



At a life coaching retreat in Connemara, FRANCES POWER leaves her inner cynic at home.

I'm sitting on a white sofa in a light-filled room a stone's throw from the sea. With me are eight other people. One is Ann Kelly, a life coach whose mission for the week is to lead us through our emotional boglands to the safety of higher, drier ground. The rest of us are a mixed bag. Mostly thirties and forties, some single, some not, but all looking for answers. We're here because of work, relationships and that catch-all, to find a better quality of life.

This morning, Ann Kelly is talking about beliefs. "Behind every pattern of behaviour is a belief. Our beliefs are just a story we tell ourselves. Beneath them lies something else that may surprise you. If you find an area of your life is blocked, change your beliefs until they work for you." Silence. It's part gobsmacked, part resistant. "Am I preaching?" Ann Kelly asks. "A little," is one verdict.

It's only day three of a week-long course, but already the group is relaxed enough to be honest, not just with each other, but with Ann, so something is working. She's told us it'll be like peeling the layers of an onion. At the core, we hope to find honesty, self-awareness and whatever is blocking us. It's a sort of life audit.

Every life coach has a different approach. Ann, fiftysomething and a mum to two now grown-up children, uses everything she's learned so far – that's 23 years in a multinational, NLP techniques (neuro-linguistic programming) and her life-coach training. "Life coaching," she explains, "is a fairly robust experience, based on taking you from where you are now to where you want to be." It's for those, she elaborates, who feel stuck, who want to make a change. What it's not is counselling. "Therapists may disagree but I believe therapy is more about looking at the past and seeing the why and how, then taking you for-

ward." NLP – as far as I can see – is the process of being aware of the language you use and what you say, then using techniques to literally reprogramme the way you think. "It only takes 15 minutes," says Ann, "to change your mind."

Soon, the layers began to peel away. We kicked off at 10am each morning with practical exercises – on the roles we play, our goals, what we wanted out of this White Space workshop. We worked in pairs or fours, sometimes as a group. And we had a lot of laughs.

We identified our needs, "Needs drive us," explained Ann, "and we'll go to extremes to get them met." I examined mine – a nasty little stew. It's important, says Ann, to know what they are and make sure they are met in a positive way. We pondered our core values. "They're tricky," Ann said, "because they can flip over into needs." Big words like Love, Truth, Justice began to pop up. Off came another layer. The group began to gel.

"Pass the salt please," someone said at dinner that night.

"Is that a need or a core value?" came the response.

We decided the workshop would make a good reality television show. Upgrading ourselves to a Hollywood movie, we named it *Carry On Regardless*. We cast the movie. One turning down Liv Tyler in favour of Catherine Zeta-Jones. I rejected Madonna (flexible but no acting talent) in favour of Jessica Lange. As much work was done outside the sessions as during them. We were enjoying ourselves.

One morning, we talked about stress. Ann asked us to imagine the accumulated annoyances we put up with – nasty bosses, demanding in-laws, dripping taps – as a physical weight. Then she sent us out to the beach to choose a stone of similar size and weight. We were to carry it around for the rest of the week. Corny? Maybe, but it was certainly a pain to lug around.

On Thursday, someone slipped out the door at 10.30pm, saying, "I'm just off to a Legion of Mary meeting." Ten minutes later, she was back with three bottles of wine. That was a late night.

Ann was working flat out. Apart from the sessions – we finished about 4pm each day – she gave one-on-one coaching if any of us wanted to talk through a particular issue. But we were making progress. One person began to muddle our names. "That's good," approved Ann, "mind scrambling. It means your brain is making new connections." I was re-christened Flan.

I begged a session. It was brilliant. The sun didn't shine, the birds didn't sing. But I clicked about what I was doing that kept getting me into trouble. Ann has a talent for cutting through to the core issue of a problem with deadly precision. "It's a matter of finding out why you always end up in Dublin when you set out for Connemara." Within five minutes, the decision I was there to make was resolved.

The only jarring note came the day we looked at love. What was it? We all had differing ideas – comfort, a warm feeling, something too big to put into words – that, Ann told us, was Little Love, emotional love. There was also Big Love. It was universal, global, divine, it put our crises in perspective. Only a few evolved beings would experience it in their lifetime. The Group didn't like this. Arms were crossed. We knew we could do anything. Ann took it well. "I'm still testing this part of the course for myself," she said. That's what's great about her – she admits when she's unsure.

Afterwards, I made myself some tea. A mean solo cup, not a pot. "Little love," remarked one of my group.

Our last day. We took stock. Had we peeled the onion? Well, everyone had changed, but in subtle ways. "Remember," said Ann, "small things make a difference. Imagine spending a night in a tent with a mosquito." For myself, things had shifted. It was all about attitude, I realised. The obstacles to doing what I wanted exist only in my mind. Later I learn that three of the group couldn't bear to part. They went for dinner, ended up all staying the night at one of their houses. They may still be together. ■

Ann Kelly's next White Space Workshop, December 27-1 January 2005; for details, 021 435 4725; ann@yourworldyourway.com; www.yourworldyourway.com.