

## Towards a Fulfilled Life

Climbing the stairs to reach Kathy's study I hear the music playing. Classical, vocal, serene, it seems to set the tone for our conversation. I later learned that music is one of the constants in Kathy's life, one of the ways that she keeps her priorities straight, maintains her connection to the sublime. Pretty philosophical stuff for a communication skills trainer, but Kathy, who studied philosophy at college, offers a lot more than just a collection of techniques. All of her work, from individual coaching to workshops for corporate clients, is at the most basic level about having a more fulfilled life through improved communication and a deeper self-awareness. Perhaps not surprisingly, Kathy's work has its basis in her own experience, drawn from, and shaped by, her response to circumstance, personal crisis and the many challenges she's taken on.

Even as a child, Kathy was interested in the big picture, trying to fit her experience into some sort of philosophical framework. College was just the next step on the path. 'I took a course, I think my second semester at Yale, on death, which is actually a big theme for me, and the reason why I studied philosophy. When I was 11 my brother was in Vietnam, and the possibility of his death was ever present in our lives, and so I thought a lot about it. Basically, I started philosophizing then. I thought that there has to be a meaning, a purpose to our lives, even if maybe the meaning happens mostly for other people, because of our death. So my own spirituality started developing because I was trying to make sense of the possibility of my brother's death.'

Her other big theme in college was the Sublime, which also had its basis in an unforgettable childhood experience. 'One of the very, very first things, I have to go back a little bit, that was a very important influence in my life, was a two week backpacking trip I took when I was 13. It was a kind of spiritual birth. The experience of being with other girls, and having these really inspiring leaders...we discovered our strength. That we could carry packs, we could walk 10, 12 miles a day, we could sleep out and be self-sufficient. It was great. I also experienced a sense of being really, tangibly, connected to the earth, the universe. The last night we were each asked to say something about the experience. I remember that I talked about what I'd learned; how everything is interconnected, how we're a part of the earth, how we can draw strength from that sense of belonging. That's something that has always stayed with me. Later, at Yale, I took a course called 'Wilderness and the American Mind'. For my class project I went back to the same area and hiked a piece of the Appalachian Trail, on my own, for 3 days in the fall, and kept a diary of the trip. It was great to be able to do that. I believe that process, of recognizing that you are actually a small part of something big, is very important for having a fulfilled life. That's a prejudice of mine...I'm pretty convinced of that though.'

At the same time, Kathy was grappling with the demon perfectionism. 'It's one of the main themes in my life. I'm convinced there's a gene for perfectionism. I'm also convinced perfectionism is the root of probably all of our addictions. It's right up there on my bookshelf...[Addiction to Perfection](#), right in between [Timeless Healing](#) and [The Winning Trainer](#)' she laughed, 'which says a lot...there you go, you've got me in a nutshell! I don't agree with everything in the book, but the principle that perfectionism is an addiction, that it has a structure of addiction, that there's a huge gap that you're compelled to fill with something else, that I do agree with.'

Perfectionism drives you away from other people. You hate your own imperfections so much, you certainly don't want to do anything that would reveal them, deliberately, to other people. So you end up isolating yourself. And there's a very *strong, direct* link between a sense of social isolation and loneliness, and mortality of every type. Heart disease, cancer, accidents are exponentially higher among people who feel isolated and lonely. It's even been shown that the ability to express your feelings openly to another person can *reverse* heart disease. Love is one of the keys to overcoming perfectionism. It's something that I've worked on myself, and now in my courses, even with business people, I'm constantly urging them to open their hearts to other people, to be direct, to be open. Procrastination is also linked to perfectionism. Because you want it to be perfect, and you *know*, somewhere in your deepest self, that it can't be perfect - because you're not perfect - so why start? That haunted me throughout my school years. Even at 11 or 12 I knew I was a perfectionist, and I knew it was a problem. I can remember thinking *things that are perfect are not alive*. I recognized that this desire for perfection was a life denying desire. When I really worked on my perfectionism, though, was during my psychology training. The way that I worked on it was to cultivate self-nurturing and self-love, which is a huge part of my work with other people now. The theme of taking care of your needs is there, whether it's presentation skills training or adapting to a foreign culture or interpersonal effectiveness.

One of Kathy's most notable characteristics is her determination, which has taken her a long way from the small town of Middletown, Connecticut, where she was born and raised. 'It's an old mill town, very working class, very depressed, very *boring*. I go back to visit because my mother lives there, but I would *never* want to live in Middletown, it would be like a curse to have to live there. I would have liked to go further away when I went to college, but I visited Yale, and it was just great. I loved it. So even though New Haven is an even worse pit than Middletown, I went to Yale.

Working hard to better her circumstances is a theme in her life. The first summer job I ever had was working in the tobacco fields in the Connecticut River valley. It was farm labor. They would take underage workers, mostly black girls from the local ghetto, and white migrant girls from the Carolinas who came up to do the work in the sheds. The first days, coming home, when I would close my eyes all I'd see would be rows of tobacco under the white tents. It's very sticky work. I'd get all sticky...my hands, my clothes, and then I'd get covered with dirt. So I'd come home, exhausted, sticky, filthy, get in the shower fully clothed, crying, just trying to get clean again - that was every day for the first week - and my parents would say 'You don't have to go, you can quit', but I knew I wanted to go to summer school the following summer, and I had to pay for it myself. Quitting was never an option. Partly on principle, and partly because I didn't want what I knew would be the consequence of that.

I was a financial aid student... I'm still paying off those loans! I also had a job in the dining halls. In my second year the head of the dining halls recommended me for a summer job selling books door-to-door 80 hours a week. I did that for 5 summers. The first summer I went to Lawton, Oklahoma. It was incredible. Every summer was an incredible experience but the first summer was the most incredible, because it takes guts, it takes pure *guts*. I remember being dropped off on a street corner in Lawton, Oklahoma around 5 o'clock on a Saturday evening, with my suitcase and my 2 roommates. And we had to find a place to live. First of all we had to find a place to stay *that night*, preferably one we didn't have to pay for. So we started calling ministers,

asking if there was, maybe, an elderly widow in the congregation who might have an extra room to rent for the summer. There were moments of doubt, and fears, but I never entertained the thought of quitting, I never considered going back to Middletown. It was the school of life. I learned so much; about motivation, my own motivation, other people's motivations, how to talk to people, how to ask questions, how to establish rapport, about negotiating, problem solving, stress management. And it was the days, and occasionally an entire *week*, without selling that builds character', she added with a rueful laugh. 'It's a really great learning experience. I wouldn't want to have missed it.'

After her first summer selling books, Kathy took a leave of absence from Yale and used her earnings to finance a year of study and travel in Europe. After 4 months in Germany learning German at a Goethe Institute, she started travelling, and the first place she went was Switzerland. 'I'd brought cross-country skis, along with about 90 lbs of luggage, and at that time the only place you could cross-country ski in central Europe was Davos. So I went there, intending to stay for 3 days, and ended up staying most of 3 weeks. In the 3rd week I met Werner and fell in love with him. It was very fateful. I'd already planned to go back and sell books again the next summer, but now I had the extra motivation to make sure I earned enough money, again, for a plane ticket to go and visit in the spring break. And I did that every year, then, for the rest of my time at Yale.'

When Kathy graduated from Yale she went to work as a regional sales manager for the company she'd worked for as a door-to-door salesperson. 'I knew I didn't want to go to graduate school, I knew academia was not it for me. So I continued with Southwestern, thinking I am good at this. They wanted me to make a career with their company, but in fact, that wasn't it. This was a time in my life when I really wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I was staying with this company, even though it was becoming clear that it was not intellectually satisfying enough, especially when I no longer had Yale as a counter-balance. I went into a kind of waiting mode. Then one day I got a call from a marketing executive in NY who wanted to hire a woman, with an Ivy League education, who had been successful at door-to-door selling! (incredulous laugh) The company was Tampax Inc. I went for the interview and got the job. It was what would have been an entry-level MBA position. I learned a lot...and I still have a lifetime supply of Tampax!, though by the time I left I really had a sense that I didn't belong there, that I didn't belong in the corporate world. That year in NY I got an apartment that was big enough for two people, and I was hoping that Werner would come and live with me. And he did come and visit, but it was just not what he wanted. He was happy with his job, he was happy living in Basel, and I was not happy with my job, and I was not happy living in NY as a single woman...well, I was living in Queens, which was even worse. At that point Werner asked me if I'd consider coming to live in Basel, trying it out, see if it works...and I said yes.

And so I came over here, in 1982, and just plunged into being a housewife, renovating our apartment, learning Swiss German. I ended up with a really bad case of culture shock. I'd tried to acclimate too fast, I'd cut myself *too* much off from my own culture, I'd given up too much of my identity all at once...my language, my family, my job, my identity as a career woman. I also had very unrealistic expectations about Switzerland. I extrapolated from Werner, 'Here's the most wonderful person in the whole universe, he comes from Switzerland, therefore everything there will be wonderful!' The other mistake I made was that I thought I knew what Switzerland was like because I'd been here several times, but it is a very different experience to

be here as a visitor than to live here as a foreigner, and that caught me by surprise. So I put all my eggs in the language basket. I thought, OK, I don't feel very at home here, but as soon as I can speak dialect it will be OK. Within a year I could speak fluent Swiss German, but it didn't change my sense of well being. That's when I went into a real crisis and finally realized that I was not going to be able to get out of this on my own. I'd been raised to be extremely averse to psychotherapy, I was very self-reliant, and it was very hard for me to go for help. But I recognized that if I didn't do something soon it might be taken out of my hands.' Kathy found an English-speaking therapist and started going for therapy. 'I went from being totally averse to being...I'm a *complete* fan of good psychotherapy. Good therapy is a great gift, a great opportunity for self-discovery and self-development. If I learned about my dependence on the earth when I was 13, I learned about the possibility of being dependent on other people when I came to Switzerland.

When I finished my individual therapy, about 3 years later, I said to this woman, who's an MD, I think this has been a wonderful experience for me, and something I'd like to pass on, but I'm not going to go to med school. She suggested I check out an applied psychology program in Psychosynthesis, offered in Basel. Psychosynthesis is a transpersonal model of psychology. To put it into real English, it's a *spiritual* psychology, which was very appealing to me. It's also based on a model of health; nothing is *broken*. In psychosynthesis the work with the client is much more about their vision of who they want to be, what they want to become, and then looking at what's hindering them and integrating those parts of themselves. In my work, if there's a model I draw from, it's that one, and if there are tools that I use, it's mostly tools that I learned during the 4 years I trained as a psychosynthesis guide. It's the foundation of what I do. Psychosynthesis launched me more consciously on my path of self-development, and helped me to tie together all the things that had come before. It enabled me to become whole. So in that sense it was very healing.

Soon after I started Psychosynthesis training I started to think about what I was going to do. Fairly early on in the training we talk about what we want to contribute to society, and I knew I wanted to work with expatriates, to return the gift of having been rescued from culture shock. So that's my community service, the Surviving and Thriving in a Foreign Culture workshop that I offer.

While Kathy was completing her Psychosynthesis training she went to work for Hoffmann-La Roche as Head of Language Training. She'd been teaching English in a language school since shortly after coming to Basel, so she had a lot of experience and felt well qualified for the position. Kathy stayed at Roche for 2 and a half years. In addition to modernizing and expanding the language program, she piloted courses in communication skills, report writing and presentation skills. It was a great opportunity to start putting some of what she'd learned into practice and to find out about the training needs of corporate business people.

In 1990 she left Roche and started her own business, Communication Skills Training and Consulting. Though most of Kathy's work is with corporate clients, she also does individual personal growth counseling, runs public workshops, and takes on the occasional English student. Her corporate work ranges from presentation skills training, meeting skills and writing skills to conflict resolution, intercultural communication, stress management and team building. All of Kathy's courses are built around the same core themes. 'My work is from the inside out. A key word in all of my training is responsibility, that you take responsibility for your own life, you make your own choices, and that you're on your own path. It's your own meaning, that's the only

one that counts in the end. I'm not supporting anarchy, but I think for people to stay on a path of self development they need to find out what their own values are, what their own motivations are. Even though I offer a lot of different types of training, it's still about the same things. The themes are the same. Love, loving yourself, which to me is the door to being able to have a really fulfilled life, to recognize the joy and wonder, the delight of being alive. To live that, to be present. Being consciously grateful. Sounds like a cliché, but that really is the stuff I care about it. I try to live it; I *do* live it, that's my path. That's what I do.