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## 'The truth behind Black Dog'

Talk by—Janine Browne, Founder of The Black Dog Project

*Talk at Princess Margaret Children's Hospital, Bridge's inspirational evening, during Body Image and Eating Disorders Awareness Week, September 2008. Audience – patients, sufferers, carers, families, health professionals.*

I think a lot of you here tonight would have heard of or know about The Black Dog Project so I've decided to step out from behind the Black Dog tonight and talk (uncomfortably) about myself—hence me *reading* my talk. I'll start by talking about what prompted me to change the focus of my talk.

On Monday I attended the launch of Body Image and Eating Disorder Awareness Week. One of the speakers was Chris Harris (a Psychologist from Princess Margaret Children's hospital). Chris said something very simple yet quite profound. It was along the lines of . . .

“ . . . eating disorders are an indication that  
*something's not right.* ”

It was the *not right* that made me sit a little taller in my seat. . . his use of *not right* when he could have said *something's wrong*. Being diagnosed with having *something wrong* with you can feel much like being crushed into the carpet.

I've been diagnosed with depression, anxiety disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, and post traumatic stress disorder. It was so refreshing to hear someone flip the whole 'disorder' business on its head with a slight change of words. And words *are* really that powerful, that significant to who we are and how we feel—how we see and perceive ourselves and the world around us.

That's essentially what I do through my writing—and visually through art. When I hear the words '*something's wrong*' . . . I see a BIG red cross X of a teacher's pen. When I hear the words, '*something's not right*' . . . I see a question mark . . . a let's explore why this is not right? . . . how can we switch this around? . . . pull something from this? . . . who can I trust to talk about this—to help me? It allows me to explore and challenge myself and my world . . . when '*something's not right*'.

Chris also talked a lot about the SELF – the person, the individual and their perception of SELF. How refreshing to hear someone draw attention to what lies beneath the symptoms, the diagnosis, the illness . . . the SELF. It has been my personal experience that it is the SELF that often requires the *treatment*. While I don't discount the role of medical treatment, I've found that therapy with a focus on the SELF has enabled me to manage and co-exist with my *disorders*.

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Kathryn Zerbe, author of the book 'Body Betrayed' wrote . . .

“Human beings ache for understanding – they should never be regarded as mere containers of their symptoms.’

It is that ache for understanding that fuels my writing and art. The search to understand my SELF, to understand others and to understand the world around me that I've always felt a strong sense of disconnection from, not *fitting in*'to - not *belonging*. It is the means by which I explore all that has constructed who I am and share those discoveries and processes in the hope that it offers insight and hope to others – particularly young people.

For a moment I'd like to take you back *before* The Black Dog Project.

I'll take you back about eight years ago - to when I'd come to work in the fitness industry through my own personal experience of the intimate relationship between mental and physical health, and the process of dealing with some unhealthy and self destructive addictions and habits—essentially, taking better care of my SELF.

During this time I was writing a book about diet and exercise – my story of how I rose up from being hospitalised for a *breakdown* and became this *before and after* weight loss success story. Well intended it may have been – I later discovered my perception of *success* was horribly distorted – as was my perception of my SELF.

Coming up close to four years ago now, I closed my business and ceased lecturing in the fitness industry as a result of some things I can speak of – and some I can't. One of those was the experience of being a volunteer for Youth Focus, an organisation that supports young people at risk of depression, self harm and suicide. Another of those things was attending a fitness convention in Sydney. The opening speaker was a woman by the name of Ellie (author of *Ellie's Wings*). She spoke of her experience of elite sport and the eating disorder that brought her close to losing her life. (Respecting of course, that eating disorders are not simply a social issue). Since then, I've been confronted over and over again by the same

painful reality of what this 'weight and appearance' obsessed industry (and culture) is doing – particularly to the minds and bodies of our children and young people.

Long and short of it was, her story deeply etched my conscience, as did the stories I heard from young people. How could I and we (as an industry) continue pushing weight loss and exercise in a way and to such a degree that it could actually threaten peoples health and lives rather than enhance them?

As uncomfortable as this is feeling right now, I'm going to continue to talking about my SELF – because regardless of all that's going on around us – the SELF is one thing we do truly own, we can change, strengthen and build on. It's certainly no easy task – but it is an option that lies within all of us, an option that often requires help from *outside* of ourselves to access – to be encouraged and supported in taking that fear filled step from our comfort zone (no matter how dire that zone may be) into recovery and beyond.

I have discovered that to connect with my SELF I had to first break the mould of believing the focus on my SELF is the same as selfishness.

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Thankfully my Psychologist has been helping me see the difference lately. I'm beginning to see how we are sometimes more comfortable giving selflessly and generously to causes outside of our SELF (in my case, The Black Dog Project and Youth Focus) - than giving that same care and compassion *to* our SELF.

Even as I stand here tonight, I feel a little undeserving of this place. I know that many of you here tonight have stories and experiences that others would benefit greatly from hearing. Knowing this has compelled me to share my truth in the book I've just published titled, 'In My Room'.

As the title suggests, it is an intimate and account of my own SELF exploration. It offers no solutions, no advice – it's simply as close as I could get to my truth and the most beautiful place I could create to share it.

What helps me take care of my SELF and make things a little better when *something's not right* these days, are the little girls I draw and their stories (affectionately known as 'The Army of Ink') who have become my life line, my constant companions, helping me explore those BIG, universal questions of 'who am I?' 'What is the meaning of life?' 'What is my purpose here?' 'Who do I want to be?' They're now marching out into the community making friends with lots of people who have embraced their wisdom, insight and strength.

It would serve no good here tonight to glorify what could be perceived as my *success* story. The truth is, that creating The Black Dog Project and publishing the book have taken me under many times—but ultimately, firmly grounded me in a very truthful, yet challenging place.

In revealing 'the truth behind The Black Dog Project' to you tonight, my truth, I hope to create a slight shift in the way some of us may perceive ourselves and others who have *something wrong* with them - and the power of words and images to create that shift.

I'd also like to offer some encouraging words for the parents, families and friends here tonight, who are supporting a loved one. When my Mum read my book, she said very sadly to me; "Where was I?"

Mum felt she perhaps hadn't given me *enough*, been there for me *enough*—as we all feel as parents and friends at times.

If my Mum had not given me *enough* I would certainly not be standing here now. Although my experiences and states of mind are complex and debilitating at times, she *did* offer me *enough*. Never has she said she is too busy or couldn't make it when I needed her to drop everything and get to me in my darkest moments—and moments not so dark when I simply needed some quiet, unobtrusive company. Her abundance of love and support was . . . *enough*.

I hope that by talking uncomfortably about my SELF here tonight, I have offered *something* to those who have '*something not right*' and those who feel the helplessness of feeling they're not doing *enough*.

. . . thank you for listening.

[See page 5 for the story behind the 'Baring Souls' image used for Body Awareness and Eating Disorder Awareness week]



## Baring Souls

A tissue, a tissue  
truth is falling all around  
as I play in forbidden fields  
make tiny paths for  
little fingers to walk along  
draw on things they don't get  
follow a map of darkness and  
crumbs left behind  
to explore where once  
I could not go .