

Extracts from “Broken Open”

by Craig Hamilton

(with Neil Jameson)

Foreword

Craig Hamilton has one key message in writing his story. It is for Australian men and it is important: Don't let your pride or stubbornness prevent you reaching out for help when you need it. I know Craig went through his own anguish with mental illness and if it can affect him it can affect anybody. I hold him in high esteem as I believe him to be very credible and someone who has a real passion for what he does, particularly calling rugby league on the ABC.

Like many Australians today, Craig changed his life so he could manage his illness. Through medication and a healthy lifestyle of yoga, meditation and laughter he is now living a healthy life. His story is a must-read. His triumph is truly remarkable and will inspire anyone lucky enough to read it.

Sadly, many people suffering mental illness do not have the strength or support to change their lives. Like Craig I have watched players and have friends and family who have suffered from mental illness. I know through these experiences that mental illness exists and is not in someone's imagination as we are often told. By telling his story I know Craig will help others who have suffered, but more importantly he makes us all much more aware of the presence of mental illness, and in particular depression and bipolar disorder.

Sincerely, Wayne Bennett
Director Coaching, Brisbane Broncos

In this remarkable memoir, *Broken Open*, ABC broadcaster Craig Hamilton tells what it's like to go mad in public and survive to tell the tale. Craig explores how his breakdown and diagnosis of bipolar disorder affected his family, work colleagues and friends. In doing so he lifts the covers on the taboo subject of depression and shows how he stared down his demons to resurrect his life and career.

Broken Open is a gripping read about one man's journey back from the brink of hell. But it is much more than that. It is also a personal plea for society to shake off the stigma surrounding people with depression and to bring the subject out into the clear light of day.

Prologue

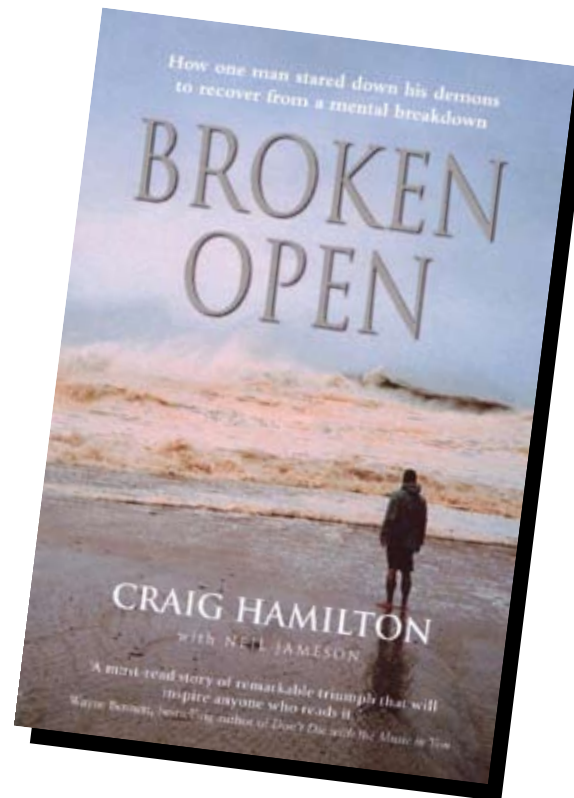
Tuesday, 12 September 2000

“Today I felt pass over me a breath of wind from the wings of madness.”

Charles Baudelaire

It's a five-minute drive from our home in suburban Newcastle to Broadmeadow railway station. In the budding brightness of this spring day my wife, Louise, is at the wheel and I am next to her in the passenger seat. The kids – Joshua, nine; Amy, seven; and Laura, three – are in the back, excited about delivering their dad into the global tide of professionals and bit players converging on the harbour city to power up the biggest show on the planet – the Sydney Olympic Games.

Hello world. This is Australia calling. From the lanyard around my neck hangs a media accreditation tag – my permit for passage anywhere and everywhere at the Olympics. Beneath the passport-size snap are printed the words: ‘Craig Hamilton, Broadcaster,



ABC Radio'. Whatever my professional career delivers—past and future—this is as good as it gets. Three days until the opening ceremony. My bag is packed and on this flawless afternoon we're walking together as a family from car park to ticket gate and ... and something is not quite right.

Un sighted, a major piece of space junk that has been orbiting our lives for a long time is about to crash out of a clear blue sky and transform this perfect scene. At the core of my being, a chain of detonations is firing up, gathering intensity on its way to the big bang.

But, right now, it takes the shape of hyper stimulation, a symptom that might be explained away by the wonder and excitement of this long anticipated day. In reality, and undiagnosed at this point, I'm in the manic phase of bipolar disorder, riding the face of a tsunami-size mania and set to wipe out in awesome and truly awful style.

Forty-eight hours earlier my mood had become elevated to the point where I had lost my grip on reality. At the time, I didn't know. They tell me you never do. Now, if this tale is not weird enough already, then try this: in my mind I had become Jesus Christ reincarnate. This is delusion on the grandest scale. The Jesus notion hadn't struck me like a lightning bolt but, rather, taken shape as a result of the escalating mania

throwing off grandiose delusions. And they don't come any more grandiose.

All the events of my life to that point had been readying me for this occasion, or so I thought. In the two days before arriving at the railway station my Olympics planning had changed. I had a new assignment. It was perfectly clear: I was going to change the world. My gospel for the global audience was disarm, feed the hungry and love one another.

A wise man once said that insanity is a perfectly rational adjustment to an insane world. My message was rational, noble and universal. The only flaw was that the messenger was, by any definition, insane.

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The plan was that I would arrive at the Games as Christ. With the exception of a few enlightened souls, nobody would know that the Messiah had returned. I would do my broadcast job for the ABC and, during the course of the fifteen days of the Olympics, it would become apparent to the movers and shakers gathered in Sydney that Christ was among them and they would afford Him the opportunity to speak at the closing ceremony. To add lustre and credibility to the occasion, I would be sharing the stage with Nelson Mandela. The message would be heard by the planet.

On the station we bump into Kathy Stewart, wife of my long-time mate Chris Williams. Kathy runs the rail kiosk, is pleased to see us and, as we exchange hugs, she tells us that Chris will be dropping by shortly. Kathy and Chris have been very close to us. I was emcee at their wedding and they were honoured guests at our ceremony. Chris and I had been cricketing club mates for ten years and had opened the bowling

together. It will be great to see him, I say.

The pressure in the volcano is rising. Don't misjudge this. I am not feeling bad. On the contrary, I am feeling 10-foot tall, bulletproof and experiencing a high I'd imagine you could attain only on the strongest drugs.

I want to see Chris so I let the first train come and go without me. I'm in control here, or so I believe. Louise thinks otherwise. Unease chafes at her caring heart. Call it women's intuition or put it down to her twenty years as a nurse, she senses a rupture in the fault line, but she can't put her finger on it. Family duty calls and she and the kids have to go.

On the point of their departure

I sit down on a bench and start giggling to myself. The kids ask me what I'm laughing at and I tell them it doesn't matter. I can't tell my kids that I have been seized by the realisation that life is a big joke and the sooner everybody wakes up to that fact the better humankind will be. Everything, especially ourselves, is taken too seriously. This insight has set me giggling. I am in on The Big Joke.

I miss the darts of disquiet in my wife's concerned eyes as she stoops to kiss me, gathers up the kids and departs. Alone on the bench, I continue to reflect on the absurdity of The Big Joke, laughing out loud.

It must be apparent to the half-dozen or so travellers waiting for the next train that my shackles are broken. I place my head in my hands and my mood starts morphing from hilarity into a cosmic scramble of visions from history. The noise of a passing train, the sound of footsteps—any external influence becomes the stimulus for another jumping vision as my internal

teleplay flashes through the ages and pages of history. It is like watching a movie, my mind is way behind the plot, but I don't want it to end. I need to see what comes next.

'Are you okay?' It is Kathy's voice and her warm arm across my shoulders. No response.

'Look, Chris is here. He's come to see you.' 'Hamo!' I recognise Chris's voice. Again, no response as I keep my eyes covered with my hands.

'Hamo, how ya going, mate?' Without a word, I stand and walk away down the length of the platform. Chris, bewildered, follows. 'Hamo, what's going on?'

I turn to eyeball him. 'Fuck off!'

'Hamo, it's me.'

'Fuck off!'

On any other day and with any other bloke, I would cop a smack in the mouth. But Chris Williams is a caring, compassionate individual. He knows now that the gears are stripped. My welfare is his priority. He tries to reason with me. I respond with louder, more violent abuse. 'Listen,' I say in exasperation, 'you're dead, I'm dead, we're all dead, everybody is dead. I'm now in some other space, so just fuck off!'

'What are you talking about, Hamo?' he says evenly. 'We're fine, I'm fine, you're fine, you're going to the Olympics —'

'Stop talking shit and just fuck off.'



Kathy witnesses the entire exchange and phones Louise with the advice that she better return, pronto. My wife parks the car again and ushers the kids into Kathy's care inside the kiosk. She is fearful of what they might witness on the platform. Louise screws up her nerve and, under the wretched gaze of strangers, steps out into that corridor to confront God-knows-what. She sees two men. One is her husband and the father of her children and he is ranting at the top of his voice, yelling illogical, foul-mouthed abuse at one of his dearest friends who is doing his level best to placate him.

I am hostile, enraged, out of control. Years in general nursing and especially in drug and alcohol rehabilitation have given Louise some experience of psychosis. She recognises the symptoms. 'He's psychotic,' she says, 'call Mental Health.'

The Mental Health Crisis Team wants to know the details. They are: we have a man in his late thirties, storming up and down the platform, yelling and screaming abuse, out of control, he is psychotic.

The combination of 'railway station' and 'out of control' are enough. Mental Health advises that the police must be called. At this point, let's get one thing clear: I had no intention of jumping under a train or doing anybody harm. But no one else knew that.

The police paddy wagon backs up into the loading ramp. I am still stalking the platform like a wild thing, yelling and abusing anyone who comes near. As the police approach, Chris steps aside. The officers—maybe six of them—string themselves along the platform edge to prevent the possibility of me jumping in front of a train. This loose line of blue then loops in behind me, gently herding me in the direction of the paddy wagon.

When I see two officers standing either side of the open door it occurs to me they are going to put me in their van. 'I'm not going in there.' All indignation and confusion. 'I'm not a criminal ... I'm going to the Olympics.'

The phalanx of blue moves closer. Instantly, the survival instinct kicks in. Fight or flight. Frantically, I examine the options. Access back to the platform is blocked by an arc of blue uniforms. There is nowhere to run. I must fight. I am a wild, thrashing, kicking, bucking animal scrapping for its very life. I flail, twist, heave and roll on the ground, scuffing shoes, ruining attire. I weigh no more than 85 kilograms, but it takes the combined effort of all the officers to restrain me, pin my arms behind my back, snap the handcuffs into place and heave me into the wagon.

Abruptly, I realise I am free of their grip. But there is no time to react. The metal door swings shut. With dreadful finality, the bolt slams into place. ✕



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Site Links

Organisations that provide recovery oriented activities, research & resources



Good Practice Examples

Australian initiatives that demonstrate good practice



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"Peace comes not from the absence of conflict, but from the ability to cope with it." *Author Unknown*