

# A road travelled

*by Kay Conroy*



There was a time, and it was a long time ago, when those who were lost, without meaning, those searching for a way forward emotionally and psychologically, outside medication and medical assessment, had nowhere to go professionally, or no one objective to speak to.

There was a time when I was young and was not so interested in the area of psychotherapy and counselling.

There was a time when I didn't know what it was or how it could move emotional mountains.

There was of course a time, and it became my time, for my beginning, in this world of human opening up.

One evening when I was eighteen, I saw an advertisement in a magazine: Come see the world in the Q.A's (The Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nurse Corps). And I did. My journey to train as nurse began in Surrey. I learned how to march, salute, spit and polish my shoes, lay out and wear my uniforms, parade on all occasions, and most importantly train as a nurse. I travelled the world. Scotland to Singapore. Singapore to the jungles of Northern Malaya. Across the Far East, on to Saudi Arabia and finally back to London.

Some years later, back in London, as a well-trained and travelled nurse, I was sitting in my office in the top of a building I had leased, which I was running as a nursing home for the elderly. I had also opened a private nursing for terminally ill patients, and I was busy administering, running and being matron to both of the homes.

I was looking out the window. I remember the season. It was autumn. The leaves were falling, and so too was my personal sense of meaning and purpose. I felt redundant. It was an extraordinary feeling, considering my work, my team, my nursing care and function. All was going so well. Everybody was doing their job so well. What was the real need for me? Or my guidance? Or my opinion? In what way was I really necessary?

On that November day watching the London rain beat on the office window I met myself. That was a meeting with a crisis of meaning. But it was a spiritual meeting with myself. A meeting that resulted in a renewed search to at least get to know myself.

## **Know yourself before you travel and guide another**

Sometime later I went to a psychosynthesis workshop at the Institute of Psychosynthesis in London and thus began my training and journey in psychotherapy. A world opened for me. A world which for me, at that time, was untapped, but which offered huge new light. It was personally momentous.

Suddenly, the person or self I thought I had known was not the person I was at all. There was shock and there was joy. How exciting to be getting to know somebody new. Myself. And what to do with that new somebody? Carry on.

I had read a lot about Dr Elizabeth Kübler-Ross around death and dying due to my initial and continuing work with the elderly and the terminally ill. Kübler-Ross came to London. I went to her workshop. I went with my nursing background and with my new knowledge of self through psychosynthesis and psychotherapy. I listened with an eager ear. I listened with a new vision and a renewed mind. I can use the word 'inspire' with ease as that is what I took away from the workshop. Inspiration.

I said to Kübler-Ross 'You must take your work to Ireland'.

She said 'There is an Irish woman here who thinks the same. You must meet her.'

That person was Mary Paula Walsh.

I moved to Dublin in 1982 and with Mary Paula Walsh we founded a Bereavement and Cancer Support Centre, which would help to train nurses and social workers and was to be a supportive centre for those working within the health services. As a counselling centre we also supported people in the early stages of bereavement, cancer, and terminal illness. There was a dual aspect to all our work our training and our therapy.

Within psychotherapy in those early days many counsellors were practising and supporting people in need, but there was no validating body in existence. A group came together. A group from all works and walks of life. But all from the world of social work, medicine, education, nursing, and teaching. They were the early visionaries of IAHIP. Their purpose was to ensure that high standards of training needed to be sought, recognised, and validated in Ireland. Thus, IAHIP as a professional membership organisation for psychotherapists was founded. 30 years later IAHIP still holds the vision, the quality, and the national and European standards, ensuring that training of potential psychotherapists always remains professional. All IAHIP's committees are staffed by volunteers from our membership. This is an educational and social achievement and deserves great praise and pride from us all.

Back to my continuing journey in the world of self-knowledge, growth and development. One of the greatest influences on that development road was Mary Paula Walsh. Mary Paula Walsh was a social worker. With the mind and the walk of a giant. She was artistic and articulate with a deep patriotism for all that was Irish. Her family had been rooted in history, arts and activism. She was a seeker of the meaning of life. That is where she placed all that she did. She shared all those qualities with me personally and brought them to her work with clients and her students in training. In one way it was a sacred meeting at that workshop in London. In another she became a life-long friend and partner.

She shared with me the vision that had begun with Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. She understood what service to others really meant. She knew that was where you would find the best in yourself. She filled in the space that had caused my emotional redundancy at the window of my office in London. Together we had an affinity. To go forward with our personal history, our knowledge, and our experience and with our belief in the idea of human needs, human searches, human guidance and always through psychotherapy, the possibility of human healing. That was the sole companionship we shared. That experience, our empathy and our energy came together in our founding of Turning Point in 1982.

When we opened Turning Point it was not just for clinical practice. We brought Kübler-Ross to Ireland

and there were not enough seats in the Mansion House. We trained as facilitators to work with her in prisons in the UK, USA and in Ireland. We developed residential workshops for AIDS at a time when it was very controversial. We ran men's workshops. We ran residential workshops for women who had been abused and we ran workshops for bereavement. The demand for our services grew. And the demand for training and our courses grew even more.

After 38 years of Turning Point's journey from a group around a table in our living room, seeing and feeling the need for something to be done to service and contribute to the needs of human beings, Turning Point has grown into a respected national and international training college for psychotherapists. Its MSc in Counselling and Psychotherapy is validated by UCC. UCC and Turning Point are a unique collaboration. It combines what UCC stands for as a university through the disciplines of knowledge, learning and understanding with Turning Point's focus on the education of emotions, knowledge of self and human balance, through the study of counselling and psychotherapy. This ensures highly validated and academically educated and clinically trained professional graduates who then go on to sustain the lives of others whom they counsel. The MSc is also validated by IAHIP. Their standards and the standards of UCC parallel each other. Indeed, the standards set by IAHIP greatly contributed to the endorsement and the validation of Turning Point's MSc by UCC and continues to do so.

If I was asked 'and what of your journey now?' my answer would result in many, many questions. Has technology become our God? Are we zoomed beyond recognition? Is the very core of psychotherapeutic counselling which is the relationship between two human beings being eroded to a camera and an email? Is my sense of the redundancy felt at my window in London here again but this time in another form; technical?

My own experience is that we are now more alone than ever. The government recently commissioned a million-euro study on loneliness. I wonder if there are any psychotherapists involved in this piece of research. I hope so. I see loneliness daily in my small café. I have met it in myself as we all faced Covid. If I was being acute, I could tell the Government exactly what the study will say. Human beings need human beings. Lots of them. Plugging something in won't help you to become. Voice, your voice is tantamount to expressing who you are. If technology and going on, and being on, and learning online is the future, looking out the window from my desk seems a pretty good option, despite the weather. I'll end with a translation by Paul Muldoon of a Medieval Poem:

*Each day brings the same three talking points.  
The first is knowing I'll soon depart.  
The second not knowing when I'll start.  
The third (the cause of my greatest heartache)  
Not knowing which route I'll take.*



I would not change one step on the route I took. My road travelled has taught me to find, and to open, and to honour the personal treasure chest that we all hold within us.

### Reference

Anonymous, Muldoon, P., Trans. (n.d.) *Each day brings the same three talking points* <https://www.pressreader.com/ireland/the-irish-mail-on-sunday/20220904/284610311398991>