



Beyond Erasmus

Stories From Outside The Box

A Legacy Project Involving
Youth Work Practitioners
and Trainers from Erasmus+

1
Volume



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'The aspiration behind the project was to capture stories that reveals the 'ah ha', the 'I never knew that' or the 'I only discovered this after they were gone' moments. It was about capturing stories that demonstrate members of the wider Erasmus Youth Work and Training family are more than just Youth Workers and Trainers, Policy Makers and Strategists, Mentors and Coaches. It was an attempt to shine a light on their more humane side, a side that gets little or no attention, a side that offers a glimpse of people we know but don't really know.'

Introduction

I want to begin by offering my heartfelt thanks to everyone who has thus far agreed to be part in this initiative. There was no obligation and certainly no compulsory element to it, the nature of the project very much voluntary. Everyone that took part give of themselves fully.

There were of course many curiosities about what was involved. Some thought they were being asked to 'bare their soul' and needed a little reassurance. Admittedly some were reticent, for a variety of reasons. The most common reason was, 'I don't really have a story to tell' which if I can be candid, is bordering on nonsense.

I don't say that to be disparaging in any way, but the reality is that it does not makes sense to say we do not have stories rather than a judgement on anyone's response. We all have stories, more than we can imagine, many of them that are shared in the quieter non-programme moments when we are not busy preparing for the next session, the next programme or developing the next proposal.

This response is probably more reflective of the challenge we feel when asked directly to offer a story about ourselves. It probably also reflects an understanding of what people define as a story, and of course the next decision being whether we consider it worthwhile to share, yet it is something we do on a regular basis with our friends, family, colleagues, and acquaintances.

A story is merely an experience, and we all have plenty of experience. It can be (at the time of writing) something as simple as the moment I experienced a little earlier when the window seat on a flight I was taking was free yet the gentleman next to me in the middle decided he didn't want to avail of it.

I was on the aisle seat of course and I naturally assumed once everyone was boarded and no-one else was coming to claim

the seat, he'd shift over allowing us both a bit more room, at least for the benefit of our elbows. Free the elbows, that's what I say! Who among us likes to engage in a bit of 'elbow chess'? If a seat on a flight becomes free and offers you more room, you take it, right?

Well, what do I know? It seems not! In fairness to said gentleman, he did ask if I wanted to move into the window seat but It was clear that even if I did he would have still sat in the middle. Thankfully the row behind me had two empty seats so I moved there. As I write the gentleman is still sitting in the middle!

A small almost anecdotal tale that (in a post-session catch-up with colleagues) might be the gateway to longer more interesting flight or airport stories that we all have (read to the end for the more interesting outcome). Yet, we're almost inclined not to rate these as worthy and when asked, providing a story becomes a little bit more challenging in that we suddenly feel a little 'thrust' into the spotlight somewhat.

Perhaps we should change Story Telling to Experience Telling. We could abbreviate it to E.T., which might lead us to think of the film which in turn might remind us of the time we tripped getting into our seat at the cinema and poured our entire allocation of popcorn over the person in front of us only to discover that said person in front of us was our current partner who somehow was there with someone else but equally, you had to explain why you were with someone else also!

Don't worry, that's not a story that has been relayed to me yet, nor is it one I have experienced, but it does remind me how earlier this year, I couldn't quite understand why as I sat down and got comfortable (after a few people kindly got up to let me into my seat at the end of row) that the new Indiana Jones film I had bought a ticket for was seemingly already well underway. Did I get the time wrong? No!

The dawning realisation that I had planned to go see the new Mission Impossible film starting ten minutes later in the other theatre was upon me. Cue the next realisation that I now need to move and everyone in my row will need to stand up. Perhaps I could just sit here and work out what has happened so far to Indiana. How bad would it look that I get up after just sitting down? Freeze or fight? Freeze or fight? I choose Nathan Hunt over Indiana Jones. It was dark anyways; they wouldn't remember me!

I digress a little. Some participants did genuinely feel they didn't have a story beyond Erasmus which is in some respects remarkable and says something about how much we are woven into the fabric of Erasmus World. To paraphrase some of the things I heard, 'Erasmus is my world' or 'my work is my world, it's all I know' or 'every story I can tell is related to Erasmus.' I beg to differ and the stories contained within are a testament to this, a testament to the notion that collectively, we are more than just Erasmus.

Pausing for a moment to consider this, it really is remarkable that any practitioner might think or feel that they only have Erasmus stories to offer. It suggests to me two things – they are overly committed, and Erasmus is the great beneficiary (and of course they love what they do – this should be pointed out) and the value they put on their own experiences pales into insignificance when compared with Erasmus.

I don't have to extol the benefits of Erasmus nor what it means to be part of this world – I have been very much a beneficiary and in turn have provided countless opportunities for others to be likewise – but perhaps it's something we should reflect upon.

Everyone has stories to tell from Erasmus, but that would be an easy hit. For me the more interesting story are those we rarely hear – the linguist, the lawyer, the mathematician et al – the stories that unless we make a point of asking, we don't get to hear.

A quick search on-line of our colleagues and numerous references to policy documents, training programmes, strategies, SALTO, Youthpass and the like will appear, but how do we discover they've rode a horse across their country, played in a rock band, performed on stage, have a love of silent disco, etc without asking. This reflects for me how we are always doing, doing, doing and not being, being, being. Yet without us, Erasmus does not function. Individuals create the collective and the collective is its strength, yet we do not accord individuals much space 'to be' but rather only 'to do.'

On one occasion during the process, I was trying to illustrate to a colleague I've known for close to 20 years, the sense of revelation and discovery I was looking for – 'blah, blah, blah, wow, I've known you for 40 years, how did I not know that...?' and then he revealed to me he was a lawyer in a previous life. I know him almost 20 years and had no idea. How did I not know this?

His revelation illustrated what I was talking about perfectly. I would never have known, had I not asked, and in the world, I share with many colleagues and have done so for many years, that is simply not good enough in my opinion. Not everyone will agree but that's ok.

It is worth saying that there were colleagues whose humility shone through in the sense that they genuinely felt they did not have a story worthy of sharing, but this is in my opinion a reflection of their nature rather than the reality that they do or did not have a story. With a little reassurance however, an open approach, some probing questions, a willingness to engage with one another,

and many dollops of laughter, everyone to a person was by the end appreciative of the opportunity to take part and found the process, without attempting to sound cliched, almost cathartic.

I am truly honoured and humbled to have shared space with them and grateful for their willingness to take a risk, jump in and make the time to not only support the process but to share, to be curious, to be receptive and give of themselves freely and honestly. No conversation lasted less than one hour, some stretching to almost two. No matter how long the conversation lasted, it was worth every moment!

Appreciating that people have not only made time but all exhibited a willingness to be 'exposed' and embrace a degree of fragility and vulnerability, they have entrusted me to nurture and curate their story, and I have endeavoured to honour that. I want to also acknowledge that I would not ask them to do something that I was not prepared to do myself and therefore I too have provided a story.

In closing, and by no means least, a word of thanks also goes to Erasmus colleagues Jo Claeys, Simona Molari and Peter Hofmann whose support at the outset provided inspiration and motivation to continue, and contributed to shaping the direction of travel. Just to say that this is the first volume and a second one will arrive soon, and for those who have not jumped in and taken a leap of faith, the door is always open. Perhaps there might even be a third.

Once again, to those that jumped in already, you gave me your time – there is no greater gift you could give me!

The final Thank You should go to Graphic Artist, Michael Robertson. Michael is a friend and colleague I've worked with many times over the years. He takes an idea and words I give him and transforms it into something beyond what I can imagine. Where I see lines on a page, he sees rainbows and landscapes. I'm indebted to him always for his ability to take my one-dimensional thinking and 3-D it into life and something ultimately more meaningful. This publication is a testament to his ability to do so.

Fergal Barr
December 2023

P.S. The gentleman in the middle seat did eventually move, but only to use the bathroom.

P.P.S. His lady-friend who was sitting several rows in front joined him mid-flight. She took the window seat. On his return from the bathroom, he took the aisle seat. Their belongings took the middle seat! His decision to stay in the middle seat became clear. I was the pawn in a game of Elbow Chess! An experience that started out as an anecdotal tale has been firmly upgraded to a story!

Project Overview

Rationale

Starting out as The Erasmus+ Human Legacy Project, this voluntary initiative was designed to capture non-work stories from Youth Work practitioners and Trainers connected by their involvement in Erasmus+ over the last number of years, and even in some cases, decades. The aspiration behind the project was to capture stories that reveals the 'ah ha', the 'I never knew that' or the 'I only discovered this after they were gone' moments. It was about capturing stories that demonstrate members of the wider Erasmus Youth Work and Training family are more than just Youth Workers and Trainers, Policy Makers and Strategists, Mentors and Coaches. It was an attempt to shine a light on their more humane side, a side that gets little or no attention, a side that offers a glimpse of people we know but don't really know.

Context

The fragility of life is not a conversation we tend to have too often. It is without doubt a sensitive subject, and by no means easy to talk about. Loss can have a devastating impact on even the most resilient among us. The nature of loss and the circumstances that surround it can have a profound effect leaving us feeling deeply wounded.

Loss is not something that the Erasmus+ collective - at least among the youth work and training fraternity - has experienced or shared collectively. Notwithstanding the loss of colleagues in our own respective work settings, the Erasmus+ family has been fortunate that many colleagues have had the opportunity to work and grow together over a sustained period, building many strong relationships working on multiple projects.

We often become accustomed to seeing colleagues at annual and bi-annual gatherings and working on a range of initiatives together often led through innovation, creativity, and imagination or in response to policy decisions.

The fragility of life was highlighted in 2023 with the untimely passing of Leo Kaserer, an experienced and committed practitioner from within the Erasmus family. Leo was well liked, respected, and very well thought of at both a personal and professional level, and his passing caused some of us to reflect on what our contributions or legacy might mean but more than that, how we are known to our colleagues, beyond that role we fulfil when working on projects, programmes, policies, and strategies.

This initiative was not about necessarily paying tribute to Leo – there are many more much better placed to do so - but if anything, perhaps his passing can be a catalyst for not only acknowledging that all life is fragile but that the many connections built up through involvement in Erasmus will inevitably come to a close at some point.

Perhaps we can begin to think about not only the impact it might have but look at ways in capturing legacy, legacy which focuses more on the individuals that make up the collective rather than the numerous policies, strategies, models and initiatives that binds us. This is not a criticism of any of those initiatives but that we are quite simply more than these. This project was not in receipt of any funding and was led entirely, on a voluntary basis, and was created in recognition of two key elements:

Project Aims

- (i) the need to create an enriching archive full of stories about the person behind the practitioner before they are lost through the mists of time and**
- (ii) recognition that life is fragile and in any given moment, we might lose that person through illness, natural circumstances, or suddenly and unexpectedly.**

Who was involved?

A small working group initially consisting of Peter Hofmann (Austria), Jo Claeys (Portugal), Simona Molari (Italy) and Fergal Barr (Northern Ireland) was established to set in motion the process of capturing non-(Erasmus) work stories from colleagues within the wider 'Erasmus Youth Work family.'

What the stories should or might look like?

The emphasis on each story was to capture and reveal the person's more humane side, sides that we might never have occasion to see due to the normal Erasmus 'demands,' i.e., time-bound, intensive, outcome-focused, and so on. It might be a story that we might only learn about them after their passing, or after they retire.

They might have played in a band, published a book, starred in a film, been a fabulous artist, changed the law, climbed Everest, saved a life and we might never know this, which of course would be a shame, but it's the sense of discovery that this project wants to nurture, that each person is more than merely the practitioner we know in the working context, that context being essentially Erasmus.

We know a lot about each other in terms of the projects that practitioners from this Erasmus Youth Work Family co-ordinate, or perhaps lead on, initiate, and develop but not a lot about the non-work side, and this project was designed to capture that.

Colleagues were approached to share a story - something that no-one really knows or at least very few beyond the Erasmus 'bubble' do.

Practicalities

Stories were captured in two ways – documented through informal conversation – in person or on-line, or stories were submitted. Any stories documented were returned for final approval with any amendments at the request of practitioners implemented.

It was always designed that each story should be no more than 1-2 pages long, or approximately between 500 and 1500 words (4000 – 6000 characters including spaces). It was to be a non-work story, something that individuals were willing to share and at no point should ever compromise anyone or any other colleagues.

Participants were also asked to submit a black and white head and shoulders photo of themselves without any props as such, e.g., hats, sunglasses, etc, nor should the photo be of a 'professional nature' but rather convey the essence of each person, a truer reflection of them without any filters as it were.

The photo would give a sense of the 'true' individual, revealing their humane side, in a way that we have not seen or might not expect, or just with a sense of the true self.

The idea was to collate all the stories into a pdf file with perhaps hard copies following in due course. What you are now reading is the outcome of that work.

'A story is merely an experience, and we all have plenty of experience.'

'Of course, there was no mention that she got the info from somebody else. I showed the article to my kids - and we were happy that the story had a good ending and still we had our own little secret about the story.'

Bara Stemper-Bauerova

Bara Stemper-Bauerova

Mother, Friend and lover of Nature,
Qigong Practitioner & Teacher, Story teller,
Believer in Humanity who loves to inspire
and empower young people and someone
who takes care and acts when needed.

One sunny but very cold November afternoon - 5 years ago - I was on my way to the Zoo in Vienna with my kids. I had just parked the car at the very end of the large parking place when I noticed a car, which was with the front hanging over the edge of what could be described as a small concrete bollard (about 30 cm in height). It was impossible to drive away, and the car window was open.

I was curious so I asked my older son to stay with his younger brother near to our car and went to check what was going on. I saw a younger man lying in the car, one window open. He was sleeping but I noticed a few bottles of spirit (vodka perhaps) lying around. I hesitated a bit and then I asked, 'are you ok'?

He spoke English. I asked him if he needed help (also related to his car) as it was cold outside and it was clear the car cannot be moved without external help. He muttered something like "no, all good, but thanks".

Reassured that all was ok, and as our train was about to come in a couple of minutes, I took the kids to the train and explained to them briefly, what I saw - that there was nobody harmed, and that he assured me he was ok. Content, we continued our trip to Vienna Zoo.

On the way back to my surprise I saw the car was still there!

It was already dark and the temperature near zero, there were other "commuters" getting into their cars and driving home.

It was so obvious it could not move without external help and all the others who must have seen it – it would seem they just ignored this fact. So, I took another look, a closer look, and this time - the man inside did not react when I checked on him. I took my kids and went all the way back to the Railway building, where I found a woman, who was on duty and told her the whole story.

I told her that 'since this afternoon or earlier, there has been car parked awkwardly with a man inside, who does not react now and in my opinion, he must be cold. The windows are open now and were open earlier and the weather outside is cold. I think somebody should do something. Can you come with me and have a look?'

And she did. She closed her little office window and went with me and my kids all the way through the long car park where other drivers – still just taking their cars and driving past - while we were making our way to the car.

Initially, she might have been a little doubtful but very quickly she saw I was telling the truth. She told me she would call the fire brigade and the police. I also asked about the 'Ambulance?' and she nodded. Only after that, I packed my kids into our car and we went home.

On the way back, we talked about what happened and shared our thoughts. My older son could not understand why the other commuters did not pay attention and told me that I was brave - in his imagination the man in the car could be a bank robber and could have had a gun (he was 7 years old at the time). This of course could have been the case, but I felt compelled to help.

After about 10 days - there was an article in a local newspaper with a photo of a crane rescuing the car and also an interview with the woman from the railway station office - who was the 'hero of the day' - and she was thanked for doing the right thing at the right time.

Of course, there was no mention that she got the info from somebody else. I showed the article to my kids - and we were happy that the story had a good ending and still we had our own little secret about the story.

I felt proud of myself, and I am happy that my kids might remember this example of acting in this moment, that when they see there is a need and not ignoring these things - even if they know there is also a risk to do so, and even if they know there is going to be no reward at the end. And, that it is always good to call the 'authorities' as they can move things!

But the first step is to be attentive to the environment around us - not ignorant to those in need and brave enough to act.

So as my favourite Bréne Brown says: Be Here (presence) Be You (values, identity) and Be-long (act for community).

‘I approached one of the young soldiers, the one that seemed the leader of the frightening and equally frightened looking Army group, and calmly said “Excuse me, until you have finalised the check if this activity is legal or not, there is the assumption that it’s legal. You must demonstrate the contrary, right?”’

Davide Tonon

Davide Tonon

Youth Worker, Father, Trainer, Lover, Dreamer, Curious about Human Geography; Passionate about Non-Formal Learning, Love, Life, Humour and Socratic Empowerment - **LAWYER!**

When I meet colleagues or participants on courses for the first time, normally it's not something that comes up in conversation. It's not really something I share. Nothing special to hide, but when I'm in more 'intimate' situations, curious people sometimes discover it.

"Really, you used to be a lawyer before working as an educator in non-formal learning?", they ask me, quite surprised by my journey of passing through courts of justice only to land in plenaries with participants in a circle.

Yes, I confess, I studied Law. Even if my story as a lawyer was very short afterwards. And just for the record: I always wanted to become a lawyer of the lost causes. So, you can easily find the link with my life as educator.

By the way, this is not the story I wanted to tell. Or better said, it is just the starting point. The paradox is that "the-lawyer-in-me" that I abandoned at a certain point, was in the end quite useful in different moments of my life, from being almost arrested by my hometown police to nearly being detained by the Israeli Army. But before this, let's see how I applied my law studies to the rail network in Italy. As a pendular student, while coming back home from Bologna University I found myself facing long delays for connecting trains on several occasions.

After a whole day of study, including ordinarily three hours of a normal train journey, to have to wait an additional one and a half hours for the next train available with my monthly card it was unbearable! But, but, but!

It happened on a couple of occasions that in Mestre there was a super quick train, super expensive and not-even-think-to-step-on-it that was passing just 10 minutes after in the direction of my hometown.

In principle I couldn't take it! So, I quickly jumped into the office of the Chief of the station and started to speak some well-prepared legal bullshit to convince him that it was a must to stop the train and allow me to take it (without paying any extra money, of course). It seems that I impressed the chief both times, because they stopped the super-duper train for 20 minutes to allow this poor law student to jump on it.

Years later, during a youth exchange in Barcelona - again a matter of trains - a strike started when I was with half of my youth group in Girona while the other half was in Barcelona (with the return ticket to Italy in their hands). A special substitute bus to Milan was organised, but literally I had nothing to show and prove that my participants and I had a real train ticket (there was no WhatsApp at that time).

I don't know how I managed to convince the Chief at Girona station - no evidence that those tickets existed - I spoke patiently but overall, I listened to him. Poor guy, he had problems at work and (also) with his wife. So, finally he let us on and even accompanied us to the bus!

'Yes, I confess, I studied Law. Even if my story as a lawyer was very short afterwards.'

On another occasion, when I became an environmental activist, my lawyer background also helped me to explore legal limits of protesting. Once, in the city council plenary session of my hometown, town councillors had to vote whether to build a highway that would have passed across a preserved and beautiful nature reserve, ultimately ruining it forever.

The Municipal Council was crowded by worried inhabitants from the village where the highway was to be constructed. With a bunch of other companions, we dressed as sandwich-man and sandwich-woman carrying on our shoulders protesting posters and invaded the meeting.

When we interrupted the plenary - in silence - with our poster messages (claiming the politicians' shame and for the protection of the last natural corner in the area), we were welcomed both by applause and by some bad words of course, but – most dramatically – the President of the Municipal Council was screaming to the Carabinieri to arrest us!

The Carabinieri jumped on us! We were shaking with fear at that point. But we spoke. Calmly. And we made the point: which crime were we committing so as to be arrested? Maybe, expressing our point of view in a democratic and silent way?

The Carabinieri looked each other and... let us protest in our sandwich-mode. But probably, the best "legal" satisfaction I got was in occupied Palestine, more precisely in Hebron. I was there for a project, leading a group of video-activists for Human Rights.

In a break from the video shooting, with Catalan and Palestinian participants, we decided to join a group of local kids in a football match. The field was a rectangle of sand, holes, and stones, surrounded by barbed wire. The scene was somehow surreal but magic at the same time: desperate people in a miserable field, smiling and having fun. Until of course the moment in which four young Israeli soldiers jumped into the scene!

Walking up the hill, they reached the football field and stopped us, claiming that the match was illegal because the field was occupied land under Israeli authority and Palestinians were not authorised to walk on it. They said that if we didn't stop playing, they would have brought all of us (including the "internationals") to the local police station.

At that point, Issa, a brave local Human Rights defender, addressed the soldiers showing an Israeli legal order and demonstrating to them that they were wrong. Of course, the soldiers were surprised and unnerved by their own uncertainty, but they decided to phone

their superiors to check the situation. The atmosphere was tense. Both the kids' and adults' faces were dark with fear and anger.

I approached one of the young soldiers, the one that seemed the leader of the frightening and equally frightened looking Army group, and calmly said "Excuse me, until you have finalised the check if this activity is legal or not, there is the assumption that it's legal. You must demonstrate the contrary, right?"

The guy was looking at me with two big eyes, and answered just a weak "Yes", then I continued "So, until it's not proved that this is an illegal match, would you be so kind to go a little back and let us play football?"

After a little hesitation, they did so, stepping a little back at the edge of the sandy field, near the barbed wire. At once the tension was broken, and the kids started to run and scream like crazy, kicking the ball and smiling again. And suddenly the magic was back once more!

'...the crowd of children were quite silent, cautious, and curious. I soon realised that I was probably the first white person they had ever seen.'

Andrew Hadley

Andrew Hadley

Traveller, Internationalist, European, Husband, Parent, Cat-servant, Moderately-OK pianist, Stargazer, Cinema & Theatre-goer, Snooker fan, Londoner by necessity but Cornish by design – LINGUIST!



Four Ingredients in the Recipe for a Traveller

1. Leaving England

I was eight when my parents took me on my first foreign holiday, to Brittany. We travelled overnight from Southampton. I remember the unfamiliar, oily smell of the ship's car deck; the rumble of the engines; the wake and the gulls as we glided up the Solent past the oil refineries and out into the open sea. Above all, I could see my country recede into the distance and the realisation dawned on me that we English live on an island and there's a bigger world out across the ocean.

The magic of those moments stays with me to this day and is repeated in perfect detail every time I board a ship. I like to say that you will scarcely find a more English person than me (no Scottish, Irish, Welsh, or continental European ancestors that I know of). But that first journey was the beginning of the erosion – or the enrichment – of my English identity. In an important sense, it's a journey from which I have never returned.

2. Learning French... Learning Languages

When I was 12, my father arranged for me to spend 6 months in Versailles. I don't really know how this came about. I lived with a French family and attended a local school. It was my first experience of total linguistic and cultural immersion. When I returned home, I was pretty much bilingual.

The family I stayed with have remained lifelong friends, and we have organised second-generation exchange visits for our own children. Just recently I came across a school report from the time. For mathematics the comment was "he is attentive in class, but his results are very, very weak". I never was cut out for maths or science, but my interest in languages and cultures has grown constantly. It's probably a left-brain, right-brain thing.

The love of language didn't end there though. I might not have had a passion for maths or science, but language was something I had a talent for, and this was nurtured over time through many intercultural experiences. So much so, I speak (or at least used to!) five languages moderately well, and maybe another five rather less well. And not forgetting, Latin and ancient Greek, which aren't exactly spoken these days but in certain situations they reappear. The power of language and the ability to communicate with others in their native tongue cannot be underestimated and one very powerful ingredient.

3. On a donkey in the Peloponnese

As a student I used to spend every summer wandering around Greece. One year I thought it would be fun to get hold of a horse or donkey and travel that way. This was a fairly ridiculous idea for someone who knows nothing about these animals but as we all know, young people don't usually think about practical details like that. I headed for the beautiful mountain town of Kalavryta, and started asking where I could buy or rent the necessary beast.

I already knew the brothers who ran the local taverna, and one evening they introduced me to their dad Mitso, who was a farmer from a nearby village. As a man who had never travelled himself, he was somehow intrigued by this young foreigner with crazy ideas, and without hesitation offered to lend me his own donkey for as long as I wanted, which remains one of the most extraordinary acts of generosity I have ever known.

‘The next day I went to the village and was taught the basics of donkey-handling, including how to leap backwards into the saddle, and the all-important words to encourage the donkey to go forwards (“Haaa!”) or to stop (“Kitchom!”). With a string of introductions to Mitso’s cousins in various villages, I set off into the mountains.’

But in this village, the crowd of children were quite silent, cautious, and curious. I soon realised that I was probably the first white person they had ever seen. My friend’s meeting with the village elders took place in a dark hut with the door ajar to let in the fierce sunlight – and to allow a cluster of wide-eyed children to peek around the door and stare at me. I couldn’t photograph the scene, but it remains perfectly clear in my memory. This unique and amazing experience showed me for the first time what it is like to be the different one.

One encounter along the way stays vividly in my mind. An old woman carrying a bundle of straw met me on a remote path, and asked where I was from. “England”, I replied. “Ah, England”, she said “is that somewhere near America?”. I realised she had no conception of maps so the only explanation I could give was how many days it would take to get there over land and sea. From then on, I have understood that our view of the world is always relative, and that we all have different geographies, histories and cultural frames of reference.

4. In an Ethiopian village

A friend of mine in Addis Ababa was doing postdoctoral research on rural communities. He invited me to go along with him on a field trip for a few days. We drove down into the Rift Valley, to a village where traders from many different tribal groups, including the fearsome Afar, would meet for a market every so often. In the towns and cities in those days, wherever you went, as a European you were likely to be followed by a bunch of children shouting “Ferenj, Ferenj!”, basically meaning “white foreigner” (a behaviour which is much less common now, thanks to an education campaign).

‘Getting this feeling into the picture and capture the feeling and then it takes time developing the image in the dark room. Watching a story come alive before your eyes, seeing the story unfold in front of you without any guarantee – a ‘relic of the past’ but a testament to an ‘ancient’ ritual that is arguably more about nurturing and curating a process than the end-product itself.’

Corinna Robertson-Liersch

Corinna Robertson-Liersch

European, Youth Worker, Pedagogue,
Teacher, Biologist, Book Eater,
Swimmer, Runner, Yogi, Partner,
Mother, Sister, Traveler, Storyteller –
PHOTOGRAPHER!



I'm a Photographer! There I said it. It took me quite some time to be comfortable and embrace the idea of being one. Photography is a passion of mine. It requires me to be open to the world. It requires me to be vulnerable - just like people - and most specifically in countries where we don't speak the language, where I don't speak the language. Photography captures a moment and communicates a story.

Storytelling through photos. I love the idea that the person looks at it and finds their own story in the image.

I'm not the only photographer of course but most likely one of the few that still uses original 35mm film and older non-digital cameras, some of the cameras being the kind you have to look down into, box-shaped cameras with rangefinders, more commonly known as viewfinders.

It's easy to capture a photo of anything now. We all have cameras in our phones – or at least most of us have – but the challenge and equally the beauty of taking photographs without knowing instantly how it looks, or how it will look is for me, something special. Not knowing is part of the magic!

Getting this feeling into the picture and capture the feeling and then it takes time developing the image in the dark room. Watching a story come alive before your eyes, seeing the story unfold in front of you without any guarantee – a 'relic of the past' but a testament to an 'ancient' ritual that is arguably more about nurturing and curating a process than the end-product itself.

I took photos in South Korea at the beginning of the year but had to wait months before developing them. I like the feeling of getting surprised and then the vulnerability that comes with it when I present this to the world. This wasn't always the case though.

I have been taking pictures since the age of five, but I never presented or rather exhibited them, until only a few years ago in 2014 when at the age of 37 I had my first exhibition in Brussels - 'Routes.' I had applied to host it in Germany, but I felt more support in Brussels – I felt seen and supported there.

Exhibitions are becoming more of a feature in my life as more and more people come to appreciate my work, but it wasn't always like this. I have had some frustrations and disappointments.

Shortly before I went to work in Brussels, I applied for a scholarship in Germany. Even though they were extremely impressed by my work, and even more surprised to learn that I was not under the tutelage of any professional photographer, or that I had not previously exhibited, they could not understand how I was able to produce the quality of the work that I did through my own endeavour and natural evolution as a photographer.

They didn't offer me the scholarship although they invited me to apply the following year, but the notion had passed by then. I felt they were afraid to act outside of their formality, an unwillingness to take a risk, or a leap of faith.

My faith in my ability as a photographer grew when I worked in the European youth field, presenting at big conferences like the national youth policy conference in Ireland. Delegates were very supportive of what I presented, and everything felt ok. It felt good. I built on this, although I was still a little reluctant to fully immerse myself in the photographic world.

One reason I hesitated to go into art, was in part due to my family being heavily involved in the Art World, many of them being directors and museum directors including Museum Island in Berlin.

I accept the support from those that it comes from the heart, a little bit like those from my time in Ireland. Natural and nothing fixed.

My pictures are for the ones who really are open, open for a story. I'm applying right now (after capturing pictures from South Korea) to be part of an exhibition in Brussels in February 2024. I had limited time in South Korea – so my time there was not complete – I would like to go back. I call my pictures 'Beyond Light' – showing moments beyond life.

'To take a picture of anything is of course light on paper. Stories are captured by a ray of light and that's what I want to show.'

I'm currently, exhibiting in the Octogon Church in Aachen in Germany, an exhibition called, 'Joy of Life' which is about enjoying nice things, food. It seems funny, ironic almost, that after not securing the scholarship many years ago, I'm now exhibiting already for a second time in Germany after all these years.

I took pictures of people in the moment, enjoying the moment, enjoying themselves, being mindful, being in the moment. One picture – from China – was of a man working in an open street kitchen, a lot of steam around him, hot water, - working away but completely at ease, being present, enjoying just being in the moment, being so present, you look at this and he's in the moment. He's at peace in this moment.

Another picture from Japan – are written wishes hanging on a cable – each wish tells a story. The rock behind the cable where the wishes hang is ancient and has a spiritual story. It's the connection between both, that captures the story for me.

I have no plan for a future life in photography – it doesn't need to be more than the current 'encounters' that I have, that I embrace and enjoy. To take good pictures, I must be in a good state and how it is at the moment, my day-job combined with my love for photography, is how I like it – a little like Franz Kafka – who has worked as a 'functioneer' but was a brilliant novelist and short story writer. I like it this way. My day job sustains me, I love what I do, but photography is my passion.

'I became quite knowledgeable about the timetable to an extent where I knew it basically by heart. Many days of my school summer holidays in that period I spent strolling around the train station and having a feel of full clarity on what's going on here.'

Peter Hofmann

A blue-tinted portrait of Peter Hofmann, a middle-aged man with short, light-colored hair, looking directly at the camera. The portrait is partially obscured by a blue speech bubble on the left and several yellow stars scattered across the background.

Peter Hofmann

Mindful and Caring man, Facilitator and Trainer, Father of two young men, Embodiment and Movement fan, Loving Husband, Hiker and Biker with passion – TRAIN LOVER!

The love for trains in my life – or the charm of useless knowledge.

Ever heard of or read the epic novel “The living and working conditions of Austrian railway workers between 1918 and 1938”?? NO? What a miss! OK, maybe it is not epic and not even a novel – and you would have difficulties to find it – and you would need to understand German!! Yes, indeed it is the title of my master thesis at the University of Vienna finishing off my history studies.

‘I felt like a historian in my own biography. What an important piece of historical finding!! And yes, I did throw them away!’

This love for trains and everything around it originated when I was around 11-12 years old. At that time, I developed slightly autistic behaviours – like spending hours and hours on the train station of Salzburg, a city of 100,000 inhabitants on the border with Germany, watching trains arriving and leaving. But it did not stop there!

I became quite knowledgeable about the timetable to an extent where I knew it basically by heart. Many days of my school summer holidays in that period I spent strolling around the train station and having a feel of full clarity on what’s going on here. Did this knowledge help me in any way? Well, maybe I wouldn’t have gotten my summer job at the postal service at the Salzburg train station some years later without this particular timetable-knowledge – but surely this experience added to my basket of useless knowledge about train timetables and postal logistics connected.

I worked mainly during the night getting big bags with letters and parcels off and on the trains. So of course, I quickly knew all possible details about the night trains passing Salzburg at that period. Well, useful – no?!?

Another manifestation of my slightly autistic tendencies in my early teen years – cutting out all newspaper clips I found on my then favourite soccer club “Austria Salzburg”. Over three years I filled dozens of paper folders with clips cut out diligently, glued on paper and some of the commentary provided by my humble view of things.

Obviously, I had interesting things to say about that matter – I did not miss one home game of my team! When I was emptying the cellar of my mother’s place – many years later – I found those folders; and for a moment I felt like a historian in my own biography. What an important piece of historical finding!! And yes, I did throw them away!

'When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen, you may learn something new.'

Dalai Lama

'I remember standing behind a proper DJ Set-Up for the first time that evening, hands trembling and for a moment I thought about saying "I like music, because it is cool", take my CDs and leave. But then I just put on that first CD, hit play, saw some of the smiles on the faces of people and took it from there. It turned out to be a good night and the place was packed and everyone had a great evening.'

Marco Frimberger

Marco Frimberger

European, Austrian Youth Council employee, former NA Deputy Director, that RAY/TCA guy that just popped up in the Menti cloud, Youth Goals enthusiast, Mr. Calm, Listener, Open-minded, Runner, Card Player – RETIRED DJ!

Vienna, Austria. The late 80's, a classroom in a High School in the 23rd district. A very nervous boy proclaims: "I like comic books because I think they are funny". What would be quite a basic summation of a presentation about comic books was even worse than that. This was the presentation, more or less of all of it. That young boy was me. This is the story of how music in general and DJing in particular helped me to become more outgoing, helped me to chase my dreams and also helped me to let go of them.

My first foray into DJing came when I was about 10 years old. I taped songs from the radio and recorded my take on the songs in between. Unfortunately, they are lost to time, then again, I don't think my opinion about Falco's greatest hits are "need to know" material.

Fast forward a couple of years when my cousin from Germany, who was a little older than me got me into the hair-rock bands of the 80's – Bon Jovi, Skid Row and Guns'n'Roses. And with the early 90's around the corner I discovered bands like Nirvana, Faith no More and Green Day.

Soon me and some other misfits from school spent our afternoons in record stores, discussed the latest releases and traded CDs. When we were finally old enough to go out, we found the perfect Pub for us – Schlawiner - in the centre of Vienna. A small pub that was run by Robbie, a guy in his 20's who loved music.

The DJ there was a guru for us and the coolest guy on the planet; 15-year-old me always dreamed of being that guy. It was great, on weekends we could listen to our favourite alternative and metal music and during the week Robbie managed to get some enthusiast of different musical tastes to DJ.

This is how I learned a lot about the music of 60's and 70's and emerging musical trends such as gothic, industrial but I also renewed my love of some songs from the 80's of my childhood. Through this I learned to appreciate diversity, not just in music but also in other aspects in life.

Since music was what had brought us together in the pub we came from different walks of lives – from the 20-year-old students to the 40 year old guy running a marketing company to the young girl working in a lab and the unemployed man who did some DJing to help him get by.

I remember many weekdays sitting there, playing dice poker and discussing the world events and disagreeing on many things with some of this quite diverse group of people. But we never did think less of someone, we just agreed to disagree, played another round, and sang Hotel California from the top of our lungs.

'Fast forward to my 23rd birthday where I decided to rent a little room to celebrate my birthday and convinced myself to give this DJing thing a try.'

While I was confident at first the "500 Euro minimum turnover" for the night appeared to be somewhat of a challenge for me and my handful of friends. So, I decided to tell everyone I knew – hey, bring your friends, I'm throwing a party. On the evening "I like comic books" (ILCB) Marco crept into my head, and I was somewhat nervous. But I told myself hey, it's just playing music for me and my friends.

Word spread, and more friends of friends showed up than I expected. Once I was there, it was anyway too late to turn around, so I went through with my very first gig. Some of these people that, I never met before liked what I did, and we hit it off, became friends and still are to this day 20 years later.

Since I had some talent for DJing and was happy with some free drinks as a salary I was invited to DJ at parties for some friends and at one of those I was approached by someone starting an online music magazine who was looking for a people to write reviews of concerts for free tickets. I was of course in. And I loved it, even though the thought of many people reading my articles was somewhat upsetting for “ILCB” Marco.

After a while we thought about organising a monthly party where we could promote his website. So, I volunteered to be the DJ and I also had the perfect place for him: the Schlawiner pub. Even some 10 years after being there every weekend Robbie was still running the place and was very welcoming and always happy to give people a chance who were passionate for music. And yes, we might have lied a little about our “vast experience” in DJing, but we were passionate. We had a couple of drinks together, discussed old times and our idea and got a Saturday date a couple of weeks later. When the date approached ILCB Marco was back – this was not just a party for of couple of friends, this was my chance to be that cool guy in the favourite pub of my youth, with some of the regular guests from back in the days being there.

I remember standing behind a proper DJ Set-Up for the first time that evening, hands trembling and for a moment I thought about saying “I like music, because it is cool”, take my CDs and leave. But then I just put on that first CD, hit play, saw some of the smiles on the faces of people and took it from there. It turned out to be a good night and the place was packed and everyone had a great evening.

After a while Robbie asked me if I wanted to become a regular DJ on the Friday and Saturday line-up, and I didn’t hesitate one minute. It was a fantastic time, getting to spend my weekends there with most of my friends joining in every other week, discussing music with the other DJs and meeting some of those dice poker players from back in the day during the week. I had a fantastic time.

Sooner or later I got an offer to DJ at an event at WUK, a bigger venue in Vienna. While I felt quite secure at the pub with a crowd of maybe 70 people on a good night, I didn’t really think about the assignment to much until I walked on the stage for the first time and saw this big room that fits a couple of hundred people. I was scared!

This was not the pub, this was a proper venue, a lights check was currently taking place and people paid some hard-earned money to enjoy a night out. So, while ILCB Marco thought about packing up and admitting that he was in over his head two things kept me from leaving. I had a good friend at my side who was DJing with me that night and I wanted to give those people who were ready to dance the night away a good evening.

I once again gutted it out, and when the doors opened my friend, and I just played our favourite songs and the hundreds in attendance enjoyed it. And so, I was booked regularly. I still get goosebumps when I think of those moments when you know that this next song will send this room full of people into a frenzy. Then again, I always loved to see those young couples who flirted around the whole evening dancing slowly to “Reality” from Richard Sanderson at 6 in the morning.

So, for about a decade I did it all, I performed in places that meant a lot to me when I was younger and was on top of the world. But “Real work” became more demanding, and

I had to say “Sorry, I’m not in Austria that weekend” more and more often. One day I got a call to say that Schlawiner had to close. After about 20 years behind the bar Robbie wanted to move on and he sold the place. And with that I also decided to call it quits. I couldn’t invest the time needed anymore to stay up to date with the musical trends anyway and I did all I ever wanted to do.

And while Schlawiner has been closed some 10 years ago once a year I get a message from Robbie: “Hey, I’m organizing a reunion, want to come?” While I don’t manage to make it every year, it always is a blast. Sitting together with some of the old gang, have a couple of drinks, even more laughs and talk about music and the world today. And enjoyed agreeing to disagree and being happy that some of those people taught me a lot without even knowing it. Not just about music, but about life.

‘One day you will tell your story of how you overcame what you were going through and it will become part of someone else’s survival guide.’

Unknown

‘I phoned the one pub still functioning in Dylife (The Star Inn). I told them my needs were simple - ‘I need a room, if possible, a beer and bite to eat and by the way... I’ve got a horse with me.’

Howard Williamson

A blue-tinted portrait of Howard Williamson, a man with curly hair and glasses, wearing a dark jacket over a collared shirt. The portrait is partially obscured by a blue speech bubble on the left and several yellow starburst graphics scattered across the page.

Howard Williamson

Father, Youth Worker, Youth Policy Adviser, Researcher, Writer, Footballer, Motorcyclist, Guitarist, Harmonica Player
- HORSE RIDER!

Each year I commit to doing something meaningful - not just related to my day job of course but I make a point of, in the absence throughout much of my working life of CPD (Continuing Professional Development) and when circumstance allows, i.e., when moments like Covid don't get in the way, I set one goal and make it happen.

For example, in 1980 I travelled across America on a Greyhound bus. I took with me the life story of Sacagawea, who was an expedition guide for Merriwether Lewis and William Clark as they headed west in 1805 to the Pacific Coast from the Mississippi River. I tried to follow their route (albeit on a bus!) and attempted to tune myself into the places I passed nearby by reading the account of Sacagawea.

I've done this a lot of this over the years. In 1984 for example, I went to see where George Orwell used to spend a lot of time for a few years in the late 1940s - a farmhouse called Barnhill on the island of Jura in the Scottish Hebrides - and most notably, where he completed his final novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. There was a lovely sign as the only proper road on the island turned into a causeway through the peat bog - with four miles still to go to Barnhill - that said 'motor vehicles beyond this point at owners' risk'. It has now been replaced with 'no vehicles beyond this point'

In 1998, I took on another meaningful journey, when I rode a horse across Wales, from the English border nearly to the sea. From Clyro to Corris, near the west coast of Wales, a journey of normally around 72 miles, at least when travelling by car. But I headed across the old droving roads, so the actual distance was probably considerably shorter.

Now, there was a time when riding a horse across one's country, wasn't so uncommon, but this tended to be in days when there were no railways, never mind buses or cars. Thus, the logistics of organising a journey

across your country by horse is not without its challenges. My experience with horses is not without negatives either. Two years earlier I had cracked my pelvis falling off a horse in the middle of nowhere, and I had to carry on riding in considerable pain for the rest of that day and the following day, and therefore riding a horse for such a sustained period required careful consideration.

'Why ride a horse across Wales? Well, it's simple really. I had always had the dream of riding across Wales on horseback.'

In January 1998, I decided to make the dream a reality. It took a lot of planning, not least tying watertight bags of pony nuts to trees at strategic points on the planned route.

To prepare for the journey I carried out some walks to check routes using Ordnance Survey maps. Early in August the weather forecast looked perfect for the week ahead. I phoned a mate who had horses and stayed at his place the night before. The next day I met my sturdy steed - Gordon. I had all the stuff I needed in my car; I didn't even go home.

It should be noted, that having a horse that was as co-operative as Gordon cannot be underestimated. He never ran off and walked beside me when I dismounted. Keeping him well fed is of course a key part of that process. The food planning was critical to our relationship.

The first place I got to was Bleddfa. I had a meal and pint in the pub. There was no accommodation, so I started sleeping in the fields. If anyone knows me well, or at least well enough, sleeping in the outdoors in a bivvy bag, when the opportunity presents itself, has always been a part of my DNA. As you can imagine, going for a 70+ mile journey with only a horse for company not only requires knowing how to handle a horse

but requires quite a bit of knowledge about all the equipment. The horse could of course wander off in the middle of the night. I used a lunge rein clipped to Gordon's head collar and slept with the other end tied to my wrist. The journey took me 4 days, with a rest day in the middle. I met all sorts of characters en-route; riding alone invariably triggered conversations with the few people I met along the way.

At times I had to walk the horse because of the terrain or simply to give Gordon a rest. On one occasion I was stopped by a farmer, 'have you thought about walking mate, can't you see your horse is knackered' he teased. On another occasion someone looked at me funnily – well I was essentially dressed like a cowboy - 'you better be a good horse rider' he said pointedly.

At one point I also met a family and had a picnic with them. Their grandparents had been evacuated from Liverpool during the war – and had brought their grandkids to the farm they were evacuated to. I met a guy at a conference some years later – 'didn't we meet before? Weren't you riding a horse across Wales, and I was going to get my Sunday paper?'

Whilst going from Staylittie to Dylife (pronounced Dullivay), at the start of a mountain road that drops down to Machynlleth (Mackhuttleth) I phoned the one pub still functioning in Dylife (The Star Inn). I told them my needs were simple - 'I need a room, if possible, a beer and bite to eat and by the way... I've got a horse with me.' Accommodation was sorted but by the time I arrived. I was walking in the dark – a farmer stopped and lent me a torch ('leave it in the pub'), and by the time I reached the bar, the landlady was waiting patiently to help me untack my horse and lead it to a nearby field.

My end point was a cottage just beyond Corris, near Machynlleth - the ancient capital of Wales – though I went over the mountain ridge. Cadbury Cottage (real name, Ffynnon Badarn – fun-on badarn, meaning St Padarn's spring) was bought by Cadbury's for its apprentices in 1961. I used it for countless residencies with young people over the years, and bought it from Cadbury's in 1996. In the garden there's a pipe where the water comes out of the ground; it's one of the Holy Wells of Wales. And the cottage is not that far away from rock band Led Zeppelin's own cottage (Bron Yr Aur), though that was rather more modernised than my very primitive place, almost unchanged since the 1960s, with gas lighting and a wood burning stove.

Five days after I started, pelvis still intact, cowboy gear aesthetically maintained, Gordon fed and watered, the sun disappearing behind the ridge, and my bivvy bag well used, I reached the cottage. The following day my mate arrived in a horse lorry. We had a meal and some glasses of wine and the following day made a slow journey back to Clyro.

'I went in with the barrow and said to the owner, where was the ticking coming from, he said the back wall. I spun my camera around and there were at least a hundred identical white shoe boxes, and I don't have sound. "Shall I blast away at a few with my shotgun?" "No, no, no!" he shouted back!'

Billy Hillman

Billy Hillman

Enthusiastic-honest-world adventurer, Father-Grandfather, Youth Worker, Community Educator, Football Fanatic (Cardiff City), Humorous Storyteller, Creative and Charismatic Leader, Poet, Kind & Thoughtful, TV & Book Enthusiast, Bucket List Achiever - BOMB DISOPOSAL EXPERT!

Do you know what it's like to walk up to a bomb and stand there deciding which colour wire to cut so that you don't die? No... me neither. I think only James Bond knows this feeling.

Mid 1980 I passed the intensive 4-week bomb disposal course (no mean feat, high pressure training with a 78% fail rate at the time) and in October '80 off I went to 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland to put my newly attained skills into practice.

My job was as the Team Number 2, which meant that everything to do with the robot (which we call a wheelbarrow), a small tracked vehicle loaded with weapons and gadgets was my responsibility. I would sit in the back of the bomb wagon looking at a small black and white monitor as I looked for the bomb, drove my 'barrow' up to it and rendered it harmless using a weapon called a Pigstick (I won't bore you with details).

I went to Ireland in 1980, returned in 1981 and during that short period there was a massive jump in technology. My 'barrow' was powered by a hundred metre electric cable, halfway through my tour, they brought in a fully remote control 'barrow'.

The problem with the cable barrow was that the cable could get caught and if your cameras couldn't see it when you were reversing, the metal tracks could easily sever the cable and that was the barrow finished.

One day, I was on a job in the Belfast area and the device I was dealing with was down an alley and around the corner. The 'alley' was one whole side of a building on the left but on the right was a cross squares wire fence with spiked nettle bushes sticking out through it. These caught my cable and the nightmare of not being able to see the cable with my two cameras was real. What do I do? I called the Number 1, but he was nowhere to be seen.

I jumped out of the van, ran down the alley and pulled my barrow out of the bushes, ran back, and got on with my job. Brave or stupid? I'll let you decide (my vote goes with stupid).

'Another job in the high street was a shoe shop. The owner said he heard ticking and called us. We got there and he couldn't tell us how many people had been in the shop before the ticking and for how long.'

I sent the barrow (by now one of the new remote-control ones, so much better) to the shop only to find he had double doors and only one was open and it was too narrow for the barrow to get through. He wouldn't let me blow open the other door, so I had to suit up the number 1 just to go open the other door then came back.

I went in with the barrow and said to the owner, where was the ticking coming from, he said the back wall. I spun my camera around and there were at least a hundred identical white shoe boxes, and I don't have sound. 'Shall I blast away at a few with my shotgun? No, no, no!'

Back up went the number 1 to listen for some ticking, none. Open a dozen boxes, just shoes. Thorough search with no background info at all, no ticking, no job, home we go. He gave us all a new pair of shoes each.

There are many of these tales of the funny side of danger, where we trashed a beautiful lawn at 3am with our bomb wagons when the police took us down a narrow alley we couldn't get around, where again in the middle of the night I drove my barrow up a hill and an old lady came over to the bomb wagon and gave me a cup of tea and told me she saw the bomb thing moving up the road (my barrow).

On another occasion, an Ulster bus was stolen and left in the country lane roads (which we suspected would be a remote control bomb and was treating it this way) when an old farmer looking guy (the legendary 'Herman the German') just walked past me 70 metres from the bus, walked up to the bus, got on, had a look around, shouted 'it's ok lads' and drove the bus away leaving us all standing there with our mouths open in disbelief.

Apparently, he worked for the Ulsterbus company and if there was a bomb on board, he would lift it off, put it on the floor and drive the bus away.

When I came home, I told my dad this story and many years later, on the ten o'clock news at the 'and finally' section there was a story of Herman the German retiring. I called my father to watch, I couldn't believe it.

'We lived the dream that weekend. We got a boat across the Bosphorus, talking and laughing all the way, but timing wasn't our strength that night – maybe too many cornflakes or just the fun of dancing for joy. We got the times wrong (see, numbers matter) and couldn't get a boat back. We spent a night sleeping with the friendly local homeless in a park, who moved over on their benches that night to accommodate us.'

Susie Nicodemi

Susie Nicodemi

Cosmopolitan, Activist, Mum,
Friend, Wife, Youth Work Promoter,
Facilitator, Reporter, Outdoor
Lover, Daughter, Learner,
MATHS ADDICT!

What's your favourite number? Maybe lucky 8? A nice round 24 or 36, making it easy to divide into different small working groups? Or prime number 17? For me, 1.618 is a beautiful number. These are the first four digits of a never-ending number, with no repeating pattern, that can't be written as a fraction. An irrational number that explains a lot of the universe – better than 42! Got it? Yes, simple! Right? Ok, bear with me.

It's an ancient ratio which originally comes from an Indian formula $(1+\sqrt{5})/2$. It can be seen in the Fibonacci sequence (a series, where the numbers equal the sum of the previous two numbers).

If you take two numbers from that sequence, the ratio between them gets closer and closer to this magic golden ratio (check out my t-shirt in this picture, a meeting of irrational numbers).



Now you might be wondering why I'm telling you this. You might normally associate me with things like Erasmus+, parenting, the British Council, the outdoors and so on but, it's a bit more complex than that - just like the maths formula I've just quoted - and the complexity of what I'm about to tell you, might come as a surprise.

I'm a Maths Addict – a Mathematician no less! Yes, I've said it! That's me out of the Pythagoras Closet, I'm a MATHEMATICIAN. I'm a Maths Addict. Some might prefer to use terms like nerd, geek and so on, but that doesn't go far enough to really explaining my love affair with numbers.

I love numbers, I love mathematics. It explains so much. The one thing that can never be debated is numbers – maths cannot be replaced by opinion, or speculation. Maths explains so much, and I have been in love with numbers since I was a kid.

My love for maths was nurtured from the age of 8, my Maths Teacher - Mr Ron Long - made maths real for me. Among other things, it involved hula hoops, leaving the classroom to learn about timing the speed of cars and so on. It paved the way for my becoming a specialised Maths student before completing my Maths Degree at University.

I met many interesting geeky people – even before Erasmus+! Maths is beautiful in that it explains things, and it connects things. If you want to understand things, people, and places there is a common language: maths.

Numbers work. They are facts. Maths is binary, it's either true or not. In the current climate and feeling of chaos, or disinformation, it is the beauty of maths that encourages me, it gives certainty, something to frame reality and to rely on. Come on, are you getting persuaded by its attractiveness yet?

But that's not the only surprise. If you thought that maths was a surprise, then perhaps the next one will be even more of a surprise - DANCING! (There is absolutely no truth in the rumour that Mathematicians don't dance). When you think of mathematicians, you don't suddenly conjure up the image in your mind of anyone strutting their stuff on the dance floor, or perhaps performing ballet, or do you? No, I didn't think so.

'That's me out of the Pythagoras Closet! I'm a MATHEMATICIAN.'

Maths comes in handy in so many ways and is also connected to dancing (1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 3 and so on). Whether it's keeping a beat or rhythm, or the repeated patterns used, maths is also involved in dancing. But it was dancing - not maths - that brought me to one irrational adventure through international youth work.

My whole youth was filled with experiences in learning and teaching ballet, tap-dancing, contemporary and national dancing - Macedonian folk dancing even. My dad was a Morris dancer and dancing was always around us. I was always first on the dance floor at a party. It was later in my professional life that I met a colleague - another trainer - Evelina Taunyte, and we discovered a common interest in dancing. We had a passion for silent disco dancing! Yes, I know! Susie Nicodemi - a Mathematician who has done ballet and is passionate about silent disco dancing!

On one occasion we met in Istanbul for a weekend. We stayed at a cheap hostel, and took the sheets off the bed, dressed up in them to have some experiential learning about wearing a hijab. We ended up having a silent disco, dancing to Tori Amos. We were the original Cornflake Girls or at least we liked to think so.

We lived the dream that weekend. We got a boat across the Bosphorus, talking and laughing all the way, but timing wasn't our strength that night - maybe too many cornflakes or just the fun of dancing for joy. We got the times wrong (see, numbers matter) and couldn't get a boat back. We spent a night sleeping with the friendly local homeless in a park, who moved over on their benches that night to accommodate us.

We got a boat back across early in the morning and back to the Chinese hostel (we never slept in), picked up our bags, and left for the airport. We didn't miss our flights - we knew the importance of numbers then!

So, it's out - that's it - I'm a Maths Addict, and I dance with joy in the outdoors occasionally, although not always wearing bed sheets I might add.

'Not sure what to do with us, they separated us in the hallway. At 13, I looked much older, and thus probably appeared 'fair game' for a bit of messing with my mind. Facing a wall, the gun man put his pistol to the back of my head and asked me in a no-nonsense mood, 'what the fuck were you doing back there?'

Fergal Barr

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Parent, Grandparent, Youth Worker, Facilitator, Trainer, Airbnb Host, sometimes-suffering Liverpool Supporter, Tea Drinker, avid Book Reader, Humour and Music Lover, Occasional Author, ABDUCTEE!



'If anyone tries to take the car, bang on the horn and flash the lights and keep them flashing and the horn going.' That was the plan and that was the routine. My father was a baker during the week but at the weekends he was a Provident Collector. Provident – a personal loan company – more like a legal loan shark given their high interest rates, but for many in Northern Ireland, especially during the 'Troubles,' it was their only access to credit, much needed credit, just to survive.

My father was the man who lent people the money – not his money of course. For every pound Provident got, my father got nine pence and he had to cover all his costs out of this – fuel, food, tax, an allowance to my mother who helped with the bookkeeping as maths was not my father's forte.

Growing up in Northern Ireland during a period of intense and sustained political violence over three to four decades was far from idyllic and very far from normal to barely a day without a shooting, bombing, riot, murder, assault, or hijacking, the latter being the thing my father feared the most.

Most of his customers were in Catholic-Nationalist-Republican areas (93% of Northern Ireland's population live separate from one another and roughly the same percentage go to separate schools). Even though he was well known in the community – be it through his being a Lay Minister in the local Catholic Church, running the bowls club in the local community centre, or organising Bingo in the local parish hall, two nights per week, he knew that for some, this would count for nothing if 'the moment' ever arrived.

The risks were high – every Friday night and Saturday we'd be out on 'our rounds'. I say our rounds, but it was more my father's rounds. I was there to be his 'guard dog' as it were. To be honest I hated it – every Friday night and almost all of Saturday I was with him from about the age of 8 or 9. Whilst my peers were

out playing and enjoying what the weekend had to offer, I was sat alone most of the time in the car keeping an eye out for 'the moment.'

Of course, I understood my father needed me. I was his son and he relied on me. My mother used to help out but once my younger sister arrived that was it. The baton was very firmly passed over to me. And whilst my older sister was available, tradition and conventional thinking dictated that this was a job for males. My father didn't want to put any of the female members of the family in the line of fire so to speak.

We used to do the rounds in an old orange and white VW Camper which is one reason why my father became so well known around town. I think we might have been the only family in my hometown of Derry in Northern Ireland that actually had a camper. They really were few and far between. We did use it for holidays in the south of Ireland and overnights in County Donegal but life in the VW camper, or Ford Escort and Fiat Regata which came later was often about keeping an eye, opening, and locking doors, and ultimately 'waiting for the moment.'

My father's rounds involved calling into customers to collect money they owed and to lend money they didn't have to keep things going. He hated the job if truth be told but needs must – there was no option. He had to bring in more income because full-time in the bakery wasn't enough.

People were familiar with his 'doing his rounds.' As he worked in the bakery during the week, he could only do his rounds on Friday night and Saturday. Not only did his customers know this but those who might be interested in his car for purposes other than visiting his customers.

My father used to say he was always told to vary his route so that any potential attack from paramilitaries might be avoided. If he arrived earlier in a particular area, they might be caught off guard. One night he did. It made no difference. The paramilitaries were waiting.

As I sat listening to Tina Turner (I think it was 'Simply the Best') and singing along, I could hear a kind of muffling sound to the rear of the car, as if there was shouting, a kind of commotion. I looked in the mirror, and in the dimly lit night, I saw a man running up steps calling for help! It was my father, heading at speed towards the car.

I remembered the plan. I jumped over into the driver's side and hit the horn and put on the hazard lights and turned on the head lights. I kept my hand pressed on the horn. They weren't going to get a car without a fight! By the time my father got to the car, three men in dark clothing and balaclavas caught up with him. They pushed him against the driver's door.

'Tell that fucker to stop pressing the horn!' I looked at him as he pointed the pistol at me through the window. At first, I refused. This was the plan of course. I had to defend the car at all costs. I was holding up my side of the bargain. I had to fulfil the promise I made to my father. A promise in my own mind but not one written down anywhere. My father raised his hand and indicated me to stop. I knew then it was serious. I unlocked the driver's door, and I was pulled out of the front seat. We were bundled into the back seat.

Two-gun men in the front, one with us in the back. My father was petrified. He was worried for me, his 13-year-old son. This moment we had always prepared for and so I had to be strong. I had to look after my father. Or at least that's the responsibility I felt. He was afraid, he thought we were going to die. It wasn't unknown for people to be abducted and not come home. It didn't matter if you shared commonality with paramilitaries from your 'own side.' For many, this made no difference in the slightest. The goal was bigger – remove the British from Ireland, and if you end up as collateral damage, then so be it.

We were taken a short distance to a block of flats. Uncannily no-one was at home in the block of flats in that moment, almost as if it had been pre-arranged for residents to make their absence felt that evening. The hallway was dark, the only light coming into it was from the streetlamp outside.

The commotion I had caused with our pre-arranged routine did not go down well with the gun men. They were nervous, and irritable, and trying to work out their next steps because they knew there was a risk, that word might have got out that an attack was under way and all of the army and police bases would be alerted and roadblocks set up, and whatever they had planned scuppered. That in effect wasn't good news for us.

'I was holding up my side of the bargain. I had to fulfil the promise I made to my father.'

Whilst trying to work out whether to continue with their as yet unclear mission, they were unsure what to do with us. Baggage they didn't need. Their carefully choreographed plans were disturbed by my father managing to evade them initially – he saw them before he got to his customer and turned on his heels hence the chase – and then there was me – flashing lights and horns! It was meant to be much simpler. Grab my unsuspecting father at gun point, quietly bundle us into the back of the car whilst no-one was looking, drop us off at the flat, issue instructions, and they'd head off on their 'mission.'

Not sure what to do with us, they separated us in the hallway. At 13, I looked much older, and thus probably appeared 'fair game' for a bit of messing with my mind. Facing a wall, the gun man put his pistol to the back of my head and ask me in a no-nonsense mood, 'what the fuck were you doing back there?'

In my own mind, I had nothing but disdain for his question. What a stupid question I thought. What kind of man was this that

he can't even ask a decent question. Yes, this was, believe it or not the thought going through my head. 'What do you think I was doing?' I snapped back. He didn't like my attitude. 'You know I could put a bullet in the back of your head here?' Again, I was genuinely disturbed by his line of questioning – wasn't this obvious? He had the gun – of course he could. I just answered, 'Yes' almost waiting for him to get it over and done with.

Somehow, I felt quite calm in this moment, more worried about my father than me, that he would be left with the 'mess,' the impact of losing a son, how would he tell my mother. He was an older almost middle-aged man, too much of a risk to kill, too well-known in areas where the gun men might live and so their reputation might be damaged, not that over the years, they didn't mind this so much. But take out a young man in his teens – distinctly possible.

The belief that I might have put up a fight and this led to my being shot might well have been a version of events that emerged. In the battle of the propaganda war, it only takes a whiff of a suggestion of such to make things credible. And as we well know, 'collateral damage' is something that happens in wars, civilians the victims more often than not.

Something about being thirteen, thinking that perhaps we're going to die anyways and not giving him the satisfaction might have been a factor in my thinking back then, which is probably also a bit of a Northern Irish attitude. I was of course quite annoyed that he had caused such distress to my father so I decided to be somewhat cantankerous without appreciating that I might be antagonising him somewhat.

It seemed he got bored with me and then told me to 'stand over there' pointing in the direction of one of his 'comrades.' 'What are you doing over here?' the other gun man

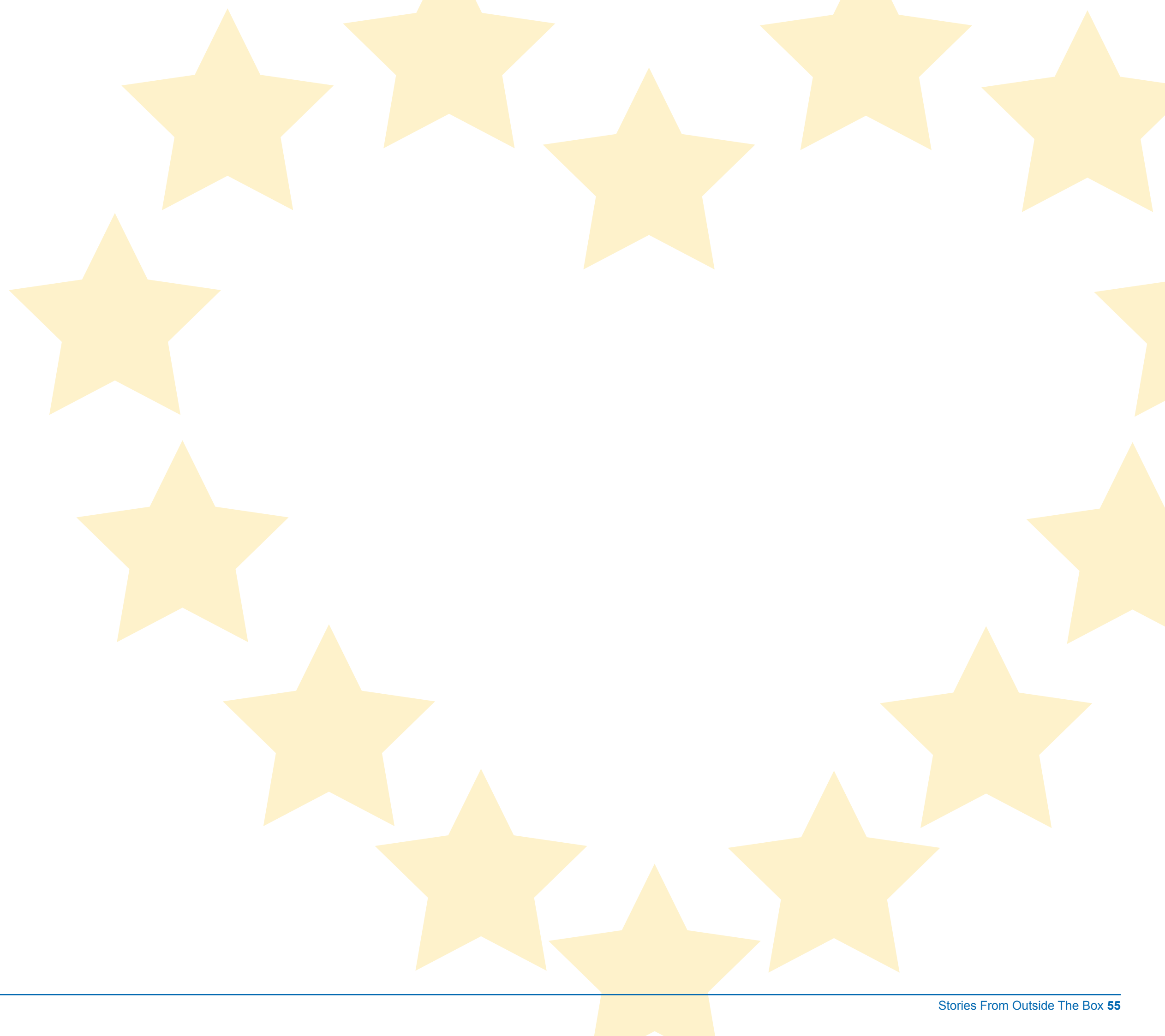
exclaimed. Again, totally unimpressed now by their questions, and that none of them seem to know what they were doing, I barked back, 'he told me to stand over here!'

It was clear that they were trying to work out what to do and, in the end, they decided to abandon their mission which as it turned out was to put a bomb in the car, and park it outside a local police station. Minimal damage would have been done to the heavily fortified police station but to the surrounding houses only feet away and the possible loss of life that might have ensued, well that's a different matter.

We were abandoned in the hallway of the flat and told not to leave for 15 minutes and then go to a certain place and pick up the car. We did as we had been instructed. When we arrived, the engine was running and incredibly, without even thinking about it, we jumped into the car and drove home.

We never checked the car, we just wanted to get home. Within ten minutes of arrival, the local priest called to check on us – word had spread - and the following morning, we were back out once more on our 'rounds.' My father was traumatised by the event, and for years, asked that I never tell anyone about it. He's no longer with us, so I'm free to speak now.

My Story...



**Volume 2 will
appear in early
2024.**

**Thank you
for reading.**

