



21st Century Chopping Block



24th August 2006

“So, do you think he did it?”, I was asked getting on the elevator, to which I replied, “Do I give a \$#!%?” I mean, who *really* cares whether John Mark Karr killed JonBenet Ramsey -- besides the victim’s family and friends? Does the *whole* world need to be brought into this development because it’s a matter of either national or international importance? If John Mark Karr is guilty then there will still be a problem with Iran’s nuclear energy program; there will still be a problem between Lebanon and Israel; there will still be any other problem you can dream of, unless of course you are the parents of JonBenet Ramsey who *might* have judicially solved the problem of who killed their daughter.

The reason this question came to me in the small-talk world of ‘elevator chat’ is that one cannot escape my lobby or parking levels without catching at least **one** glimpse of superfluous news, on the flatscreen portraits adorning the walls of the building in which I live. Since only 10 years have passed between JonBenet Ramsey’s death and the confession of John Mark Karr, the book -- so to speak -- had not yet been closed on this little bit of superfluous news, thus the hamster that runs on the wheel to turn the media- $\$#!\%$ -mill began his workout.

It’s entertainment, actually. One doesn’t make money telling facts: a mathematician teaches and even *comes up with* facts (if he’s a good one), but there’s no entertaining value to it -- just mention ‘calculus’ to 95 out of the next 100 people you meet starting today and see what the reaction is. ‘Boring’, ‘Confusing’, ‘Clueless’ -- these are some descriptions of math or science classes as they have come to me in the many times I’ve been asked the ultimate at-least-make-some-noise-I-can’t-stand-the-silence question, ‘So what do you do?’. Well, that’s kind of a loaded question to start with, but I usually ask them to specify if they mean to add the prepositional phrase ‘for a living’ or if they mean ‘for fun’. You see, in my case -- so far -- these questions both lead to the same answer, but I’ve been told by a myriad of skeptics that this will change; but for now, I’m in the clear. When I respond to the first question with “I’m a Researcher in Aerospace Engineering, specifically rockets” I get a counter-response similar to -- bypassing the lame ‘so, you’re *really* a rocket scientist?’ -- ‘oh, I hated math’ or ‘oh, I hated science’, or ‘wow, I could never do that’. Most people agree that these are the usual responses they would give to being told this in an otherwise random conversation.

But it is usually these same people that are just so damn curious about who killed JonBenet Ramsey; now, this seems like an uncloaked derogatory mark, but in fact it’s a disguised compliment. You see, everyone’s a scientist, mathematician, or what-have-you-reasonably-rational-and-curious thinker in their day-to-day matters, but they don’t realize it because of that smelly and crusty guy who talked to the chalk board for an hour during freshman physics class at 8am. From then on, any encounter with ‘math stuff’ or ‘science stuff’ was guilty by *association* with that uncomfortable experience of ‘not getting it’, also known as confusion -- not understanding. Every subsequent experience that hints of any indicators connected with this memory of realizing one’s intellectual mortality drives people away from rational thought, when in fact they use it and aspire to quench their curiosity of ‘Runaway Brides’ or John Mark Karr or any other unsolved puzzle that is put before them in the constant barrage of media every day. Curiosity never leaves us, but the ways we may attempt to quench it drip away before we know we’re holding the cup.

So, just make sure that every Middle and High Schooler has a good (I mean, can-explain-quantum-mechanics-to-a-three-year-old good, like Feynman could have done) physics and math teacher at every critical juncture in the curriculum, and then we won’t have to watch worthless news clips about Natalee Holloway’s parents using the John? Well, not quite: it’s because although the political situation in Nigeria, for example, is a precarious and possibly troublesome scenario for the world (see the April 2004 *Atlantic Monthly*), no one wants to hear or think about that because being able to debate that bit of possibly important info could in fact lead to *actually giving a \$#!%*. That’s why Joe Schmo is entertained -- not informed -- of actual news by MSNBC and CNN, to name a couple; if he doesn’t figure out today who killed JonBenet Ramsey, it *really doesn’t matter* because either he’ll be told by the media machine at some point in the future or he’s already made up his mind -- i.e., he’s taken in the facts as they’ve come in to him and formed a judg-

ment based on his 'experiences' inferred from either life or TV (alternate life) -- to render a verdict before the trial begins; if he's wrong, so what; because Judge CNN already rendered the verdict *by association*.

To be publicly displayed as the suspect today is as good as having one's head on the chopping block 400 years ago. It's just that in these hundreds of years of progress we've actually become *crueler* in our dealings of punishment because we have figured out how to execute, yet not kill, the accused - - not necessarily the guilty. 'Did John Mark Karr kill JonBenet Ramsey?', to which I respond again, 'Does it matter?'. Everyone's mind has already been made up because curiosity had its moment of thirst, and everyone wants to drink right away from the well of knowledge, however mistaken the tongue may be.
