

# The Woking Wanderer: A Tale of Conversion

*Woking has always attracted fascinating converts, and Khalil (Paul Henry) Martin is no different, writes Cameron Appel, as he tells us the amazing conversion tale of this local, wandering, hippie*

Khalil Martin, born Paul Henry Martin, sips his tea and contemplates where to start his story.

"I was born in Woking in 1951", he finally begins.

"I didn't come from a religious family. My parents found that religious people were self-righteous and overbearing".

There is a pause.

"They owned a successful shop in the town centre that sold high quality clothing. They were very aspirational".

We are sat in Khalil's office in a small industrial estate in the town of Frimley, ten miles west of Woking. Khalil cycles here regularly from his home. The walls are white, except for a few adverts of the outdoor gym equipment his company supplies to organisations and local authorities up and down the country. Khalil is wearing glasses and has a neat white beard with flecks of grey but not a strand of hair on his head. He is dressed in a comfortable knitted cardigan and brown corduroys. It is a look as relaxed as the man himself. Khalil is clearly at peace.

But it wasn't always that way. As an eighteen-year-old economics student at Exeter University, in the late 1960s, Khalil found himself unsettled. Whether he was afflicted by the 'swinging 60s' era he was living through or something deeper, the economics degree he was enrolled on - largely influenced by his father - was not making him happy. Khalil was becoming less and less convinced that a 'safe', middle-of-the-road, life and career was what he was destined to do. Instead of contemplating the merits of Keynesian economic theory, the young Khalil found his head swimming with more profound questions about belonging and purpose.

By the end of his first year, he knew economics wasn't for him and instead began to wonder if sociology and philosophy might better satisfy the questions he needed answered. This led him to approach a philosophy professor. It would be the first of several defining moments in his life.

The professor asked him a simple question, "why do you want to study philosophy?"

Khalil, unable to *really* answer the question, was left reeling. Why did he want to do anything, he wondered. The interview triggered something of an existential crisis in the young man from Woking.

As he left the professor contemplating his very existence, Khalil came across a friend similarly disillusioned by university education. The friend told him he was planning to quit and move to Israel to live on a kibbutz. The year was 1970 and the socialist ideal of agricultural communes was all the rage, especially with youngsters unconvinced by the age old social norms and the material values and motivations of western culture. This was something that immediately resonated with Khalil.

"The moment he spoke the words I was struck, 'Yes! that's the answer, that's what I will do'", he recalls in a rare display of excitement.

Whatever the reason, that afternoon Khalil began packing his bags. He too would quit his education and go in search of an alternative way of living and maybe that would lead to the answers he sought.

Khalil didn't know it at the time, but his decision was about to take him on a three-thousand mile hitchhike that would last ten years, leading him from his leafy Surrey hometown to one of the holiest cities in the world, where he would eventually come face to face with his destiny.

The decision to leave education and hit the road wasn't completely random. Khalil had been afflicted by wanderlust following his final year at boarding school. Upon graduation from their well-to-do public school, he and a group of four friends had decided to hitchhike across Europe to Istanbul. There, on the fringes of the east, in one of the world's greatest cities, they had spent a hashish-fuelled week in a hippy hostel. On their way home, the four friends made a detour to northern Greece where they set up camp on a stony beach. The beach was popular with new age hippies and Khalil and his pals befriended two glamorous ones from New York - a model and a photographer who were touring Europe in a vintage Citroën.

One night, as the full moon spread its light across the dark Aegean Sea like a brilliant Damascene pearl, the group were sat around a flickering fire listening to the silence, broken only by the rhythmic slapping of oars as the last fishermen made their way back home. The two uber-cool hippies showed the impressionable boys their homemade tattoos - done using a matchstick and a needle and thread dipped in Indian ink. Khalil offered his wrist, and a small four-leaved clover was permanently printed onto his white skin.

Khalil rolls up his sleeve to reveal the tattoo still on his wrist.

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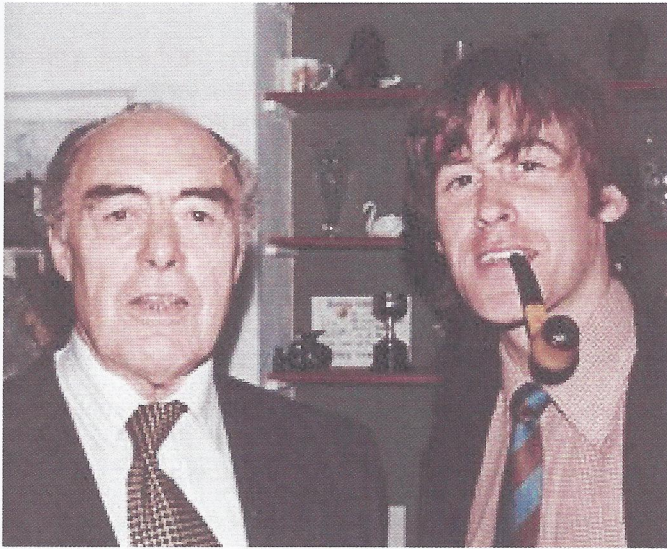
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**Seeking:** A 25-year-old 'Paul' pictured with his father, smoking a pipe during one of his brief returns to Woking.

It was a simple act of adolescence, but in the company of two well-heeled hippies who lived a carefree life that resonated deeply with Khalil, the moment came to symbolise much more for Khalil. That night, he felt connected to something greater than himself. Was it God? The universe? He didn't know, but that night became a permanent reminder that truth and beauty are far more virtuous than wealth or status. For Khalil the tattoo was intended to be a permanent reminder that the most valuable things in life are free and money and materialism can never buy happiness.

That magical night on a Greek beach under a glistening moon, kept coming back to Khalil as he turned away from a university education in the summer of 1970. And in a poetic twist, it would be Greece where he would make his second life-changing decision.

Khalil arrived in Greece for a second time in the winter of 1970, his plan had been to get a ship from Greece to Cyprus and then Cyprus to Israel. Khalil knew that the land borders were closed because of the political conflict that led to the Israeli War of Attrition and had hoped to make the crossing by sea. But in an age where there was no internet, and detailed pre-planning options for independent travellers were limited, Khalil arrived to find the ships didn't run in winter. He was now in a difficult position.

"I had banked on making it to the kibbutz, and brought along just enough money to get there. I couldn't turn back," he remembers.

Compelled to keep on moving, Khalil made his way to the Lebanese border, arriving with only ten English pounds to his name. There he was able to secure a 24-hour transit visa. He had no idea what he would do next, he could neither go on to his destination nor did he have enough money to return. He decided to go to the port to see if he could work his way out on a ship.. The first ship he boarded was a Finnish cargo vessel, and the captain gave him a job as a deckhand. Only much later when he tried the same thing at other ports did he realise that to get a job at first try was a piece of incredibly good fortune.

The captain set him to work cleaning and mooring. The trip to Israel was put indefinitely on hold.

Khalil's was a merchant ship that travelled between Lebanon and New York, calling at ports along the Mediterranean coast.

One day, as the ship made its way across the mighty Atlantic, it was caught in a raging storm. Vulnerable and surrounded by nothing but the vast ocean, Khalil's ship was buffeted by powerful winds - like a tiny matchstick - and as he was tossed around inside it, he suddenly felt the true insignificance of his own existence. Yet in that moment of potential terror, something profound overcame him.

"I loved the feeling of smallness amid the power of nature and the grandeur of creation. In that fleeting moment - just like on that beach in northern Greece - I felt connected to something larger than myself and I knew it was God", he recalls with a wry smile.

"In modern life, cut off as we are from the night skies by light pollution and with a million and one distractions, it seems difficult today to connect to that overpowering sense of our own smallness and insignificance".

What bothered Khalil now was how to connect with this God. Where was He? How did he reach Him?

As he pondered these questions, Khalil's next move was taken out of his hands, for when the ship docked back at Spain, he failed a health check due to his poor eyesight and was signed off. The road beckoned once more.

For the next decade or so, a pattern emerged for Khalil. He worked as little as possible and travelled as much as possible, by eating cheap, sleeping rough and hitch-hiking. During those years on the road, he recalls never spending more than three months in any one place. It was as if something kept pushing him to keep moving, keep searching for whatever it was he was looking for.

Whenever he was asked why he was on the road, he would respond with, "I am looking for myself and I am looking for my place in the world," though in truth the road never got him any closer to this.

"During that time I never felt at home or at peace and neither did I come any closer to finding my place in the world. I realised also that the romantic image I had of myself as a loner, actually hid the fact that I was lonely."

The decade of travel did involve the occasional visit home, when Khalil's parents would ask, 'Where is this all heading?'

Khalil never had the answer and the questioning simply pushed him back onto the road and he would take off again.

On one such return to Woking, when he was 27, Khalil finally confronted the question, only to realise that the years of travel had not provided him with any real answers. Fatigued by the constant, aimless wandering, which was beginning to lose its original romanticism, Khalil's thoughts began to return to the reason he had first hit the road all those years ago - and he became overwhelmed by the realisation that his destiny to go to a Kibbutz in Israel remained unfulfilled.

That's where he would go this time, he decided. Something told him, that's where he was meant to have gone all along. The years of wandering had been a distraction and he had failed to see that until now. To mark his decision and acknowledge the momentous realisation, Khalil performed a strange ceremony. He gathered up all his little mementoes, collected from the years of aimless travel, and burnt them in a fire at the bottom of his garden.

"To me, they represented my identity in that moment and I wanted to rid myself of that before heading to Jerusalem," he recalls.

This shedding of his former self, and symbolic opening-up to what lay ahead, had the desired outcome. On his first morning in Jerusalem, Khalil awoke with an 'energy' he had never felt before. It was as though somewhere within that ancient, holy city was a spiritual energy he was feeding off - he just needed to find it.

He decided the most obvious places to start his hunt in a city so important to Biblical traditions were the sites linked to the Biblical stories. By late afternoon, Khalil found himself on the eastern edge of Jerusalem's old city, at the foot of the Mount of Olives - a mountain ridge named after the olive groves that once covered its slopes. Khalil remembered from studying the Bible at school, that the mountain was linked to numerous prophetic stories and was a place of huge religious significance for both Jews and Christians. The story he associated most strongly with the holy mountain was that of Jesus teaching the Lord's Prayer to his disciples in a grotto there.

As he examined the site - now within the Carmelite Monastery - he was stopped by the monk who looked after the sanctuary. The two of them struck up a conversation during which the monk remarked that Khalil did not seem like a typical tourist. The monk then said to Khalil that if he wished to experience the site in a more appealing atmosphere, he would let him remain there after the sanctuary had closed to the public. Seeing it as a sign, Khalil took the monk up on his offer, and when all the tourists had left for the day, he found himself alone inside the the grotto where Jesus had once preached. There he sat and meditated.

"What came to my heart so strongly in that moment was that all these years I had said that I believed in God and could be in awe of His creation, but at no time had I turned to Him and asked Him what was the meaning and purpose of my life.

"So I prayed from my heart; 'Oh God You created me and You know the meaning and purpose of why You created me, so show me how to live my life."

After a decade of wandering, and three thousand miles from home, Khalil felt his prayers being finally answered as he sat alone inside that grotto where Jesus had preached - yards from a Christian monastery. His heart became filled with a conviction - the way to God was total submission.

"I had been kidding myself I was looking for the Truth for all those years on the road. But I had never truly submitted - in that moment I realised it had all been about my ego, and not a sincere search for the Truth. In that grotto was the moment I truly believed for the first time."

Khalil knew nothing about how to live one's life by God, and as he sat there, alone in the cave, he wondered if what had overcome him was a calling to priesthood or a monastic life, like the one led by the kindly monk who had allowed him to stay there after hours.

Leaving the sanctuary in the depths of the night, Khalil knew his life had changed and would never be the same again, and with this a new sense of peace and calm took hold of him.

As he walked along a street at the top of the Mount, a woman, half-shrouded by darkness, beckoned him to come closer.

"You have to meet my sheikh," she said.

Khalil had never met this woman, nor did he know what a 'sheikh' was or why she felt he should meet one. But in his new state of serenity and submission, he couldn't resist whatever pathway was put before him, and so he obeyed. The woman instructed a young boy to take him down to the house of the sheikh and Khalil was led down the hillside along a dimly-lit street, not really sure where he was going or why, just in a state of surrender. Eventually, his young guide turned off down an alley and directed him to a house.

Khalil stood outside the house, uncertain. A young girl was washing the steps and spotted him. Like the woman earlier, she too beckoned him towards her, inviting him in. The girl turned out to be the sheikh's daughter and after instructing him to remove his shoes left him by himself in a room, where after a couple of minutes, a man appeared and said, "Yes, my beloved, what can I do for you?"

It was the sheikh he had been told to meet.

Shy, embarrassed and feeling like an intruder, he asked, "What does the Qur'an say about the last days?"

No sooner had the words left his mouth, a strange feeling came over Khalil, as he became overwhelmed by the realisation that he already knew the answer.

"If you are at peace with yourself and with God, you have no reason to fear death or the Last Days." responded the sheikh in a kindly tone.

Khalil then asked, a little more tentatively, "How does one find the Truth?"

"To find the Truth you need a guide who can lead you to the Truth".

"And how do you find the guide?"

"Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you," came the answer.

Khalil was taken aback. He knew the sheikh was Muslim, so why was he quoting the words of Jesus? Khalil's heart began to race. Something was happening but he wasn't quite sure what. He was being pulled in, and yet there was resistance.

Khalil spent another 30 minutes or so speaking with the sheikh that night, throughout he felt uncomfortable.

"Were my questions sincere? Was I wasting his time? What am I doing here?"

When he eventually took his leave, the sheikh showed him to the door. He put on his shoes and went down the steps, where he hesitated for a moment and looked back. The sheikh's silhouette was framed by the doorway and he was about to close the door. At that moment Khalil's heart was struck a second time.

"I had asked God for help, I knocked on His door, He opened a door for me, and now I was running away because I was frightened!"

His rational mind kicked in and told him not to be swept along by events, but deep inside he knew that he had no choice. Could he turn to God again with sincerity knowing that at the first test he had refused?

Khalil decided to return to Jerusalem and wait until the next day, but inwardly he knew that nothing would change.

"It is impossible to convey the power and depth of what struck my heart, I haven't experienced anything like it since, but for me this was an order from God to my heart", he recalls.

For the next two days though, it was as if the internal torment became physically manifest, and Khalil was struck down by a fierce fever that confined him to his hostel bed. His recovery coincided with the first day of Ramadan and that was the day Khalil went back to the sheikh to ask if he could be his student. Much to his astonishment, the sheikh refused, saying he needed a clear sign from Allah.

Khalil persisted, returning again, and again the sheikh refused. A little hurt and upset, Khalil gave it another go, and on this third time his request was granted and the sheikh allowed him to move into the small living quarters beneath the house. Finally, the wanderer had settled.

Khalil knew nothing about Islam and there was no pressure for him to begin fasting or praying, but it felt completely natural as he joined the other students in their daily routines, grateful that he could spend his time in a clear and direct relationship with God. Over the next few months, Khalil received daily instructions in the company of other seekers. During the day, he and the other students would study the sheikh's teachings and in the evenings the sheikh would answer their questions. It was there, 'Paul' became 'Khalil'.

After three months, the sheikh said it was time for Khalil to return home. Khalil did as he was told and came back to Woking, only this time he was returning knowing that he would not be running anymore.

"I came back having realised the place I had been looking for was not a physical place but a spiritual one and my only desire now was to live a life in keeping with the values of the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad (saw), and to follow the guidance of my own heart – a heart that was now turned truly towards Allah."

"I went back to Jerusalem once a year to see my sheikh", Khalil says, finishing off the last of his tea.

"Seven years after my conversion, the sheikh introduced me to a fellow student from Austria called Fatima. We got married two days later, and have raised three children together."

Today, Khalil finds himself still living in Woking, the place he kept trying to run away from over and over again. He also inherited his father's business and settled into a 'safe' life that follows all the conventions he resisted during those adolescent years. It took a decade of wandering and a climb up Mount Olive to realise it, but Khalil now knows what it is he needs to do.

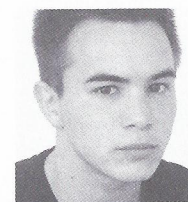
"It's not that complicated", he says, bringing his fascinating story to a close.

"Hold fast, all together, to the rope of Allah."



Content: A 63-year-old Khalil with his entire family at his son's wedding.

## Cameron Appel



Cameron Appel is a freelance journalist based in Oxford who volunteered to support Everyday Muslim's work in Woking. He studied economics at Columbia University in New York City and is interested in politics, design and sustainable development. You can follow him on twitter via @appel\_cam.