

## Introduction

There was a time during my late teenage years when, night after night, with no discernible trigger, my body would descend into a state of primal terror. I found myself more and more terrified as the day drew on, knowing that as the light began to fade I would be back there in hell again, isolated, dying inside.

As soon as it got dark, I would feel a tingling around my perineum and then extreme nausea would take over, coupled with a rising, galloping thudding of the heart as adrenaline flooded my system. Over the next hours I would be back and forth to the toilet, first vomiting whatever was in my stomach and later retching bile and air when my stomach had nothing left to offer. I had no way to make this stop and it would only cease when I finally fell into exhausted unconsciousness, drenched in the stinking, clammy sweat of fear.

Back in the 1980s they didn't really have the term 'panic attacks', and so no one knew what was going on when out of the blue I would start shaking and vomiting and disappear into a foetus-like state. It was so intense that after a few months of experiencing this every single night I felt the only option open to me was to kill myself. At the time, my mum had got involved in a self-development course called Turning Point, run by a

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genius Australian facilitator called Graham Browne. She had been trying to get me to attend the course with evangelic verve yet I found the whole thing completely creepy. The more she tried to get me to do it, the more I resisted and judged her for her cliquy, new-age language, but when I came to her and said, 'Mum, I'm not being dramatic, but I think I might need to kill myself. I can't handle much more of this, and if it is this or nothing, night after night, I think I choose nothing,' she looked at me coolly, didn't try to talk me out of it and said, 'Look, just try going on this weekend, and if it hasn't shifted it by Monday, then kill yourself. Deal?' Who could argue with that?

The course *was* powerful, and even though it wasn't a one-stop healing for my condition it definitely changed something about my responsibility and willingness to feel all my feelings and reframe what might be happening in me. It taught me to stop and look at what was going on, to notice and observe myself rather than be totally taken over by the experience.

It was the beginning of a great treasure hunt, the first step on a journey that has brought me years of making films and music and running workshops, and now even coaching people with panic attacks. This road of exploration led me to many different practices, ideas and breathing techniques through the many cultures I visited and studied, all thanks to trying to survive being so sensitive in this world.

In 1999 this journey took me around the world with a project called 1 Giant Leap. The first trip was a journey of collaboration with singers and musicians from fifty countries, and along the way we also interviewed writers, chiefs, gurus, criminals and street kids. It was fascinating to me that the more diversity we

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encountered, the more unity was expressed. And the thing I realised so many of us human beings shared was this collective insanity, an unspoken pact where we all waste a huge amount of our daily energy maintaining an appearance of confidence and 'being fine'-ness in public – especially at work, where being a 'winner' and 'on top of things' is paramount. I witnessed the way we will go to such extreme lengths to avoid our pain and our shadows, which for me resulted in those teenage panic attacks. I realised how many of us hide our true faces behind masks of appropriateness and how much shame and embarrassment we feel for the uniquely beautiful, eccentric and wounded individuals we are.

And here is the big clue about our suffering. If it weren't for the heinous panic attacks I suffered in my late teens and the suicidal state I got myself into, I would never have sought out information and techniques to pull myself out of the misery. The survival tools I have learned have taught me to be a skilful and empathic helper for those who are experiencing similar things. I notice that the hardest times of my life have acted as a kind of superhero training, sculpting me and giving me gifts which are useful for others in need. It is almost as if, in our suffering, we are sent down into the darkest mines alone, but when we return to the surface we notice that we have in our hand a jewel that is of use to the next person down the line struggling as we have been.

In order to survive, I discovered that I had to be willing to feel my pain if I was ever going to release it, I had to be willing to stop hiding so much of myself that I judged as unattractive or inappropriate. If I was ever going to feel connected to the world around me I had to be willing to feel vulnerable, to go

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to the edge, come what may, and stop worrying so much about what might happen when I got there.

When they asked Michelangelo about his epic *David* sculpture, he said that as soon as they brought him the huge slab of rock he could already see the figure of David standing there within it. His job was just to chip away the excess marble, and that's what we're doing here with our innate genius. I want to invite you to slowly come out of hiding in all your raw glory and begin to dissolve that massive knot of emotional, painful gunk inside. I want you to tear up the complicit agreement that tells us all to say we're fine when anyone asks. We so rarely feel safe enough to say what is really going on. So I have entered the rock-dissolving business, and the many exercises throughout this book are designed to help you dissolve your own rocks and make a Masterpiece of yourself.

It has dawned on me that we are all functioning, relating and creating from such an insanely limited version of our true potential that our brief seventy or so years of human experience are as good as wasted while we scurry around worrying and controlling and battling our way through our limited, self-cherishing lives. I want every aspect of my life and yours to be a Masterpiece, I want my work to be a Masterpiece, I want my parenting to be a Masterpiece, I want my sex life and all my relationships to be Masterpieces. I want us to explore the edges, gently, to laugh at our foolishness, gently, and see ourselves for everything that we are.

I want to live in a world where we stop settling for operating at this drastically reduced capacity and un-edit ourselves back to the juicy, unapologetic, uniquely gifted humans we really are. This is what I feel passionate about, what I am an activist for,

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because if you're going to rebel against anything, best to start with our own considerable bondage. We are enslaved by our approval addictions, our fear of what people might think, our competitiveness, our shame of who we really are, and all this is death to intimacy and death to our Masterpieces. If you want to engage fully with your passion and innate genius, this is where to start . . .

Bob Geldof maintains that he never felt saintly about his work to end poverty in Africa; it just really annoyed him that such a solvable situation was going on unsorted. This is how I feel about the way we're all going through our lives as these violently edited-down potential versions of ourselves. It irritates me in the worst way to see most of us humans living so dishonestly with ourselves and others and, in our quest for safety and comfort, missing out. It isn't complicated, but just because something is simple doesn't mean it is easy. When we dare to be visible, when we stop hiding, when we commit to staying present with our feelings instead of numbing them and escaping them, suddenly our lives turn from black and white into colour.

I'm on a mission, through my films and music, through my workshops, and now this book, to create an army of 'walking permission slips', a legion of like-minded souls who, just by being themselves, present, authentic, often vulnerable, become catalysts for everyone who comes into contact with them. When we meet people like this, who are comfortable to be seen and heard just as they are without hiding behind roles or being an 'appropriate' version of themselves, we ourselves become more relaxed and more authentic. Our freedom to be seen in our mess, in our eccentricity, in our fallibility, creates a permission in

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everyone we meet to lighten up around all the sides of ourselves that we believe aren't welcome, and when that happens, intimacy and creativity levels shoot through the roof.

## THE MANIFESTO

- We want to put our own full, unedited, unabbreviated selves into the work.
- We want to create a movement of introspection and self-enquiry where the viewer becomes the subject of the piece. It's about you.
- We want to dare to show ourselves in all our raw glory, really express what's going on in the chaos and the shadows, then give ourselves the chance to connect to something real in our audience. Because when I talk about me, you'll hear about you.
- We need to collectively admit that we're not fine, we're not confident and balanced and good.
- We turn up to work every day pretending we're not neurotic and obsessed and insatiable and full of doubt, and we waste so much energy keeping up this mutual pretence for each other because we think if people saw the truth, if people really knew what was going on in our heads, all the crazy truth of our dark appetites and self-loathing, then we'd be rejected. But in fact, the opposite is true. It is when we dare to reveal the truth that we unwittingly give everyone else permission to do the same.
- We need to stop holding our breath for a moment and actually come into the room. Be here, present, vulnerable and authentic.
- If we can all collectively acknowledge our insanity, the amount of energy we'll inherit that has been wasted on the mask will be enough to creatively solve any global crisis. We are on a mission to make self-reflection hip for just a moment, just long enough to save us.



## CHAPTER 1

# How We All Became Approval Addicts

No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*

Imagine for a moment if everyone could hear the running commentary in your head – your colleagues, your friends, your lover. What’s really going on beneath the surface you present to the world? Do you find yourself constantly placating and saying what you think others wish to hear? Do you ever get the feeling you are a fraud and one day you are going to get found out?

When we’re born into this world we are totally helpless. Unlike horses and other creatures who are almost immediately up on their feet the moment they are born, because of our lovely, large human brain, a baby’s head would be too big to make it through its mother’s birth canal if it was fully gestated, so the last chapter of ‘pregnancy’ has to happen outside the womb. Consequently the human baby, when it first emerges,

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is in need of total care and education from day one: how to eat, how to walk, how to hold and manipulate objects, how to communicate, all the basic functions of a person. These skills need to be taught to the new child by parents and carers, and the most common and seemingly efficient way we've found to teach our children is to give them loads of gushing approval and love when they 'get it right' or obey us, and when they don't, give them less, or none. Children's main source of safety and survival is the love from their parents and carers, so the discomfort or even trauma for that source of nourishment to be turned on and off is very impactful. Each of us, when we were being brought up and 'taught how to be a person' had the experience of this on/off approval and love. When we give something great but then withhold it, and then give something great but then withhold it, what that creates in the human is an *addiction*. We have all been unwittingly turned into little approval addicts throughout our childhoods, with a deeply ingrained fear of criticism or failure because we equate that with 'less love' or even 'rejection'.

This value system is backed up all the way through school, too. If you're first in the class, or win the race, you get endless love and praise and validation, and if you're bottom of the class or last in the race you're less appreciated and even, in some cases, shamed. Most kids get the message that to 'do it right' and be 'good and appropriate' is essential if you are to be loved and welcomed and not rejected or emotionally exiled. The addiction to being high up the league table of approval is so compelling that even though brothers and sisters love each other, are each other's main playmate, the moment that one of them does something against the rules, the other sibling will likely run straight

to Mummy and Daddy to report the transgression, all for the prize of being higher in the approval rating.

We are so addicted to approval that we even needed to invent Facebook. 'Ahhh, I got seventeen likes under my Rumi quote.' Yum yum yum.

The real problems begin when we don't just get approval withheld, but we get some unexpected, angry negative feedback from our parents and carers. 'Stop that! That's disgusting!' Pow! It hits us in the chest. I remember as a kid once being whacked with a venomously delivered 'When are you going to *grow up*?!', which I felt physically hit me in the body, knocking the emotional wind out of me. We have no idea as children that this adult is just tired or having a bad day, or simply doesn't realise they are being an arsehole. We're too young to have the maturity to screen out their violence and know 'it is their stuff, don't take it on'. We believe it really is our fault they have reacted that way. It is so, so painful that, whatever we were doing when they scolded us, we make a personal note never to be seen doing that again. The possible withdrawal of their love and approval is so frightening and the feeling of the adult's anger is so impactful that we make a little edit in ourselves, hoping never to experience that rejection again. And this goes on and on throughout childhood.

'How could you?' <snip>

'Good girls don't do that!' <suppress>

'Bad boy!' <edit>

Day after day, year after year as we're growing up <snip> <suppress> <edit> <snip> <suppress> <edit> and the violent editing continues with our peers in school, too.

'Oh, you're *so uncool*!'

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<Oh, am I? OK, never wear bright colours ever again . . . never dance in public again . . .>

Through this ongoing process of editing out the parts of ourselves that get mirrored to us as 'unwelcome' or 'bad' and only allowing to be seen the parts of us that get love and approval, we arrive as adults presenting a much diminished 'brochure' of ourselves, the shop window of our good bits – an 'appropriate', risk-free version.

Debbie Ford says in *The Dark Side of the Light Chasers* that when we are born we are each a castle with a thousand rooms and each of the rooms has a gift for us. We are completely open, we are curious, adventurous and limitless. Our imaginations and our creativity know no bounds. But as soon as we come into the world our parents tell us, 'Darling, we don't use these rooms over here so much', and so those rooms immediately start getting boarded up. And then throughout our childhoods people walk through our castle and tell us which rooms they like better than others, and more and more rooms fall into disuse, until we arrive as adults believing we are a two-bedroom flat that 'needs some work'.

The big problem is that no Masterpiece ever came out of that place. No touching expressions of art or intimacy were ever born from the sanitised, appropriate versions of ourselves. Whoever heard anyone say 'Have you met Brian? Oh, he's just so . . . appropriate! He turns me *on!*'

The artists and people who touch us deeply are the ones who are not so scared and limited to only express their appropriate qualities. The ones we are moved by are the ones who are brave or eccentric enough to go to the edges of what's normal and safe. We are turned on by those characters, we even deify them as if

they are special, as if they are stars. We want to feel those edgier, juicier parts of ourselves but we want to experience them in a safe, controlled way, so the artists and rebels provide that for us. We don't want to experience hanging off a cliff by one arm, sobbing in anguish, but we do like having a vicarious experience of Brad Pitt doing it up on the big screen while we all sit in safe dark rows. There we can cry along safely, or feel terror, or immense, boundless love – all because the artists are willing to really go there. This is why we worship the actors and musicians who deliver these experiences and pay them such incredible amounts of money.

This is the predicament of being human. We want to feel intensity. We want to feel our edges. But only safely within each of our comfort zones. Our problem here is that all our treasure and inspiration is not found in the safe areas furthest inland from our edges. The treasure of our lives, the illuminating and fulfilling experiences, are all discovered by snorkelling around the coastline of the edited version of ourselves, not staying away from them. That doesn't mean we have to trample our boundaries and rush straight out into the deep water proclaiming 'Here are my nipples!', but neither will we ever be available to bring in a Masterpiece of feeling, of intimacy, or creation, by staying as far away from those edges as we can day after day.

## BURIED TREASURE

It is not only the 'darker' sides of our nature that we bury and suppress. We imagine that the shadow sides of our nature are

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the darker qualities like greed and neediness, or our deviant sexual appetites, but if we grew up in a house where something as innocent as our natural flamboyance wasn't supported, then our entertainer nature might very well have been buried in the shadows, too. Most of us were cautioned to quieten down if we were getting excited with everyone's attention, often shamed or muted with irritation by the adults. Well, it doesn't take more than a couple of 'stop showing off in front of your friends' blows to crush that confident entertainer mojo and flavour future flamboyant impulses with some shame or worry about our natural urge to move the crowd.

In another home it might be quietness or shyness that's not acceptable. 'Stand up straight!' 'Speak up for everyone to hear!' 'Don't be a shrinking violet!' And whoever lives in that house is likely to grow up with shame or worry around being too shy.

It is wonderful and often heart-breaking to see some of the attendees of my Transforming Shadows workshops allowing themselves to play with their more 'forbidden' qualities in the safe container of the group. Suddenly a previously meek woman cries with hilarity and relief as she struts around the place being totally bitchy to everyone and those she encounters absolutely love her in it, or a once spiritually, politically correct Buddhist monk gets into people's faces, vocalising extreme judgements about them and letting his unenlightened voices out of the box for ten minutes. Years of lack of permission for these living aspects of themselves, under these safe circumstances, drop away in that game, and there's a sense of wholeness, of coming home, which isn't only a relief to the individual but also to everyone else around them. There's something really uncomfortable, even claus-

trophobic, about being in the presence of someone else's suppression.

We are each of us uniquely sculpted by our formative years, but the only one who can go in and harvest all that treasure we've buried is us.

*The student says to the guru: 'I want liberation.'*

*The guru replies: 'Who is restraining you?'*

The irony is that even though we live in terror of anyone seeing these shameful and unwelcome aspects of ourselves, all the treasure we want for our creativity and our relationships lies buried in the shadows. These parts of ourselves have gifts, they have life, they are full of dimension and intensity, but we've pushed them away for fear of rejection. What if we're missing the real invitation and potential here? As Jung said, if we are willing to explore beyond the 'persona', the mask that we put on during the day, and accept all the defects and ugly bits we find in the shadows, it is then that we get to connect with the source, where our instincts become stronger, our emotions freer and our perceptions wider. My experience is that it is so much more efficient and inspiring to explore ways to play with those buried parts. Some of the greatest and most compelling characters in literature are the villains and the psychos, all born from the darker, less acceptable realms of the writer. It is when the hero goes into the darkest part of the forest that he discovers the gold or the secret of life. It is when the princess is willing to kiss the frog that she finds her prince. If you and I are to be free and play from a full deck then there's nothing we can push away. All that sometimes uncomfortable energy we've been taught not to feel is the fodder for our growth and intimacy. The most touching, melancholy poems and music, the most thrilling sex

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games and the most genius, evil mischief all arise from the willingness to go beyond this safe and 'appropriate' version of ourselves.

When we allow in more and more of ourselves we become available for intimacy. When I am more visible in who I am, I become a walking permission slip for you to lighten up about your own edges. I invite you to be genuine and relaxed around me instead of manufacturing a 'version' of you which you've groomed to be 'acceptable'. How exhausting! How much of your day is spent wearing masks for people who would only accept you when you wear that mask? Surely these are the very people you don't want to hang out with! Why am I exhausting myself wearing masks for the very people I don't want to hang out with? It has got to be a better idea to gently remove the masks, layer by layer, and see who stays. Those are the people who really love us. Those are the people I want to create with and live with.

By rooting our projects, our art and relationships in visibility we make contact with the authentic nature of whoever comes into contact with us, and that recognition is the intimacy we're all looking for.