

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Catherine Kelly has worked as a geography academic and wellbeing practitioner for many years. She has taught in several universities during the course of her career, including the University of Greenwich, University of Brighton, Sussex University and the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology. She has a second degree in stress management, and professional diplomas in mindfulness training.

Today, she is the director of CoreJourneys and ChillSquad, her wellbeing organisations, and of WildBlue School, Brighton, a coastal education and wellbeing project. Dr Kelly is also a board member of the UNESCO Biosphere (Brighton Hove Lewes Downs partnership), which promotes all aspects of sustainable development, learning and living. She is passionate about the sea, learning, nature and helping both adults and children to enjoy, explore and relax outdoors in all types of bluespace. She lives in Brighton and is the mother of two adventurous young boys.

## **Copyright**

A Trigger Book Published by Welbeck Balance An imprint of Welbeck Publishing Group 20 Mortimer Street London W1T 3JW First published by Welbeck Balance in 2021 Copyright © Catherine Kelly, 2021 Catherine Kelly has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the Author of this work. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronically, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owners and the publishers. A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library ISBN Trade Paperback – 9781789562842 Typeset by Lapiz Digital Services Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CRO 4YY 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

### **Note/Disclaimer**

Welbeck Balance encourages diversity and different viewpoints. However, all views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in this book are the author's own and are not necessarily representative of Welbeck Publishing Group as an organisation. All material in this book is set out in good faith for general guidance; no liability can be accepted for loss or expense incurred in following the information given. In particular, this book is not intended to replace expert medical or psychiatric advice. It is intended for informational purposes only and for your own personal use and guidance. It is not intended to diagnose, treat or act as a substitute for professional medical advice. The author is not a medical practitioner nor a counsellor, and professional advice should be sought if desired before embarking on any health-related programme.

[www.welbeckpublishing.com](http://www.welbeckpublishing.com)

## Chapter 1:

When my 47-year-old mother died suddenly, my world went into freefall. The brain haemorrhage that killed her one July morning came from nowhere, but has become the marker point of 'before and after' in my life. Even

as I recall what happened, I find myself wanting to use phrases like 'out of the blue', 'ripple effects' and 'lines in the sand', as if somehow these watery metaphors are the ways of explaining things that resonate most. In short, watery bluespace has saved me and kept me sane since that moment in life when things fell apart.

I've talked with many people over the years who have felt the same way, for a whole range of reasons. Maybe that's what has drawn you to pick up this book? As society has become more broken with stress and mental health issues, researchers are now investigating new ways of looking to nature to help us heal ourselves. The idea of how water calms us is called 'Blue Mind', based on the work of Wallace J. Nichols. Bluespace refers to all kinds of water: oceans, seas, lakes, ponds and rivers. Research is increasingly showing how these spaces can help us to feel better, physically and psychologically. You may already feel this, without necessarily knowing why.

The way that water helped me wasn't instant or immediate. At first, practical matters had to be dealt with. As a 25-year-old, with a newly completed PhD in geography, I was only a year into my first lecturing job at a London university. I loved it: working in the leafy part of London, near the river, but close enough to hop into the city action if I wanted to; lots of great colleagues of a similar age, and plenty of wise owls from whom

to get good advice and

3

mentorship. We had a lot of fun, mostly carefree, single and making our way in our new careers.

And then, bang.

I had spoken to her the night before it happened. 'How are you, Ma?' I'd asked. 'Isn't it awful hot? I can't breathe in London, there's no air here.' The summer of 1995 was one of the hottest in years. Usually, my family home in the Irish hills of remote rural Wicklow would be more bearable than any city, but my mother was struggling too.

'I've got a splitting headache the last two days,' she said – unusual as she was not one for complaining, ever.

'Probably the heat,' we both agreed, and moved on to talk about other things.

The next morning, she was dead. Just like that. Forty- seven. Gone.

The flight back from Heathrow to Dublin was one of the hardest journeys I've ever taken. I got the news on a payphone in the departures lounge of the airport. 'Don't bother rushing,' my sister said. 'She's dead.' I will never forget those words.

I missed my first flight and was too upset to speak, for fear of falling apart, to insist they let me through. With nowhere to hide, I locked myself in a cubicle in the women's toilet, hands in my head, spinning with the enormity of this news... Denial, disbelief, but not grief, not yet – that came later. Just shock, I think. I was awakened from it by impatient banging on the

cubicle door: 'Are you going to be much longer in there?'

I composed myself, apologised, and went to sit in the small departure area, excruciatingly trying to hold it together. And so, I sat, for two more hours, on a plastic seat, facing strangers, trying to act like nothing had happened. I'm not sure why I did that, even now. The fear of falling utterly apart if I asked for help, maybe, but still having to make the long journey home. I've always had a secret envy

4 BLUE SPACES

of people who can burst into tears and get the immediate support they need. I don't know why I can't; I always thought it was the British who had the stiff upper lip, but maybe the Irish are as bad in their repression?

ireland: Fixing Things

What followed immediately after was a move from London, first to Dublin – to help piece back the broken parts of our family lives. My mother had set up her own nature-based crafts business on our smallholding in rural Wicklow. It

was a labour of love, helped by her early training as an occupational therapist, and her love of nature, instilled in the glens of Antrim where she grew up. The business was all 'her' – her own skills; her character; her wise, funny and smart way of being. Her small stone workshop, her coat on the back of the chair, a cold coffee cup beside her craft tools; the loss was too much to comprehend for a very long time. To try to carry on her business without her was unimaginable, and yet, there we were. My dad and particularly my youngest sister pulled together to try to patch things up as best they could, roping in some local help. But we were imbued with grief and trying to

negotiate the new, difficult family dynamic. And so, things stumbled on.

Less than a year after I returned to Dublin, 'the perfect job' appeared – like a gift from my mother or maybe the universe itself. A lectureship in heritage studies, in County Mayo, in the west of Ireland. It was a chance to set up a new programme from scratch – drawing together geography, history, archaeology, poetry, literature, folklore, ecology, earth sciences and more. I've never known a time like it, before or since. The subject matter of my new work was like an homage to my lost mother: it had everything in it that she (and I) loved.

WAtEry EnCoUntErS 5

— — ||  
|| — —  
And then, there was the sea.

When I first saw the job advertised, I immediately thought, 'I need to go there – I need to get the wind and the sea into my psyche, if I am ever to get through this.' My dear Aunt Mary uses a northern Irish phrase, 'to get your head shired' – it was that, and more.

I had never been to County Mayo before. It was a large, remote county, the next one up from popular and better-known Galway. It became my soul landscape. The place where I first really connected to the sea or ocean – the west of Ireland's Atlantic. The town of Westport is one of the most beautiful in Ireland. I felt lucky, and divinely directed, to land there. The small town had a harbour with an imposing backdrop – the beautiful peaked granite mountain of Croagh Patrick – and wonderful sandy beaches scattered along its surrounding windy coastal roads. I drank it all in.

Wild, rugged, peaceful, isolated – just nature, the sea, the

elements. I could see the seasons change there, and I walked by the sea every single day, usually twice a day. I got a gorgeous scruffy rescue dog called Holly – a cross between an old-fashioned teddy bear and a mini Chewbacca – and she and I just walked and walked. When I moved back to the UK some years later, I gave her to one of my mature students who had children, so that she could stay wild and free in Mayo. I remember sobbing as I drove away from his house, leaving my salty companion behind. (London, sadly, was no place for a sea-dog.)

In Westport, I let the Atlantic air and Ocean heal me. Not consciously; it just did somehow. And the pain of losing my mother eased. The water, the space, the colours, the salt, the wind, the cold sharpness of the sea – it roared, it blew, it shook me, and it calmed me.

A fatherly colleague at work once remarked, ‘Catherine, what is a fine young girl like yourself doing *stuck* out there in the back of beyond, on your own? Would you not go live in the town and have a bit of sense?’ It didn’t ever occur to

6 BLUE SPACES

— — ||  
|| — —  
me to be afraid, or to feel lonely. It was just what I needed at that time. The sea and nature were my company. Plus, I saw lots of people at work all day and had a good social circle – plenty of fabulous nights spent listening to traditional Irish music in Matt Molloy’s pub in Westport, chatting to tourists or meeting new friends. But my base level, my grounding spot, was my little house by the woods, a few minutes’

walk from the sea. I could breathe and be still; rebalance, replenish and be myself. An introvert who speaks for a living needs her silence to rebalance. I think this is true for many

people. When our working worlds force us to be social, nature, and the water especially, allows us to be quiet.

Alone, I could be broken in my grief without any witnesses. And so the water did its job; the Atlantic Ocean changing colour and mood, force and character, almost every day. It became my friend, my company, my solace, my playground to surf and swim in, to walk next to, to gaze upon, to bear my tears or lift my mood.

London: Moving On

Six years later, I began to get restless in the west of Ireland. Much as I loved the landscapes, the sea and my work, I felt that my healing and growth there were done, for now at least. That staying on for longer would be just more of the same, somehow. Not that the same was bad – quite

the opposite. But I was in my early thirties and wanted to diversify my career again, meet someone, maybe have children, keep travelling and see what else was out there. Having started my academic career in London, interrupted by a life-changing hiatus, it was time to climb back on board the boat of my ‘interrupted life’ in the UK and see where that took me. Although I’m not sure that any of us really has an interrupted life, just twists and turns that *are* actually our lives.

WAtEry EnCoUntErS 7

— — ||  
|| — —  
I began a new academic job in London. There was a moment soon after I moved, when I was sitting on the lawns of the Old Royal Naval College, watching an outdoor opera performance of Puccini, quaffing champagne and watching a yacht sail up the Thames next to me, when I thought, ‘Far from the wellies and the wild Atlantic you are now, Cath!’



And yet, there too was my water: the impressive campus building was right next to the River Thames... and so, it became a place of respite and reflection. A busy day's teaching was soothed by 15 minutes sitting next to her, watching the tidal waters rise and fall. How odd, I often thought, that a freshwater body can be so tidal, this far from the coast. I was intrigued by the colour of the water, muddy browns and greys. I think we are very lucky if our workplaces happen to be near water. Later in this book, I will talk about the specific benefits this can bring us in real wellbeing terms.

Despite leaving my west of Ireland job on 'career break' terms, i.e. with the option to go back, I ended up staying in England right to this day, even though that has not been a conscious decision. As time passed, it seemed harder to return, as if the growth I wanted and needed was not there anymore. The healing and calming had happened and now it was time to carry on – even though this was a huge, often recurring, inner conflict for me. There were days in London where I *missed* the west in my very bones – 'my ocean', the space, the wildness... the Irishness of it all, and a way of being that was easy, connected and very personal. All that London was not.

My academic work took a turn towards an interest in wellbeing – and a like-minded colleague and I began to conduct research on the subject of retreats in particular. Most of these featured water in some way. We wrote up what we did in academic journals and books, and to our own delight became well known in our field.

8 BLUE SPACES

-- ||  
|| --

My own interest in wellness was also personal, and blurred often into the spiritual (small 's') and psychological. I felt,

intuitively, that being in nature and by the water in Ireland had healed me hugely, and made me well. I still hadn't managed to put a name to this, but I wanted to learn more. It felt increasingly disingenuous to be an academic 'commentator' on wellbeing – from the safety of a university office and the expert status that is often bestowed upon such activities – without actually 'doing' wellbeing.

I had dabbled in lots of alternative therapies personally – from aromatherapy, yoga, coaching and tarot, to meditation and nature remedies. I found it all interesting, but the academic in me wanted to bring a soundness and veracity to my interests. My university allowed staff to take courses that were on offer within the institution as part of our own professional development, so I chose to do a BSc in stress management, part-time, over the next three years. Ironically, during the course of it, I was on maternity leave with my firstborn son (having met a nice Italian man on

a surfing trip!), moved house, and was pregnant with my second son.

Getting first-class honours in that degree while bringing up a toddler, working full-time, suffering three consecutive miscarriages in twelve months and then being pregnant during the final dissertation stage, was one of my biggest personal achievements. My natural sciences degree from Trinity College Dublin and my geography PhD were lovely, interesting things I had done while young and carefree. I imagine that for any of us who achieve things under extreme conditions, there is a sense of accomplishment that stays with us. We can reflect back on it and think, 'Wow, I did that!' mixed with, 'How on earth did I do that?' And so, there it was; I felt somehow that I could now dip my toe into the waters of being a wellbeing practitioner with some sort of proper self-permission and authority.

||    --    ||  
||    --    ||  
Sea-Callings Once More

One day, I was in a work meeting in London that was not going well. I felt unheard, underappreciated and taken for granted by the discussion at hand, and in that moment, it was all too much. My dad was undergoing cancer treatment at the time and the situation was not looking good. The gloss of London was beginning to wane, my wellbeing colleague had moved away, I missed home and things were less fun than they had been. In this meeting I hit a wall; I simply gathered my books, stood up and left the room. I *needed* to go – to escape – to the sea.

With that, I got on a train to Brighton, the nearest coastal place I could think of – and stayed there for three days. I found a hotel room, and bought a toothbrush, a swimsuit and some clothes to last me for a few days. Then I sat beside and swam in the sea during that impromptu retreat until I felt rebalanced.

The solitude and silence by the water felt familiar and safe, reminding me of my healing experience in Ireland. I didn't explain to anyone what had happened, or talk to my boss. Nobody asked anyway. I just needed to sort my head out without overt processing. It worked. The water calmed me. I had never been to Brighton before, but it became a place that would change my life hugely. Ah, Brighton.

Our second, beautiful boy was born on the thirteenth floor of Brighton hospital, while I looked at the sea views amidst the agony. I can't say the sea helped with that pain, but it was nice to glimpse it! The sea, of course, is what convinced me to move to Brighton, just as it had drawn me to the west of Ireland. It didn't make logistical sense for either my partner or me, work-

wise, but my soul did not want to raise my boys without water. Many people I've spoken to since I've lived here have said the same. The idea of a 'childhood by the sea' is something I've looked

10 BLUE SPACES

at in my academic research too, and it is a common family motivation: to live by, or to create family holiday memories by the sea.

Pushing my baby son along the seafront with the wind in my hair felt right. I had the sea again, and it was good. My now three-year-old first-born boy and I played with the pebbles on the beach for hours, throwing them in the water, piling them up and knocking them down. Life in the years that have followed has been a mixture of commuting, growing, school, friendships and the sea – a constant everyday backdrop to it all. Our holidays are always to places where we can surf or snorkel – in Cornwall, Devon, Portugal, Lanzarote or Greece – and our children have grown to love the water and waves as much as I do.

My academic work in recent years has turned to a quest to understand this relationship between nature and wellbeing. And in particular, this relationship between the sea and wellbeing. While working at a local university temporarily, I was lucky enough to meet the late Martin Jordan, an ecotherapist (i.e. a psychotherapist with a speciality in nature and healing) who was publishing in this newly emerging field.

When I heard him give a talk one evening, he described how, as a child, nature had been his *companion* while things at home were hard; and this resonated strongly with my own Irish childhood. As I read more about nature connections, place

attachment and other theories, a light of recognition switched on in my mind. From there, I began to study and research more about this idea of nature and healing, and the relationship between people, place and environment. Suddenly, I had the words, concepts and frameworks to explain what I had intuitively felt for so long. It felt exciting! I'm sure many of you have experienced this too, in your own growing-up? A love of nature and the water gives us companionship for life, I think.

WAtEry EnCoUntErS 11

||    --    ||  
||    --    ||

In a coming together of my personal journey (I hate that term, but in this case it was true, literally), my academic profession and my own practice, things began to make sense and converge. I could almost hear a metaphorical clicking sound. In addition to my academic work, I undertook training first in mindfulness and then in mindfulness for young people. I felt really strongly about giving kids the tools to feel strong inside. And so, I launched 'ChillSquad' in Brighton, my own wellbeing, mindfulness and resilience programme for children, teachers and families. It took all my courage to approach schools to see if they wanted to run my programme and to venture out into my own work.

Up until this point, I could hide, in some sense, behind my doctoral title and university affiliation. I hadn't realised how much of a shield that was, or indeed what a conduit it was too for easy introductions to open doors. But here I was, just me, nervously asking to be allowed in, to speak to children

at school and to help them with their own wellbeing and resilience. It was soul-baring and I felt very vulnerable.

Luckily, it all paid off, and I have now taught over a thousand young people as part of in-school programmes, clubs and

weekend workshops for children, families and parents. I've also run many training workshops to show teachers, social workers or anyone working with young people how to teach my ChillSquad programme. These training retreats are some of the loveliest, most bonding and humbling experiences of my professional career. There is an openness, power and connection during those courses that I can't quite verbalise. I would really advise anyone who wants a new work direction to follow their intuition, soul or desires, even if only in a small way to start with. Giving it a shot is something you will never regret. Doing something you feel you are meant to do scratches a soul-itch like nothing else!

During my early years in Brighton, I also did a course in 'wild beach school' with the lovely Sussex Wildlife Trust. This gave me lots of ideas, and equipped with those and my

12 BLUE SPACES

long experience in teaching geography and earth sciences, I started my own WildBlue School in Brighton. Today, both the WildBlue School and ChillSquad fit in alongside my part-time academic job. All of this allows me to combine my research and practice in water and wellbeing.

WildBlue School is a wonderfully fulfilling outdoor joy! I take 30 to 100 children to the beach on field-days in the summer term, and also run holiday camps and occasional events where we learn about the coast as both a natural and a human environment, along with identification skills, crafts and mindfulness exercises. I've also started a 'Soul Saturdays by the Sea' micro-break for busy women in Brighton and beyond. The need to retreat, especially by the sea, is something I really want to share with others. We will explore some of these

wellbeing practices later in the book.

Watching children's joy and relief as they get outdoors to the sea is as humbling as it is awesome. I'm sure many parents reading this have witnessed it too. A child's total mindfulness in present-moment enthusiasm could teach us all a lot. I love my university students dearly, but seeing younger children respond instantly and wholeheartedly by the sea, or in a ChillSquad session, gives me a sense of work fulfilment I had never dared to hope for. As the west of Ireland felt like my soul landscape, this feels like my soul work.

### Bringing it All Together

Which brings me to the final piece of the current jigsaw puzzle: wild swimming. As I didn't grow up right next to the sea, this is not something I have always done, but people always ask me if I have. People connect to bluespace at different times in their lives; not everyone is 'born into it' and it really doesn't matter when or how you come to love it. The main thing is that you enjoy it. In

the chapters to come, I will talk about my early starts in

WAtEry EnCoUntErS 13

— — ||  
|| — —  
Irish rivers, learning to surf in Cornwall and a near-death experience in African white water.

However, one of the greatest joys for me in recent years has been becoming part of a unique wild swimming group called the 'Salty Seabirds' in Brighton. Started by two amazing women, Kath and Cath, as a social enterprise, its ethos is simply 'salted wellbeing'. I'll be talking more about the Salty Seabirds in Chapters 2 and 3, and how they help women from

all backgrounds to access the water. My involvement with this group of amazing (mainly) women, who share a passion for bluespace, has been the icing on the cake in terms of my own Brighton adventure.

All of which brings me to a nexus of sorts. My own personal experiences – as an academic, setting up ChillSquad and WildBlue School, training in stress management and mindfulness, publishing academic papers about wellbeing and nature, and becoming a proud Seabird wild swimmer – have all really led me to this point and to writing this book. I often feel a bit of an oddity: not quite one thing or another; not a ‘serious, stern-faced academic’ nor a full-time practitioner, not a hippy or guru, nor a super-fit and accomplished swimmer... but little bits of everything. That has made me feel like I never quite fit in anywhere, or into any one box, but equally, my general and broad interests have a fluidity that have served me well.

Now that you have heard my story, I hope some of these experiences resonate with your own life. Have you had any kind of grief, physical or psychological pain eased by water in nature? Do you find that it makes you feel better? That it takes away pain? Quietens your mind? Makes you feel more connected? Brings some kind of relief or, indeed, release? What follows in this book is a mix of accessible science and research into wellbeing, bluespace and Blue Mind ideas; an examination of various types of bluespace (including rivers, lakes, seas and oceans) and how they can make us feel well.

14 BLUE SPACES

-- ||  
|| --

There will be a mixture of discussion, evidence, personal stories and practical exercises you can do yourself in these



spaces – for breathing, mindfulness and more. We will look at the geography of these watery places, hear from regular people about how these places have helped them too, how they can help you and, finally, how we can all help to look after the bluespaces that matter so much to us.