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The Myths of Azaria, So Many.

John Bryson.

A young trial lawyer will soon come to understand that some stories are likely to be believed while others will not, and the factor which sets them apart is not to do with fact or with falsehood.

Around a time when Lindy Chamberlain at Mount Isa was well pregnant with Azaria, the Chief Ranger at Ayers Rock National Park, Derek Roff, was warning the Northern Territory Conservation Commission about the increasing aggression of local dingoes, and the danger now to children. 'Babies and small children may be considered possible prey,' he wrote in his report. He asked to cull the worst.

As Mrs Chamberlain's pregnancy came closer to term, Roff and his rangers cast about for measures to protect campers which might be within their powers while they awaited instructions. The rangers themselves fashioned notices warning campers against encouraging dingoes with food, and urging caution. Azaria Chamberlain was born on June 11th 1980 at Mount Isa. Close to that date Ranger Ian Cawood shot the most troublesome male, which had been entering staff houses and pilfering food.

By the 16th August, when the Chamberlain family set up their tent in the Park camping ground, and the following evening Azaria was taken from the tent by a pack, or

singly, Ranger Roff's warning lay unanswered at the Commission. The Report carried a warning of peril which was not to be believed.

For two days the happening was known by everyone to do with the event, campers, searchers, Aboriginals, rangers, police, Park staff. A tragedy: a tiny babe taken, eaten by a dingo pack. These two days provided the one period when the world was clear about the truth of the event. Here we watched a brief absence of myth.

The first journalists off the flight to Ayers Rock were sceptical. Their vehemence infected investigating detectives. At this moment died the period of clarity. The new scepticism provided a warm and verdant solution in which to grow a bubbling culture of belief, an urban myth: dingoes don't behave like this. Exactly here, at this very point, the first phase of Azaria mythmaking took its shape: the child was slaughtered, this is a family of madcap religious beliefs, Seventh-day Adventists, worse, the father is a Pastor. The cities began to buzz with Myth One: Azaria was dispatched by the Pastor on Ayers Rock to atone for the sins of the world.

Then surfaced, through the Melbourne Truth, the intelligence from a Mount Isa General Practitioner, mistaking an entry in the Dictionary of Christian Names: Azaria means Sacrifice in the Wilderness.

I recall an argument with a woman in Melbourne's Carlton, a pub bar where writers met most Friday evenings, Lurie was there, Moorhouse in from Sydney, Oakley was a local then, all talking of the latest suspicions. She was a retired journalist. 'There are more things in heaven and hell than we dream of,' she quoted. She was merely one of many throughout the nation. I held no belief about the baby's death, but I had known some Seventh-day Adventists. Why were we so anxious to believe this of them?

Within a few weeks the volume of rumor swelled. Azaria had been dressed in black clothing; Azaria had been hurt falling from a shopping trolley and was irreparably damaged; a tiny coffin made for Azaria was found in the Chamberlains' garage; a passage in the Chamberlains' Bible was highlighted in red providing a template for Azaria's execution.

The myth of sacrifice high on Ayers Rock by the Pastor was itself killed off when investigators found Florence Wilkin and Gwen Eccles, who each nursed Azaria in their arms while the Pastor and the two boys scaled the Rock, and the neighbouring campers Greg and Sally Lowe saw the baby alive and active at the barbecue until her mother laid her down in the tent for the evening meal.

The Pastor stood at the barbecue eating with the Lowes while Azaria was taken; this was first made plain to public interest at Coroner Barritt's inquest, at which three extraordinary events occurred: a Chamberlain-hater phoned in a bomb threat which cleared the courthouse while; Barritt made his decision to televise his finding live to the nation to halt the rumour mongering; Barritt apologised to the Chamberlains for the nation's behaviour and criticised the Conservation Commission for allowing danger to build in the Park.

The backswell of the Barritt inquest left a confused eddy of stories and beliefs about Azaria's death, from Hobart to Darwin, but for the most part the nation was content enough to conclude we had been too hurried to attribute evil to this family which many regarded as suspiciously over-religious.

For months public interest in the Chamberlains remained doldrum calm. In government departments interest was furious. A new investigation, Operation Ochre, was formed in secret. Selected journalists were fed leaks: of the baby's clothing now in London for examination, of experiments in a zoo with dingoes peeling baby clothes from cuts of meat, of the pattern of bite marks on knitted clothing. A TV channel was invited to film an experiment with a dummy baby pulled through desert brush, another to film a search of the sewer of a motel room in which the Chamberlains had slept the night of the tragedy. We began to watch the development of two mechanisms of crowd behaviour: the Urge to Chase, followed by the Urge to Lynch.

The rumors travelled by gossip in pubs and at dinner tables, and by journalists who put them to police and to law officers as questions, who refused to confirm or deny, although sometimes this was a very officer who had leaked this information to this journalist initially. The ruse allowed an editor to put the rumor into print. So effective was

the drama of the chase, that the Melbourne Sun reported it increased its print run by sixty thousand whenever an edition carried an item about the Chamberlains.

Because this had become a story about the decapitation of a baby by her mother on vacation in the central desert, the next well publicised event was the seizure of the family car. The vehicle was surrendered by the Chamberlains on police request, but this was not reported as part of the narrative. It's impoundment at a forensic laboratory was.

Officers would neither confirm nor deny scientific findings, but the word on the street was clear, the car was awash with the baby's blood.

The establishment of an unsupported but widely- held belief, and its maintenance was, in this case, made possible by keeping the victims ignorant of the allegations against them, so they could not prepare anything in rebuttal, had no defending argument, could collect no evidence of their own innocence. Barritt's inquest finding was now quashed in secret, Barritt was removed from the case because he insisted the Chamberlains be entitled to notice of the secret session to reopen the inquest. The first notification of a second hearing into the death of Azaria given to the Chamberlains was in the form of a subpoena to attend it. Some officer had the foresight to alert the television channels, so film of the delivery of the subpoenas could be taken from the helicopters overhead, and make the evening news.

The one contribution the Chamberlains could make to the burgeoning storyline was that they knew nothing about any of these sensational developments. Their prosecution carried through the second Inquest hearing according to procedures never before seen in an Australian court. Knowledge of all scientific evidence was denied them and denied to their lawyers until it was given from the witness stand. This was contrary to the usual procedures of fair notice. The Chamberlains were denied protection usually given to parties in jeopardy, that they be called to testify last, so to know how the case against them is made, here they were summoned first, so to be questioned in ignorance of any evidence to come. Here the prosecution began as it was to finish the trial, with an easy ride. Belief in the mother's guilt was close to nationwide.

At this hearing the Chamberlains, their lawyers, along with the rest of the world, were to be told the prosecution case. Instead of putting Azaria down, her mother walked with son Aiden to the tent, sat with the baby in the passenger seat of the hatchback, decapitated her with a pair of nail scissors, secreted her head and her body in the Pastor's camera bag while Aiden wasn't looking, and returned composed to the group at fireside, after few minutes away. One finds difficulty, now, uttering that storyline without a snarl of derision but, after the Chamberlains' convictions at the inevitable trial, a poll found a strong majority of the nation believed the parents guilty, the mother of murder, the Pastor an accessory.

The Witch myth was to be believed. Worth noting here are the words of the laboratory technician Mrs Joy Kuhl, who identified baby's blood in the car. During the trial in Darwin, at a dinner table at the hotel with police and journalists she said, 'I have no doubt the woman is a witch.' She nodded. 'Seriously.'

Mrs Chamberlain was consigned to Berrima Prison. The convictions were given headline reception from media, but also prompted unique reactions from an important few. Campsite eyewitnesses formed a band of travelling speakers protesting the verdict, where one woman said, 'We may be only little people, but we know right from wrong'; Trial Judge Muirhead began to campaign against the use of juries in criminal trials, since he had considered his charge to the jury had favoured acquittal; Chief Ranger Derek Roff wrote to newspapers in protest; scientists at Behringwerke AG in Germany warned its chemicals were wrongly applied to identify blood in the Chamberlain car and could return false results.

Public hatred of the Chamberlains allows us to examine the mechanisms of the Urge to Chase, perhaps with the shape of an algorithm in mind. What are 'conditions precedent' to large numbers of a population believing the absurd?

The magnitude of horror may provide a fine starting point. The magnitude of horror seems to manipulate several aspects of human judgment. The more horrifying the real, or supposed, crime, the more likely it is that the community will demand speedy action, investigators be inclined to improve the evidence, prosecutors be prepared to

lower standards of fairness, media to increase levels of agitation, onlookers to believe suspicions they would not otherwise consider. In the Chamberlain case the horror was of, as writer Morris Lurie phrased it, 'the Spectre of the Evil Mother.'

Victims of suspicion who are disliked will find difficulty escaping it, even if unpopularity is as moderate as belonging to an out-group, while the accusers are mainstream. An accelerant we saw in this case was the rumor that 'police knew more than they could publicly say.' An instance of this was to do with a supposed Health Department file of child cruelty by the Chamberlains when they lived in Tasmania. Some years later, at a gathering of friends in Hobart, I met the forensic pathologist briefed to find the file. It did not exist, he told the investigators, although this did not scotch the rumor.

A propensity for superstitious belief may be thought a predisposing factor, and I am including the populous religions here, for this purpose. I have no measurement for this, simply an impression that people of religious background seemed the more ready to join the growing suspicions of the Chamberlains, Catholics particularly. Since Seventh-day Adventists are more critical of Catholicism than are other Protestants, this may have a bearing. Witch belief is associated with the power of Satan, and certainly with Evil, so is of religious origin.

Should we take into account the cultural influences of the times? Massachusetts in sixteen ninety-two was in a hysteria of witchcraft allegations following outbreaks of disease and pestilence which a medical practitioner ascribed to devilish works because he couldn't cure his patients. In PNG we watch the horrifying practice of witch burning which has a history immemorial. Currently, in Perugia, American Amanda Knox faces retrial on murder and sex crime charges in a city facing a drug crimewave and is referred to in the press as 'a she-Devil' and 'a Luciferina.' Knox likens her predicament to Lindy Chamberlain's. Worth recalling here is an epidemic of exorcist movies over the period of the Chamberlain persecution. Clearly much of the nation was in a mood to suspend belief.

No lynch mob formed for the Chamberlains, but the bomb threats and letters recorded by the Territory's newspapers, 'They ought to burn the bitch,' and 'She should be strung up,' brings the Urge to Lynch close enough for interest. One suspects lynching follows a suspect's escape from proper punishment or, as in post-slavery Southern USA, from racial fear. Mrs Chamberlain's protection, before her exoneration in 1987, was first provided by her gaolers.

The belief of the nation in the myth that science had proven the guilt of Azaria's parents, was the force which made the eyewitness evidence superfluous, out-manuevered defence lawyers, avoided the Trial Judge's cautions, and dislocated the mechanisms of Appeal. We had watched this progression: a bereaved mother changed by a band of conjurors into a vile beast and cast into the dungeon, but lifted by the voices of the Little People, to again become the gentle and bereaved mother as at the beginning. When might we be permitted to unmask the conjurors?