



## **The Learn Thing**

**Life Lessons Inside and Outside The Box**

**By Thomas Cloherty**

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## Endorsements

*Tommy Cloherty is the person who helps you to stop and think. Through a series of questions and gentle guidance, he helps people find their “Eureka” moment.*

*Tommy helps people to ensure that their dreams, ideas, and inventions find life and live! When I was writing my book, I struggled seeing myself as an author and had a real love hate relationship with my writing. There were several occasions when I felt like giving up and if you don't have anyone in your circle spurring you on, helping you believe that something is possible, your 'book' will go to the graveyard. Unwritten and unread.*

*To find someone who is genuinely interested in helping you fulfil your dreams is like gold-dust; rare and valuable. It's more than having someone encouraging you; it's actually having someone that is adept in helping you find the keys, unlocking your potential and swinging the door wide open!*

*Roll on a few years, I am now running my own business, have started a national campaign, and have spoken internationally.*

*Writing a book may not be your thing but we all have something that we would like to conquer or achieve. Whatever it is that is holding you back, it's time to learn how to look at things differently and overcome.*

*Tommy uses his toolbox of positivity to help you break out of your 'boxed in' mindset and turn those blockages into stepping stones...and that's where the fun begins!*

### **Cherron Inko-Tariah MBE**

Author | Consultant | Coach | Facilitator

NExD, Homerton University Hospital

Vice Chair, Seacole Group (NED Network)

CEO, The Power of Staff Networks Group

Co-Founder, The Grey Area

*C4WS Homeless Project has been working with Tommy Cloherty for the last five years to help us develop and implement core programmes to add much needed vital support for some of the most vulnerable people we work with.*

*As a project offering shelter and then moving people from this into accommodation, we became conscious that the transition to managing your own home brought its own issues; we wanted to establish a Mentoring and Befriending Scheme which would be mainly delivered by trained volunteers.*

*Expanding this to be delivered by volunteers posed new challenges and ways of working to effectively and safely help our guests. Tommy brought his wealth of experience - and calming reassurance! - to help us establish a scheme from scratch which included building a bespoke training process for our volunteers and being on hand to help us address issues that arose. Three years ago, we decided to create an innovative hosting project to place guests of our shelter in interim accommodation using spare rooms across London until we could fully resolve their housing needs.*

*Once again we turned to Tommy to help us create our project, Home From Home, using his experience as the Hosting Coordinator at Housing Justice. We developed and ran a successful pilot scheme under Tommy's guidance which gave us the confidence to roll it out as a permanent project of C4WS. We also relied on Tommy to help us with inputting into the training sessions for volunteers to build a bank of fantastic and well-prepared hosts.*

*Today, Mentoring and Befriending and Home From Home are fully integrated into our services and have helped transform the lives of our guests. We are hugely grateful to Tommy for his insights, dedication and always being there at the end of a phone to help us problem-solve and improve these services. C4WS would not be half the charity it is without these projects and we can't thank Tommy enough for everything he has contributed to them.*

**Sam Forsdike**

Welfare Manager, C4WS Homeless Project, London

## **About the Author**

1964 - born in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, England

1968-75 - went to Infants and Junior School in Outlane and Honley, West Yorkshire

1975-81 - went to Honley High School

1981-1983 - moved with family to the west of Ireland at age seventeen (worked as builder's labourer for six months in 1981)

1983-1985 - began working away from home during the week as a porter and night porter in hotels in the west of Ireland

1985-1991 - moved to London to "make my way in the world" and continued working in the hospitality industry

1991-1995 - worked in Italian restaurant (went to university as a mature student in Writing and Publishing while working there)

1995-1997 - moved to Milan, Italy, and worked as an English teacher for professionals

1997-2001 - moved to England, and worked as resident caretaker

2001-2015 - employed at HOPE *worldwide*, a charity housing single homeless people, progressing to Head of Homeless Services (began running creative writing groups on an occasional basis in 2001)

2015-April 2020 - employed at Housing Justice as Mentoring & Befriending Co-ordinator, then as Hosting Co-ordinator for Asylum Seekers and Forced Migrants; also began working as a private tutor (began running weekly creative writing groups in my spare time)

from 2015-2019 and set up as a sole trader in 2015, eventually setting up a limited company in February 2020)

July 2020 – moved to Ireland to embark on a new chapter, learning life lessons inside and outside the box...

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## Introduction

**T**his is the story of someone who has learned some very valuable lessons, at times painful, at times joyous, at times hilarious, at times embarrassing; both inside the boxes of education, career path and relationships, and outside – and who is still learning. I have definitely been a late starter in many things and hope my story gives hope to those of you who may feel you’ve “missed the boat” in life and have given up hope. If you’ve felt there’s something wrong with you because you don’t learn the way others do, or feel trapped in a system that doesn’t necessarily enable you to flourish and blaze your personal trail in the world, then I hope you will feel a little less alone as I share some of my moments, mishaps and musings with you; you most certainly are not alone!

By way of setting the scene, let me provide some background to the education system I was brought up and learned in – sometimes with enthusiasm and sometimes under duress, as I struggled to be inspired within it – and I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my dear friend Gilda Daley for the following research.

**I**n early Victorian Britain, many children did not go to school as education had not yet become compulsory and had to be paid for, and children from poorer families often worked in order to help their families survive if their parents were sick or disabled. Girls tended not to go to school at all, with the exception of a small number of very wealthy girls who attended boarding school or were taught by a governess at home.

During the Victorian era, the Government made gradual steps towards a more robust schooling system in Britain and in 1839, the

first groups of school inspectors were employed to examine and assess schools.

Families living in the big cities around Britain found it particularly difficult to send their children to school because of the fees, as well as losing the income their children brought in if they were working. In the mid-1840s, the idea of Ragged Schools, a type of volunteer-led school, spread to London. These were the only education available for those families who had been turned away from other charitable or church schools and who couldn't pay for their children to learn. Children who went to Ragged Schools tended to be poor and commonly came from families where parents were abusive or drunks, and some pupils were orphaned or had parents in prison, so they had taken to sleeping on the streets. The Ragged Schools gave free meals and clothing to their pupils and taught them a trade such as making shoes, lacemaking, cookery, and other domestic skills.

In 1846, the Government began to help pay for teacher training too, which would serve to help more teachers get the training they needed to successfully teach this new generation of young people.

By the 1860s, although there were no schools fully funded by the Government yet, Parliament was allocating more money than ever for education and in 1862, Parliament also made it compulsory for head teachers to keep daily and weekly records of what happened at their school in a log book. This was a good way to check that progress and attendance were being monitored. Head teachers were made more responsible for the students under their care. However, with no laws still to make children attend, progress was difficult and was not helped by a continued lack of teaching resources and staff.

By the late 1860s, lots more voluntary schools had been opened. Many working-class children now went to school for some of their

childhood. What did become clear was that more schools were needed, as there was still an unacceptable amount of illiteracy in Britain and those children who lived in the urban slums and more remote areas still weren't able to access a school. Britain was going through an amazing, prosperous period of industrialisation and the British Empire was growing. There was a serious need to educate all British people to help drive Britain forward and be able to show off its citizens to the world. These young people were the future of Great Britain, the then capital of the world.

Finally, in 1870, the Government passed an Education Act to deal with the education of Britain's young generation. It had been decided that it was crucial for the future of the country and its citizens, for education to be provided throughout the nation. Every child was to be given a place at school and school buildings had to be of a reasonable quality. Head teachers now had to be qualified too. Schools throughout the nation were inspected and checked to make sure that the education they were offering met the new standards. New rules now meant that school boards could make school compulsory for children between five and ten years old. Over the next ten years, new schools were set up in areas where there had been none before, making education accessible for everyone. School boards were set up to manage and build these.

The next big step came in 1880 with the Elementary Education Act. Where school boards had previously been given the choice over whether to make children go to school, the new laws meant that every child had to attend school, and the 1891 Elementary Education Act established new rules declaring that elementary education was to be free for all, not just for those in severe poverty.

Unlike school today, a Victorian child could expect to be cold at school as there may not have been a fire to heat the classroom or school hall. Having most probably walked to school, children might

spend much of the time in wet, cold clothes (depending on the time of year) and would certainly be tired from having to do chores and the journey to school. On arrival, they would often be inspected by the teacher and would have to be smartly turned out. Respect for the teacher was very important and children had to bow or curtsy to them during registration.

Lessons would be in reading, writing and arithmetic. Sometimes schools would teach Geography, History and 'Drill', the Victorian equivalent of Physical Education. Books would be shared among the whole class and kept by the teacher on his or her desk at the front of the room. Depending on which school you went to, you may or may not have a break time. During lessons, pupils were expected to pay attention and work to a high standard, and if they made a mistake, such as a wrong spelling or even writing with the left hand, punishments would either be painful or humiliating, such as a sharp rap across the knuckles with a cane or being sent to the corner to wear the dunce's cap with their face turned to the wall in shame. If children fell asleep in class, they could expect to receive a nasty rap from the teacher's ruler or be woken up with very cold water.

Significant improvements had taken place in the space of sixty years, and by the end of the 1800s many of the town schools had libraries as well as pianos. As well as the three Rs, subjects studied might include Sport, Needlework, Drawing and Craftwork, Map drawing, Geography, History, Religion, Gardening, and Music. Some schools had also opened special rooms for Science and Cookery. Schools gave awards and prizes to encourage progress and hard work. Pupils were being closely monitored and a Queen Victoria Medal might be awarded to pupils with outstanding attendance in recognition of the importance of school and a pupil's commitment. In contrast to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

every child in Britain, rich or poor, now went to school and by 1900 there were 5.7 million pupils attending elementary classes.

Fast forward to the 1940s and the Education Act of 1944, which aimed to assure a more even standard of educational opportunity throughout England and Wales and introduced free education for all children aged from five to fifteen, free school meals for all children, along with transport, medical and dental treatment. The idea was uniformity of opportunity, and the education system has been grappling with this since then, with varying degrees of success.

**I**n Ireland, the education system has been on an even more complex and fluctuating path. In pre-Christian times, bardic schools and the tradition of respect for storytelling (*file*, or poets, had a place of honour in Irish tribal society) provided an opportunity for education and the preservation of history and folklore for generations. Monasteries began to appear across the tribal island of Ireland from the fifth century onwards, and provided education based on the written word, even as the rest of Europe went through the tumultuous and battle-scarred Dark Ages after the fall of the Roman Empire – its location at the far western shores of Europe enabled organised education in monasteries to survive longer than in other parts of Europe where frequent battles between Vikings, barbarians and other tribal factions prevented the conditions under which teaching was possible. It was at this time that Ireland became known as the Island of Saints and Scholars. Fast forward to the Reformation at the time of Henry VIII in England; Christianity had survived many upheavals and was now the dominant religion in Europe, but there was division between the Catholic and Orthodox forms. The Norman invasion of Ireland in the 1500s led to a crackdown on Catholicism; monasteries were closed down and Catholics (despite being the

majority of the population) faced increasing restrictions in daily life – culminating in the Penal Laws of 1695-1829. These forbade – among other things – education for Catholics and their children (either in Ireland or elsewhere), the right to vote, take up certain professions for Catholics who refused to renounce their faith, own property, travel or trade freely.

Rather than suppress Catholic sentiment, the Penal Laws served largely to increase resistance – Catholic Masses were held in secret and Hedge Schools educated the children of Catholics in remote and hidden shacks. The struggle between Catholic and Protestant (or non-denominational) education continued. This is a turbulent and rich journey which I am doing no justice to by skimming over so quickly here, but for the purposes of giving a sense of how the Irish education system became what it is today, I think it is fair to summarise by saying there has been conflict around the idea and therefore the content of the system for generations, both from foreign agents and different sections of Irish society. Throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, education was seen as a means to entering a trade and girls – who were expected only to learn how to become good wives and housekeepers - were taught domestic skills while boys were trained in subjects that would help them earn a living later on. This inferior education system led the Irish nun Honora Nagle to set up what became known as Presentation Schools dedicated to the effective education of the poor and where girls learned industrial skills as well as literacy. The Presentation Sisters went on to play a major part in the education of Catholic girls prior to the implementation of the national school system in 1831. The national school system was established “to unite in one system children of different creeds.”

The National Board was to look “with peculiar favour” on schools that were jointly managed by Catholics and Protestant, and while the Board would decide the curriculum for moral and literary

instruction, the patron of each school would determine the form and content of religious instruction in the schools under his patronage. The Rules for National Schools to the present day set down that “no pupil shall receive or be present at any religious instruction of which his parents or guardians do not approve” and also “that the periods of formal religious instruction shall be fixed so as to facilitate the withdrawal of [such] pupils” (Department of Education, Rules for National Schools, 1947). The idea was that religion should not exclude any child from the same educational opportunities as anyone else.

While the intention may have been laudable, the National Board came under continued and persistent pressure from Protestant and Catholic education providers who wanted to run their schools in line with the principles of their religion and by 1965, the vast majority of national schools were denominational and nearly all Catholic; updates to the Rules in 1965 and a new curriculum published in 1971 meant that almost all primary education in the Republic of Ireland (which had, incidentally, only been established in 1921 after many years of bloodshed and turmoil) was Catholic in nature, and there was little provision for children who didn't follow the religion. Catholic schools were well-known for their strict regimes, physical punishment and traditionalist approach to teaching – reading, writing and arithmetic along with the moral teachings of the Catholic Church, were formally taught and those children who struggled or needed extra support were often overlooked and humiliated. The erstwhile oppressed Catholic doctrines, along with the previously suppressed Irish language, enjoyed a huge resurgence throughout the Republic of Ireland in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Progression through the school years is subject to completing the Junior Cycle, culminating in the Junior Certificate exam which will in turn, enable them to progress to the Leaving Certificate exam

after a further two years of study. Both are points-based examinations and determine which higher education options may be available to students. Competition for university places has led to a huge percentage of secondary school students also paying for supplementary private tuition (often called “grinds” in Ireland). The emphasis on points and linear progression through the education system doesn’t leave too many options for success outside the traditional academic settings. Coupled with Ireland’s long history of emigration for the chance of a better life abroad, the outlook could appear fairly gloomy for students who aren’t best suited to the traditional education paths. Perhaps it isn’t so surprising that, given the generations in which the majority of Irish people were forbidden from having a formal education, such a great emphasis is put on Irish schoolchildren to make the most of the opportunity they have been given. But what about those children who don’t do well in academic settings?

I am deeply grateful to have been born and brought up in a country (England) which values education so highly, in a world where many children have no access to it or are even forbidden from learning. I appreciate the fact that no system is going to be perfect and that to function with any degree of fairness, a system has to have some structure. My concern in writing this book is that some, who are perhaps not able to reach their full potential in a system which measures success by exams, scores, and grades, are led to feel inferior and somehow lacking - all because they weren’t suited to the “cookie cutter” aspects of the school system. The coronavirus pandemic and consequent lockdown has forced home schooling on more people than ever could have been anticipated, and it looks as if social distancing requirements will mean that some students will never again return to the classroom setting full-time, so it is potentially the right time to reconsider learning. I’m not talking about overhauling the education system irrevocably for everyone, but using this “reset” moment to address, acknowledge and allow



learning alternatives outside the box of the education system. Looking back at my life, I have learned both in “the system” and outside it. Both types of learning have been worthwhile and enriching. I also conclude that they are complementary and don’t need to be pitted one against the other in a “which is best” contest. So here’s the background to my story; I hope you enjoy and are provoked to thought by it.

**E**ver since I was young, I’ve loved writing, reading, and anything to do with words. In fact, I could easily go through a book in a couple of hours; I loved few things more than going to the library, getting a couple of books out and immersing myself in another world. Even as an adult, if I’m reading something really engrossing, I will continue reading on the bus or while walking down the road (not recommended, especially in busy traffic!) because I just wanted to get to the end of the page or the chapter. I also loved writing, and was blessed with the gift of writing as long as I can remember; I loved creating stories and would usually be told on my reports that I have a vivid imagination. I won a Silver Seagull story writing competition when I was in Junior school (though I have no idea what the story was about). I remember writing long and detailed letters to my French penfriend at the age of 13 or 14 and being able to write (and actually enjoy writing) long essays for exams and in class without batting an eyelid.

I also recall annoying one of my classmates who thought I was “always asking questions” of the teacher – he was right; I was! But I was like a sponge, wanting to soak up everything I’d read or been shown on the blackboard. My parents said I always had my head in a book. I spent ages working on my autograph when I was around 14 or 15 (in preparation for when I became a famous author and would be signing copies of my best seller, you understand...) and

can still write it the way I came up with, even if I don't sign off that way any longer. Books and stories were like oxygen to me.

I am still enthralled by the way a book can transport the reader into the mind of the writer or into a place long ago and far away – if it's well written, of course! I wrote 30,000 words of a novel a few years ago, and the kind of feedback I got was that the reader “was there”, or it really “made me feel I was experiencing it for myself”, which made me wonder whether I can evoke the same feelings in others.

I also had a natural curiosity for nature, for history (despite doing quite badly in O-level history because I found it so dry and boring; I think if the teaching methods had been different and perhaps more like today's, with interaction, simulations and historical recreations, it would have been a different story), for how things worked, (I'd often get myself into trouble for taking things apart and not knowing how to put them back together again), and for exploring. If I found a tunnel, or a drawer in a cupboard that had been closed for years, an attic, or a path that seemed to have been untrodden for many years, I'd be straight in with little fear and a huge dose of excitement. This innate curiosity would lead me off on solitary trips to ruins, fields and abandoned houses, and I would remain for ages there, imagining what the places must have been like before; what did the people look like, what did they wear, what did they eat, and what did they say? How did this path or piece of junk get where it was? What's around the next corner? How would this taste if I added this or that ingredient? I believe that learning is what makes life exciting and worth living and I hope I never lose my joy of learning. I can't imagine how dry the days would feel if I ran out of new things to learn.

The quest for knowledge led me to do lots of things I'd not have tried otherwise. I was the first in my family to travel abroad, the first to leave home, the first to learn a foreign language, the first to pass my driving test, and the first to get a mortgage. (A very long

story which you'll read more about later!) I have to insert a caveat here and add that my parents and siblings did lots of things I didn't do. I don't want to sound boastful about the things I did first, it's just that often I didn't want to wait for others to give me "permission" to pursue new adventures.

I love trying new experiences and learning from them. My higher education was interrupted when my family moved to Ireland when I was 17 (I left Ireland again when I was 21) but I was able to go to university as a mature student and get a degree in Writing and Publishing when I was in my late twenties. After the relocation to Ireland, I'd lost some direction and got into the "working" mindset; it's around this time that I largely stopped doing much in the way of writing, though I was still a voracious reader. My passion lay dormant for several years. Doing the university degree and being in the academic environment with other students and lecturers reawakened my love for words to an extent, and I flourished there; I remember one lecturer commenting on an essay I wrote on the culture of Ireland, that it was a "beautifully written piece of work", which did wonders for my stalled confidence.

**S**o, many years later, here's my first book; I deeply appreciate you taking the time to pick up this book and read thus far. I hope that in reading it, you will be able to relate to at least some of what I have experienced, might be inspired to look back and learn from some of your own life as well as mine, and might even consider taking a curious peek before stepping out of whatever box might be keeping you contained at the moment. I hope you might have a laugh or two, be moved and encouraged. So let's go, learning outside the box...

...And for those of you who have the staying power to make it right to the end of the book, on page 174, you'll find the Learn Thing

principles I have identified from the many experiences life has given me – I am still on my learning journey (both inside and outside the traditional boxes!) and intend to continue on it for the rest of my days. Every day has a new lesson for all of us!