills I had accumulated from the previous 30 years started to be put to use in a new way. I ran workshops on 'Practical Spirituality and Spiritual Intelligence' and 'An Introduction to Esotericism' from my house. I hadn't been able to combine spirituality with my consultancy work but now I didn't need to try any more. I switched my focus from working with organisations to working with individuals.

I spearheaded a campaign to allow us interfaith ministers resident in Ireland to conduct legal marriages in Ireland. This was done under the umbrella of our UK 'mother' organisation – One Spirit Interfaith Foundation. Finally, six years later, in 2019, a group of Irish One Spirit interfaith ministers

wanted to set up a separate organisation in Ireland so we could get authorisation in our own right to conduct legal weddings in Ireland. I became chair of our new Irish group – One World Ministers. I drafted a constitution and submitted the application for One World Ministers to be registered as a Nominating Body for Solemnisers. It was accepted. Four of us worked on a website design and, as I had already created a couple of websites, I established our group online.

I realise now that service is no more than using the skills you have in whatever situation they are required.

My ministry now consists of creating and conducting weddings, working on behalf of One World Ministers and being available to whomever I am needed to serve.

I have finally found my calling, my vocation. And while it's about ministering to the world, it's also about ministering to myself. I have learned not to be so hard on myself; not to beat myself up if I get things wrong; not to be so disappointed in myself if I fall short of the standards I have set myself; to forgive myself for my mistakes and to give myself the silence I need so I can hear the whispers of my soul amid the noise of the ego. Maybe this is the most important ministerial work of all.

Chapter 19: Being Spiritual – Searching For God

"Spiritual life is like living water that springs up from the very depths of our own spiritual experience. In spiritual life everyone has to drink from his or her own well."
St Bernard

I think I have been searching all my life for God.

I hadn't actually realised this until I was in a room in an ashram in Rishikesh in northern India. Martin and I were visiting the area because steam trains were still running there. While Martin went off to look at the train sheds, I went to spend a day at an ashram. The small room was crowded. Some people were locals, some were tourists, some were backpackers and some were spiritual seekers. All were sitting cross-legged on the floor, except me. I've never been able to sit like that, so I sat with my knees to one side trying to scrunch myself up so I could balance uncomfortably and look peaceful at the same time. We waited for a long time. Then he came in. A large man with orange robes and an angry face. He picked on individuals and shouted at them. I vowed to keep my head down and say nothing.

Right at the end, he turned to me and pointed and said in English, "And you! What is your question?"

As he had been picking on people randomly, I had thought of a question in case he turned his attention to me. I looked at him and said, "I've read a lot about living in the present moment but I have a business to run and people are depending on me for their livelihoods. How can I live in the present when I have to be planning six and 12 months ahead to secure their jobs?"

He looked hard at me and said, "Why do you wait until now to ask such a question?"

I didn't reply.

He went on, "And anyway, that's not the question you really want to ask. What you really want to know is where has God gone in your life. Isn't it?" he shouted. I realised he was right.

Once I had left the Catholic Church, I had embarked on my spiritual search with enthusiasm.

I was rejecting the organisation of the Church, not God, and so I needed to look outside the confines of religion. Even so, I doubted my own credentials as a 'spiritual' person. I didn't see angels (and still don't); I don't see auras around people; I'm not psychic; I don't hear things; I don't see into the future. Everything I read that 'spiritual people' could do – I couldn't. In addition, all the stories I read about people who had transformed their lives and were enlightened, or at least on the way to it, had all come from terrible childhoods and backgrounds. I've had a charmed life and thought I just hadn't had a hard enough life to transform into anything. Still, I began my search.

The spiritual path is long and winding – and messy. There is no one path anyway. There are multiple paths each one with many potholes and dead ends. At the beginning of my search, I tried many paths and committed to each one wholeheartedly – for a while. It's a bit like when a new baby latches onto its mother's breast and eagerly sucks for her milk – for its food. I would latch onto whatever spiritual idea had taken my attention and imagination and greedily devoured each new idea to feed my spiritual hunger.

Maybe this chapter should be called 'Becoming Spiritual' not 'Being Spiritual' because we are always 'becoming'. There is no end point in the spiritual journey. So, rather than list all the various courses I attended in my search, I will just talk about the particular learnings that impacted my beliefs, my thoughts and behaviour and led me to this point – led me to being the spiritual person I believe I am now.

I left the Church when I found *A Course in Miracles*. ACIM is a philosophy, supposedly dictated by Christ to an American woman, Helen Schucman, which is meant to re-interpret Jesus' teachings and provide a path for living from love and forgiveness. The 'miracle' is a change in your perception about the person or situation in front of you. You change your glasses, as it were, and you see something different. I started doing the daily lessons and tested out the theory on how I was seeing my mother. It worked and I

stopped being so stressed by her. The ACIM mantras of, 'I could see something else instead of this,' and, 'I could see peace instead of this,' helped me to continually refocus my thoughts. As did the years' worth of daily lessons which I did twice, a number of years apart.

Of course, it wasn't long before the shadows appeared!

They were right there in all my judgments. I found some of the ACIM followers I came across overtly 'spiritual' – peaceful smiles, no money, working in alternative therapies. They irritated me. And some of them were interested in nothing more than philosophising.

The time I was at Rishikesh, a woman who had been sitting next to me (who the guru had also shouted at) suggested we have a coffee so we chatted about what we were doing in India. She had already been there for three months visiting various ashrams in her spiritual quest. She suggested we cross the Ganges and see a Western woman who was 'enlightened' and popular with Western seekers. It was hot and dusty and the room was crowded with predominantly young people wearing the spiritual-seeker garb of the day - shorts, sandals, braided hair, bearded, long skirts - footwear easy to walk in and clothes easy to keep cool in.

The female guru was very late (of course) so we had to sit on the floor for quite a while waiting for her. There were no windows in this shack but the air that wafted in was hot and stifling. I don't remember the guru's name. She was tall, with long, straight, very blond hair wearing long white robes and a permanent smile on her face. We were invited to ask questions. One guy asked a question I didn't even understand. I looked at him and thought, *You poor tortured soul trying to get your head around all this. Just live fully and love as much as you can.* I was starting to get annoyed by her 'enlightened' words. Someone asked her what she did about eating and sleeping.

She answered slowly, moving her head from side to side and looking kindly at the questioner, "I eat when my body is hungry and sleep when my body is tired."

I was incensed. I thought to myself, *That's all very well while you live here and have food brought to you every day and someone to lead you to where you sleep. But I am meeting my Marks and Spencer's client in London next week and if I say at 3pm in the middle of a meeting, 'My body is tired. I will sleep now,' I will never get any work from them again!"* At the end of her session people were invited to come and bow at her feet. I didn't go. I already saw myself as superior to these ACIM groupies. I didn't see my own shadows. I was too self-absorbed.

I became torn between thinking I was doing okay to having an obsession about being better.

I become a self-development junkie. I read every spiritual book I could find and was continually on the look-out for courses I could do. There was a developing interest among spiritual seekers in all the 'New Age' ideas – crystals, tarot cards, angels and especially, positive thinking.

I attended a five-day training based on Louise Hay's philosophy of positive thinking and the importance of affirmations. She was seen as the American 'queen' of positive thinking. For months I would mouth her positive affirmations waiting for my life to change. But the more I looked into it, the more I realised that what most people wanted was more money, a better job, a half-decent relationship. All things that are outside of ourselves. When I came across *The Secret*, many years later, that was about more of the same. Surely spirituality was about more than chasing external happiness? And suppose what I wanted was not what my soul needed? How would I know? I remained confused. It would be later when I would really be able to understand the importance of the clarity of the mind where our thoughts are created.

At some point I studied HeartMath – an organisation and system, focusing on the power on the heart. I also became a Reiki master practitioner. I attended a 10-day training by a woman called Byron Katie. Her 'work' is about meeting our thoughts with understanding, so that our stressful thoughts fall away. She says that all stress is caused by how we think about things – not about what happens but about what we *think* about what

happens. She poses four simple questions which you answer in relation to a stressful thought (e.g., If I die my kids will never get over it; he doesn't love me; my needs are always last to be considered).

The questions are:

- Is it true?
- Can you absolutely know it isn't true?
- How do you react when you believe that thought?
- Who would you be/ how would you relate to this person/ situation if you didn't believe that thought?

Then you have to turn that thought around in three different ways and find three examples where the opposite could be true. Once the brain has realised that the opposite could also be true it's hard to hold onto the original stressful thought. It's a very powerful process. This re-enforced my earlier ACIM studies about the importance of clear thinking.

Some courses I did were short – a weekend or a week. The longest trainings I completed were my interfaith two-year training and the one-year Postgraduate Certificate in Spiritual Development and Facilitation at the University of Surrey.

All of them were different approaches, giving different tools to get to the same end.

Love and kindness was always the start and the end point. The Beatles said it first, 'All You Need Is Love.' I was spending a lot of money coming to that realisation.

Everything I was learning I was fitting together in a giant road map of how I could live my life. I had 'messages' from time to time that I didn't need to try so hard. One was when I went to Brazil over 25 years ago to learn the art of spiritual massage. There was a weekly meeting with a Brazilian priest who channelled a famous Brazilian saint. He sat on the floor and spoke in a different voice and his facial features changed. The hut was dark and lit

with candles. At the beginning of the session, he picked up a candle and dropped some candle wax on his hand. It was black.

"See this," he said. "This is all the shit in this room that I have to see and you have to get rid of it."

Our little group were huddled together near the back. One by one he called the local people forward. They stood in front of him and he laid into them verbally. *Do gurus always do this*? I wondered. There was an interpreter sitting beside him who translated what he was saying to us English-speaking folk. Of course, we didn't speak or ask questions. Then, right at the end, he pointed to me and said, "You, come here!"

I cringed. It reminded me of the time in India. I stood in front of him.

"Are you afraid?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"You don't need to be," he said. "Do you live on an island?"

I said I lived in England.

He said, "Well, that's an island isn't it?"

Everyone laughed.

I felt excruciatingly uncomfortable.

Then he picked up a candle again and dropped some wax on his hand. The wax stayed white.

"See this?" he said, "This is from you. You are a good person. You never need fear anything. You will always be protected by the Druids. Now take your seat."

I didn't know anything about the Druids but I *did* feel protected. I realised I always had.

That feeling of security and protection has always been with me to some degree. This became one of my core principles – trust. Trust that I am okay. Trust that things will ultimately work out okay. Trust that the Universe really is a kind place, as Einstein said, and I will be given what I need. One of the ACIM mantras that sustained me throughout my marriage break up was, 'You're in the right place and you're right on time'. That trust would be shaken at times but would always be under the surface waiting for me to remember it.

I must have become a total bore talking about the things I was learning and reading – preaching to whomever would listen. I had another sign that I needn't keep trying so hard when my consulting company Domino was at its height. I used to employ a woman called Gill on a contract basis to write articles for our Domino newsletter. She was a radical feminist who had no truck with anything to do with spirituality. I had given her an article to write on spirituality in organisations and gave her some resources she could use. I knew I would get the most objective viewpoint from her.

One Saturday, I got a phone message from my daughter, "Gill Taylor wants you to ring her." This was unusual. She never required any help, and anyway, it was Saturday evening. I phoned her.

She said, "Are you sitting down?"

I sat.

She continued, "I was on the train coming back from London and planning this article for you when I heard a voice. I didn't see anyone, but I definitely heard a voice."

This was completely unlike Gill. She continued, "The voice said, 'Tell Geraldine she doesn't need to read any more books. She knows everything she needs to know. She just has to listen to her heart'."

There was a pause and she said, "I don't know if that means anything to you but there it is."

It *did* mean something to me and I had goose bumps. It was around the time that a friend had come to visit and put a book on the kitchen table in a brown paper bag.

"I've brought you a book," she said. Then, as I pounced on it, she added, "And it's not a bloody self-development one!"

I finally stopped reading self-development books for a good while after this and started to listen to my inner voice – the one I had never really trusted.

Finally, I found esotericism through the books of Alice Bailey. She was a woman who was born in Manchester and lived in the US as a writer and teacher. She died in 1949. The texts were dictated to her by a Tibetan

master. As I studied it I saw that it was complete system of spiritual evolution related to the whole Universe. I could see where everything fit into it – Jesus, the Buddha, all the teachers and masters. It's a simple philosophy about integrating the body, the emotions and the mind (referred to as the 'personality') in order to infuse with the soul, so the personality can become a tool of the soul. By this time, I had been on a spiritual path for about 15 years. Now, everything fell into place. It's not about taking ourselves away from our lives to experience peace. It's about getting the right balance between being and doing and between contemplation and action. And all of this in order that we can serve. Spirituality is not an academic activity, it's a lived experience.

Now, I wonder about that term 'spiritual development'. What does development look like in this context? Maybe 'development' is an odd word to use. Development implies 'from this to that', an increasing of something – from a lesser to a greater. But suppose that we already *are* the greater and that what we need to do is to remove the barriers to our realisation of this? One of those barriers is the seeking of happiness. Now, instead of seeking happiness, I try to live from joy. Joy is the energy of the soul. It's our birthright. The good news is that we already have it – it is already within us but we've covered it with blockages that we attach to. Joy is our foundation – it is not a feeling (feelings, including happiness, are fleeting) but a deep knowing of the truth about us – about all of us.

Joy is there underneath all the ebbs and flows of life. We can be in pain and still experience joy; we can hate our present circumstances, and still experience joy. Because all pain is in the world of the ego and we want to be in the world of soul, where pain does not exist.

Joy is our foundation for life.

I see it like a huge slab of concrete that we stand on to survey our life and beyond. If we lose our balance and fall off it we can't see so far – we can't see the panoramic view. The turbulence that might be happening around us doesn't affect our joy. It creates little specks of dirt on the concrete slab that we need to clean off – it can never destroy the slab itself. And happiness becomes irrelevant.

We need to lose our attachments, like our attachment to finding happiness. I once only thought of attachments in terms of material possessions. But then I had my identity crises and realised that I had an attachment to being a mother and an attachment to being a consultant.

When my daughter and I became estranged I was distraught. Losing my attachment to being a great mother was the first one I saw. Then I became attached to *her* pain. I was heartbroken because of the pain she was in. I had to let her have her pain and not make it mine (not the same as reflecting on my responsibility in helping to cause her pain). Friends said that she would come around. That it would be okay, so I became attached to that idea. Then I realised that even if we never really spoke again and even if we never had a good relationship again, that had to be okay too. I would still love her and keep my heart open to her. It must have been nearly two years before I could think about what happened without crying. But bit by bit, I dropped any attachments to an outcome I wanted. I would accept whatever the reality was now and would be in the future. That's one of the core messages of Byron Katie too. Her most famous book is called, *Loving What Is*. When we fight with reality we lose, 100% of the time.

And now I see what 'living in the now' really means, it means nothing more than accepting the reality in front of us.

My spiritual activities now consist of accessing joy though stillness, through connection with others and with nature, through gratitude for everything in my life, through acceptance of whatever is happening, through finding the gift in every painful situation we are in. It is my quickest route out of pain.

A few years ago, I lost a lot of money that I had saved. I had made a bad investment in a business which was mismanaged and which folded. I lost it all. And the gift? There were two gifts actually: The first gift was realising that if I took 25% of my private pension, which was tax free, and added in all the little policies I had bought along the way, the total was just about what I still owed on my mortgage. I paid it off. Even if I never worked again, I could sit in my house, drive my paid-for car and just have to find the money for heating and food. The second gift was the realisation that the

bad investment was the second time in my life I had invested significant sums of money for no other purpose than to make money. It seems that others can do that. I can't. I didn't get the message after the first loss. I got it after the second!

Also I have stopped measuring my own progress against the supposed progress of others, as if it is some sort if spiritual competition. I reflect, yes, but monitor, no.

We actually have no idea where we are in our spiritual evolutionary process.

The reality is that wherever we think we are, we are probably *much* further back! We can monitor our human progress but best to leave our spiritual progress to the soul to handle!

The personal experience that has had the most impact on me happened almost 25 years ago. I had often thought about the notion of surrender as being important as a spiritual quality. But I had always avoided surrendering to 'God's will' in case 'He' asked me to do something I didn't want to do – suppose 'He' wanted me to give all my possessions away, or leave my job or worse still, leave my marriage. I shuddered at the thought of it. But then my marriage started to break up and I struggled for years, wondering what to do. It was painful and I found myself becoming more and more weary with the struggle of it all.

With the pain of my ending marriage increasing not decreasing, I found myself on a beach in Mexico, sitting on a rock, waves rolling in, watching a beautiful sunset and I realised I wasn't handling things well. I couldn't trust myself anymore. I had made some decisions which had had terrible consequences. I had recently read *Conversations with God* by Neale Donald Walsch and in one part the author had said to God that he had done everything God had wanted yet he still didn't have a decent relationship and he still had no money. God had replied that he hadn't actually done much at all. He had dabbled in this and dabbled in that, but he had never really surrendered to God. It hit me forcefully. *Oh my God*, that was me. I decided to start my own conversation with God. I remember saying out loud, "Okay, God. I am so tired. I can't fight you anymore. I'll let

you in. Whatever you want, it's done. Take me, I'm yours and I will do whatever you want." I felt something move inside me and what seemed like a huge stone came right out of my chest and rose up. The most incredible peace descended on me. I felt incredibly light. I was in total awe about what had happened. And in that same moment, I knew my marriage of 25 years was finally over. I felt no fear at all, just total trust that I would be okay. A trust that has always been in me and which was strengthened in Brazil but which had waned with the pain of my marriage break up. The trust finally took root in me on that beach in Mexico and it has never left me since.

What *is* surrender then? Maybe it's the answer to the call to give ourselves to something larger than ourselves and to become what we were meant to become, instead of being a prisoner tied up with the chains of our past decisions.

What was I surrendering *to*? I wasn't sure. I just knew that relying on myself wasn't working.

I think that surrender is not to a disconnected God but to my lived life as expressing my 'soul essence'.

I am already part of the wholeness that *is* God, is my Higher Self, is my soul, is consciousness, is love. It is my future here in this present moment, which I am co-creating minute by minute. I am already 'it' – but I had forgotten. My spiritual journey is actually a journey back – back home. We can gain an understanding of wholeness, of our soul, through reading about it and talking about it but there can be no real experience of wholeness unless we surrender and *feel* the soul connection.

I felt the connection that day on the beach in Mexico when I surrendered and put my Higher Self in charge. That's when I realised that surrender isn't about giving up something – it's about making a positive choice to cooperate with Soul.

That is how I want to live my life – trusting and without fear.

Chapter 20: Being Home

"There is a feel about Galway you can wear around your shoulders like a cloak. It blows in with the mist from the Atlantic and lingers incessantly at every corner. I have never been able to walk the streets of Galway without feeling some unnamed presence accompanying me."
Claire Fullerton

When I fly into England I feel the pull of my past. This is where was I was born. I understand these people (I probably don't), I know how things work here (I definitely don't anymore). England is where I came from and it is rooted in me. But when I fly back to Ireland, as the plane lands my soul is lifted and I smile and I think, *Ah, now I am home.*

It took me quite a while to get here! Here, as in Connemara. Here, as in on my own. I spent my first 24 years living with my parents. Then I was married to Martin for 27 years, until 1999. It was three years later that I first came to Ireland, and I have now been living on my own in Ireland for 14 years.

After I left our family home in Shepshed in the Midlands, I moved to Loughborough, a few miles down the road. My daughter Amy was with me. Her older sister Emily was away at college in London and then carried on living there before going to France for 10 years.

The house in Loughborough was a terraced house on three levels. It reminded me of the first house I had owned with Martin, also in Loughborough, 20 years before. Amy and I made it nice. Our family home in Shepshed was very big, so there was plenty of furniture for Martin and I to share and, thankfully, there was no argument over the splitting up of the contents.

The Loughborough house Amy and I moved to was a couple of minutes' walk to the centre of this small market town. The leisure centre was round the corner to the house, as was Sainsburys.

Everything was within walking distance – the market, the restaurants, the cinema.

Having lived there for the first three years of Emily's life, then a few miles up the road for the next 17 years, I was very familiar with Loughborough and really liked it. And I had lots of friends there whom I saw regularly.

David came into my life a few months after the move to Loughborough. In the August of that year – 1999 – there was to be a total solar eclipse and there was much excitement about where it could be seen. The South West of England seemed to be the place to be, so off I went to Devon to see it. As luck would have it, the South West was overcast and there was nothing to be seen at all! En route to Devon I had stayed with a friend, Jude, and it was there I met David. He was an old friend of Jude's and had fallen on hard times. His marriage had broken up and he had left his wife everything. He had been a nurse, a social worker and then had run his own business training people to be witnesses in court and representing children who had no one to speak for them. He was working all hours all over the country and drinking a lot. Finally, he crashed and his business also folded, so he was working out what he was going to do next while staying with Jude and, meanwhile, doing local gardening and delivery jobs.

David was friendly and funny. His first sight of me was me sitting in a chair with a towel round my neck and purple hair dye all over my head. He didn't seem to notice. He made breakfast for us. He was different from Martin in every way. He was shorter than Martin, always smiling and very easy going. It would have been hard not to like him.

About a week later when I was back home he called me out of the blue. I had left Jude some poems I had written about the break-up of my marriage. David asked if he might read them and I agreed. He called me again after he had read them and said they very much resonated with him and could we meet. He came to see me in Loughborough. We sat in my lounge while we talked, drinking endless cups of tea. He told me the background to his marriage and his business failings because he said he wanted me to know the truth from the beginning. I was struck by this transparency in a relationship – I wasn't used to it. He had a strong feminine side that I found very attractive. He saved wrapping paper and ribbon, as I did, to use again. He had a drawer of greetings cards, so he

always had an appropriate one to send, as did I. He loved cooking, as did I. And he was a great companion.

We both had two daughters who were about the same age so there seemed to be lots of synchronicity at play.

By the time we had started dating he was living in his own flat. He knew about my business and wanted to become a freelance trainer for my consulting company, Domino. He had run equality training sessions before. He attended a couple of training sessions I did for new trainers and observed me doing a couple of sessions. I observed him a couple of times. He was great in the classroom and was able to relate to people of all ages and backgrounds. In some ways, it was an advantage having an older white man doing equality training as he could challenge the participants, who were often older white men like himself, in a way that would have been more difficult for a woman or younger guy to do.

The first time we had sex it wasn't great. I assumed this was because I had been used to great sex with Martin. I assumed it would probably get better with David. It didn't. And I wasn't in love with him. One would have thought that I would have learned my lesson after not being in love with Martin, yet here I was again. To be fair, I don't think David was in love with me either and if he was, he never told me. But it was so easy being with him. He was a great companion. I had been traumatised by the last few painful years of my marriage and the marriage break-up and I needed respite from the tension and exhaustion of it all. I didn't have the energy for high passion and just valued kindness and fun much more. Friends said that we would have a steep learning curve finding out about each other.

"No, there will be no rows or tension or 'having to work things out' in this relationship. It will be easy and fun and the minute it stops being that, I'm out," I would tell them. David felt the same.

I think he saw me as his route back into work and, like me, he was recovering from a difficult marriage break up. Neither of us wanted to get married again. I had always said I would only get married once in my life and I had married Martin. Having stood at an altar and made vows which

included ‘til death us do part’ there was no way I could stand at another altar and say that again.

My marriage broke up so, in all honesty, I couldn’t promise someone else that this time it would be forever.

How could I ever be sure?

David was born north of Donegal in northwest Ireland. His father had died when he was a baby and he and his brother were raised in Scotland by his mother, returning to Ireland every summer for holidays. Within a year of our meeting, David was spending most of his time at my house in Loughborough. He didn’t really feel at home there, or in England, in fact. He had always had a hankering to go back to Ireland, so when he suggested we get a holiday home there, I was happy to look. It would be a chance to build a home together. I had no connection with Ireland and no affinity to the place. I had flown in and out for work, never once thinking that I would love to go back there. There had been a lot of Irish girls at the college I had been to but I had never been close enough to any of them to be invited back home with them.

We took a holiday in Ireland to look round. We travelled south east and looked at Wexford and Waterford, then down to Kinsale, which was a quaint place on the water with boats rocking in the harbour and tiny streets with brightly painted houses. Then we moved west to the Ring of Kerry, then up into County Clare. In every place I looked I only asked myself one question, “Is this where I want to wake up?” I actually meant literally, *Did I want to get up in the morning and look out of the window and be glad that I had a second home here?* My more enlightened friends attributed far more meaning to my question than I did!

Finally, we drove into Galway, then west out of the city into the Connemara region. As we drove I felt something change.

“Oh my God, can you feel the energy coming up through the car?” I said to David.

There was a wildness and beauty about Connemara that I hadn’t seen anywhere else: majestic mountains; water everywhere you looked;

ancient huge grey stones rising up out of the bogland. It wasn't pretty but it was stunning.

We knew it would be Connemara where we would look for a house.

We thought we wanted an old Irish cottage. We definitely didn't want a new house. When we returned to the UK we researched online and contacted an estate agent (they're called 'auctioneers' in Ireland). He arranged some viewings for us, so we flew over for the weekend. Michael O'Toole stayed with us the whole day – unheard of in England. He took us to some old Irish cottages which were hugely disappointing. They were all dark and small and not insulated. I became despondent.

Then Michael said, "Well, we have time before our next viewing so why I don't take you to see this new development first?"

"No. We definitely don't want a new house."

"He's only building a few and it's on the way to where we are going so we might as well take a look," he said.

We followed him from Oughterard, then turned off the beaten track. The land seemed flat and uninteresting. There was nothing here: very few houses; hardly any trees; no towns or villages; no people.

"We are going to the ends of the earth," I said to David. "Where *is* he taking us?"

Finally, we turned up a little track on a slight rise and through an opening where one solitary half-built house stood. But, as we got out of our car, I caught my breath. Wherever I looked, I could see the sea. The sun was shining and the tide was in and the water was so blue and sparkling. The mountain range towered over the sea to one side. There was nothing to block the view on each side of the peninsula.

On the one side, your gaze stopped at the mountains, which would comfort me in the future with their majestic presence.

On the other side you would see an expanse of sea in front of the end of the mountain range. I would come to love this view in the evening before I

went to bed – black water shimmering with white streaks in the moonlight; twinkling lights from a village way across the water; absolute silence.

We stepped into the half-built house and saw that it had a very large lounge with a tiled floor. The whole house would be fully tiled downstairs with underfloor heating. There was no upstairs built yet but the floors upstairs would be hardwood. There was a huge open fireplace set into a stone wall and two windows on each wall with a stunning view from every window. It would have three bedrooms and three bathrooms. Suddenly, a new house didn't seem such a bad idea. Michael said we could meet the builder the day after, so we agreed to return. We went back to Oughterard for the night, already excited. I phoned an engineer friend to find out what we should ask the builder. He gave me three A4 pages of questions, most of which I didn't understand.

The next day was also a beautiful sunny day. We arrived at the site and the builder, Paraic Conneely, arrived. He was stocky, with a cap on his head. He was puffing on his pipe and every now and again as a thought occurred to him, he would pull on his cap and puff away. He had brought the plans to show us and the positions of the nine houses he would build. He would only build five in the end. He answered all my questions while I scribbled away, telling me when he didn't know the answer and promising he would get back to us. He always did. We asked him which would be the best position for a house, which would he have if he was going to live here. He walked us down to the end of the plot.

"Here," he said. "If you have a house there you won't see any other house unless you're driving in and out." Then he said, "Would you like to come home and meet my wife and family?"

I could not imagine anywhere in England where you would view a house then be invited back to the builder's own house.

Paraic and Brid and their family lived in the next house down the lane in a small stone cottage. Brid put on the kettle and got out the brown bread and jam and scones. This was my first introduction to the warm hospitality that is offered in every Irish home. We chatted and asked them where the nearest beach was so we could go and see it. Brid remembers this meeting

well. I was wearing a long lilac knitted coat I had bought in Ireland, together with a long lilac scarf. And I was still in my purple hair phase, so everything about me was purple or lilac.

After we had left, Brid said to Paraic, “Well, they seem very nice. I don’t know about him, but she will never come and live back there.”

How wrong she was!

We decided on the way to the beach that we would buy one of his houses. We sat outside with a coffee and phoned our daughters to tell them. Then we phoned Paraic. The house was built over the next year and, as Paraic got to know us, he knew what to suggest that would be to our taste. There was great excitement the day we took possession of the house. It was June 2002. Brid and Paraic saw the removal van trundling up the narrow lane. The house was spotless. Brid had spent hours getting all the labels off the baths and sinks and toilets and cleaning the whole house. Everywhere was gleaming. There was a fire in the grate and they had brought a kettle to boil for tea.

As Paraic opened the front door to us, he said, “Welcome home.”

It brought tears to my eyes. And home it became.

One year later we bought another of his houses to rent out. We were living between England and Ireland, which proved to be troublesome, trying to remember what we had left where. I found I was loving being in Ireland. So, in February 2004, David and I relocated completely to Ireland to start a new life here.

Given that I thought I had no resonance with Ireland, I was very much at home here from the beginning. Rosmuc is a tiny place, typical of rural Ireland. The centre of activity is the local Post Office, which sold everything from groceries to paint to baths. Two pubs, two churches and a community centre completed the village amenities. Our little complex of five houses (still referred to as ‘the site’) was on the tip of a peninsula, which is why I could see the sea from all sides. The nearest supermarket was a 45-minute drive from me and Galway city was an hour away. I soon got used to thinking of Galway as ‘local’. And given that it was such a remote area, the

services were excellent. The doctor's surgery was five minutes down the lane and there was a wait of only a day or two for appointments. The internet service was provided through a radio mast and reception was excellent. Electricians and plumbers are local guys and everyone knows everyone!

Rosmuc is in one of the Irish speaking parts of Ireland called the Gaeltacht. Everyone round here speaks Irish but, luckily for me, they speak English as well. The schools in the Gaeltacht teach in Irish and you get more marks in the examination system if you do your exams in Irish (or 'through' Irish, as they say here). You need to have Irish to work in the government or in the media.

We became very friendly with Paraic and Brid, born and bred in Rosmuc and extremely well thought of by the whole community. I know that David and I were accepted much more quickly by the locals because we had been so easily accepted by Brid and Paraic.

Most people in Connemara have open door policies. Brid is a great example of this. Any number of people can drop in during the day and evening. There is always a welcome for them and always food. I, on the other hand, wouldn't dream of calling at someone's house uninvited and expecting to stay for hours. I don't even like it if people phone me if it hasn't been pre-arranged!

Clearly, I'll never be properly Irish, even though I became an Irish citizen in 2018.

But now my permanent home is here. I pay my taxes here. And I can't imagine living anywhere else.

David and I parted in 2007. We had had a commitment ceremony in 2003, but it was a commitment to 'the dance' – the dance we are doing together until the dance is done. And the dance is done when one person says it is and then the other will bow and say, 'Thank you for the dance.' Now I see our seven-year relationship very much as if we had created a huge box in a field and we each stepped into it and crouched in a corner. We both needed to recover from our respective marriages, so we sat in opposite corners and smiled and waved at one another and every now and

again one of us would say, “Would you like a cup of tea?” It was peaceful. It was calm. It was stress-free. Then there came a day when I wanted to stretch my legs, so I stood up. I realised there was land outside of the box. I could step out of the box. I didn’t want to be in there any longer. David realised the same thing at about the same time. We decided to part but neither of us wanted to leave the area, so we laughed and said, “Ah, that’s the real reason we bought two houses!” I asked Paraic to extend the rented house to give me a huge office and a huge kitchen and I moved next door. David and I lived as neighbours for a few years and then he moved to another part of Galway.

I’m still here. I look out every day at the wild, majestic, beautiful landscape. I’m surrounded by the energy of the land. I don’t even need to be out walking in it. I am enveloped in it the whole time.

The presence of the land has entered me and fused with my soul. I see God everywhere I look.

The home where I was raised was a place of warmth and security. A place to go back to and recharge. A safe haven. ‘Home’ in Ireland is these things too but now in a much larger landscape somehow, even though Ireland is much smaller than England. My identity seems embedded in this landscape now and it contains who I am and who I want to be.

Every time I look out of the window, the scene has changed. Maybe the sky has changed colour, changing the hue of the sea. Sometimes the tide is out and strips of black rocks lie just above the water line. Or the tide is in and there is just a sheet of water, still and blue. At sunset, the sky can be streaked with different shades of yellow and orange. Another day it might be all crimsons and pinks. Beauty everywhere you look. When I first came here there was always a wind, a still day was worth a comment. But the weather patterns are changing. Now there are many calm days and fewer winds that whistle round the house. There is not endless rain as people think, but when it comes, it can bring the mist which slowly descends over the mountain tops and everywhere becomes white. When that happens, I feel like I am sitting inside a huge ball of cotton wool. Then,

ten minutes later, I look out of the window and the mountains are clear, the sun is out and the sky is blue. Always changing and always beautiful.

I was never one for going out for a walk. “You all go, I’ll have the kettle on when you get back,” I would say to friends. Yet here, I can go to my favourite beach with sand and rocks stretching round the headland, with cows looking over the fence in the field onto the beach, with friendly dogs that want to come with you as you walk, with a huge grassy mound on the rocks which rise out of the sea. I love to walk across the beach when the tide is out, round the rocks and the rock pools and climb up to the top of that grassy hump.

From there I can see the sea in every direction – and the sand and the grass and feel the wind blowing my hair.

I feel peaceful and powerful at the same time. A friend of mine who knew my resistance to walks in the UK walked with me when she was visiting. We were wrapped up standing on the grassy mound and she said, “What are you doing here? What’s happened to you?”

I couldn’t really answer.

I see Brid regularly. She has become a close friend and I know that the quality of my life would be affected if she wasn’t around. But I have also learned the glory of solitude and silence. Both of these things have been key in developing a sense of my spiritual individuality. My life is not lonely or empty but full of intimacy and shelter. My trust in my inner belonging has lessened my outer belonging and taken away neediness. Solitude shows me the dazzle and the darkness, which are both part of me and I fear neither of them. Soul connection requires space and time and silence and solitude. All these things I find in Connemara.

On a practical level, I can be entirely selfish. I think I have become unliveable-with. I get up when I like, I go to bed when I like. I eat what I like, I watch films that I like. I don’t have any radio or TV or music on during the day. I can go three days without leaving the house and without speaking to anyone and I am still happy.

I was 58 years old before I lived alone. Everyone told me I would hate it: I loved company too much; where I lived was too remote; I was too extroverted; I would be *so* lonely. In fact, I have loved every minute of it and can't imagine I will ever live with anyone again or in any other place.

Ireland called me and I came home.