

A time before automation, technology and mass media had stolen creativity, curiosity and the opportunity for children to build a bank of experiences that developed character, strength and resilience—gave life purpose and meaning.



Janine Browne

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A culture where the qualities of kindness, innovation, creativity, community involvement, authenticity, and a social and environmental conscience were considered as valuable, if not more so, than a university degree and a six figure salary.

## Why have our children stopped dancing?

A post conference reflective perspective by Janine Browne

I spoke on the topic, 'Why have our children stopped dancing?' at an eating disorders conference in September (yes, much time has lapsed with my new 'island time' pace!) During the closing address the question was posed; 'If you could wave a magic wand (to improve treatment, and prevention of eating disorders), what change would you create?'

Rather than embracing the roving microphone at the time, I took the question with me and later, with fingers poised at the keyboard, I began to think in print . . .

. . . I wondered how I could use a magic wand to help young people in general feel better about themselves. Dr Who and his time machine, the tardis, immediately came to mind. Why Dr Who? During the conference there had been much talk about time travel— a better future; future research and technology; learning from past experience; program and service development; moving forward; letting go of the past and so on.

Personally however, the most insightful and memorable conference content came, not from the research, statistics, diagnostic tools, or treatment models—but from the storytelling. It was from the sharing of deeply personal stories that I learned the most, that reached into my soul, etched a mark on my conscience. It was the courage, humility, strength and resilience of the storytellers that moved me to tears - filled me with a heightened sense of hope. So too was the refreshing humility and empathy expressed by the clinicians. I observed the absence of hierarchy among them, and despite their titles of 'experts' and 'specialists', their willingness to open their academic minds and expose their guarded hearts to learn from the individuals and families who bravely told their stories . . .

. . . So back to Dr Who and time travel . . . I wondered whether I'd choose to travel into the future or past in search of a place that nurtured the growth of children? With the *good ol' days* in mind, I ventured down memory lane . . .

It was a time before automation, technology and mass media had stolen childrens creativity, curiosity and the opportunity for them to build a bank of experiences that develop character, strength and resilience—give life purpose and meaning.

A culture where the qualities of kindness, innovation, creativity, community involvement, authenticity, and a social and environmental conscience were considered as valuable, if not more so, as a university degree and a six figure salary.

A time before the rise and dominance of trashy gossip magazines, when intellect and knowledge was more highly sought than the latest gossip - when books exercised imagination and libraries were more popular than newsagents stands.

A place where trains, taxis and cars were purely modes of transport not mobile billboards that constantly undermined and threatened the unique diversity of human beings, setting impossible ideals and maintaining the constant state of dissatisfaction that consumerism breeds.



going up

A time when tables were set and warm family conversations flowed over a lovingly cooked dinner; community spirit was alive, neighbors said 'hello' and the butcher knew your favorite cut of meat (and offered the kids a fresh slice of polony or from my childhood memory bank—a raw sausage!)

A time when children used their creative minds rather than junk mail catalogues to hand craft presents and cards for the many occasions we celebrate.

I imagined children playing in backyards big enough to run, jump, play and hide in. Un-manicured and un-landscaped spaces where they could build and dig; experience dirt under their fingernails and grass stains on their pants. Have free time outside of structured activities, to lose themselves in the imaginary world their curious minds create. Experience that child-like sense of wonder of nature and the world around them as opposed to the fabricated, two dimensional world of television and computer technology.

I imagined little girls playing make believe games of tea parties; mothering their dolls; baking sand cakes and playing shops rather than imitating the lives and dress sense of sexed up idols and celebrities propelling them into shopping sprees for padded bras, mini skirts, high heel shoes and midriff tops. (See 'Bra Wars' article 17 on website).

A time when the wisdom that comes with aging was considered more valuable and desirable than the lack of wrinkled foreheads, eyes and necks - breasts that defy gravity. (see articles 6 and 7 on website) . . .

. . . A time when shops were closed on weekends and people returned to filling that time with picnics and Sunday drives to experience the world outside shopping complexes and the subdivided block . . .

A time when fat was adipose tissue, an essential part of a healthy body and diet—not the *enemy*, something to be feared, hated, sucked out, burnt off, wrapped, massaged and run off. [see article 13 by Dr Michael Levine on website]

Pinching myself out of my day dreaming, I reminded myself that there was a lot about the *good ol' days* that wasn't so good. I grind to a halt . . . cigarettes now pop into my mind. Yes! Who would have imagined in their wildest dreams that one day cigarette advertising and smoking in public places would be banned. This thought propelled me into the future . . .

. . . A time when magazines and billboards would also be banned in public places—on public transport. Where advertising, particularly during prime childrens television viewing times was considered as hazardous to their health and future as smoking.

A time when beauty, gossip and mens magazines were only available from behind the counter to those with proof of age—not displayed at the eye level of children on newsagent shelves. A time where it was considered *inappropriate* for womens and mens magazines to be within the reach of children and young or potentially vulnerable people in waiting rooms, beauty salons, cafes and supermarket checkouts. [see 'No Idea' article 19 on website].

Stopping for a moment to check where I'm going with this time travel theme it struck me that the *good ol' days* was a time when we had . . .

. . . *time*

Time to talk, think critically, live consciously, make carefully considered choices. More time for our children— to talk, share the adventures of the day, read bedtime stories, play, rest, eat and explore together.

At this point I realise I've been looking in the wrong place for answers! I've gone down the habitual path of searching for answers, for a 'fix', outside of myself—a magic wand, a time machine—when there are many simple things I can do personally, we can do as a community, to make a difference, to create change.

Experience has taught me however, that change takes time—and that one must create time before change. If time is something most of us are struggling to get however, let alone give, then we can forgive ourselves for *not getting around to* creating those changes we promise ourselves. Preservation however, may be a more achievable goal — preserving the things in our lives that are meaningful, make us feel good and have stood the test of time . . .

. . . If we aim to at least *preserve* the good old fashioned magic of community spirit and voice; the art of storytelling; the wisdom and insight gained from listening; the connections made by talking; the warmth that generates from simple acts of kindness; and the preservation of time to ensure our emotional, mental and physical needs and that of our children are met—I have no doubt the world would be a better place.

If the notion of changing the world sounds a little over-the-top, then wind it back a notch and focus on our individual capacity to significantly influence our immediate environment. Aim to create a non-toxic environment for ourselves and our children by controlling what we allow into our homes and lives; challenging and resisting toxic cultural trends.

Resist consumerism and save our children from the dissatisfaction it breeds; eat more meals together at a set table; watch less television; view unstructured, spare time and space to think and act from a sound level of consciousness as essential to our well being as productivity.

If we aim to *do less - preserve more*, adopt the view that time and the role of parents is our most valuable commodity— I'm certain we would improve the lives and preservation of our most precious asset—our children.

What you can do . . .

The Black Dog Project aims to be a voice in the community, creating a place to talk about and challenge the many issues that affect our lives and that of our children, draw attention to the complex layers and intimate relationships they share. You can help by ensuring this voice is heard, being a voice yourself by talking about it to others, telling others about The Black Dog Project website, passing this article on to a friend via email. I've listed on the next page, other articles relevant to this one on the Black Dog website, so please . . . .



Janine Browne

skipping girl

...keep talking everyone!

'Never underestimate the ability of a small group of citizens to change the world—indeed it's the only thing that ever has.'

Margaret Mead.

NB: The 'Why have our children stopped dancing' presentation and The Black Dog Project art exhibition will be appearing at the CAYPAKS (Children and Young People and Key Stakeholders) convention in Perth WA, July 2007 ([www.caypaks.com.au](http://www.caypaks.com.au))

For related articles I recommend reading on the *Secrets* page of the website, see next page . . .

4. Starving the soul—filling the hole—simple things we can do to prevent eating related problems.

5. Zoe's secret—a personal insight into eating disorders.

6 and 7. Dove's 'real beauty' campaign—or is it? L'Oreal injecting a message?

13. Fat a dirty word—a *must read* for all (men included) by Dr Michael Levine

14. Measuring up to GI Joe - male body image.

15. School mottos aiming too high—a personal favourite - very powerful, stunning images by Toni Wilkinson.

17. Bra wars—little girls in an adult world—never underestimate the power of peer pressure—at any age, by Geraldine Mellet

18. No idea—potentially damaging messages in magazines, by Geraldine Mellet