

# Error 87 and other contemporary myths

## On life without facts



*The freewheelin'*  
**Peter Geyer**

*They say that love is dangerous  
It's on the radio  
That holding hands is fatal  
A kiss can bring you low  
The papers they keep shouting  
That love means doom and gloom  
Love is lying low—for a while*

Claire Bathé

*One of the salient features of our  
culture is that there is so much  
bullshit.*

Harry Frankfurt

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Love can be many things, and there are many dangers. Holding hands may not be love all the time, but a picture of George W Bush hand-in-hand with a Saudi prince caused some consternation recently. Perhaps the US President is expected to model a more circumscribed, tougher view of life.

While this behaviour is culturally appropriate in the Middle East (much as expressing laughter, but meaning disapproval, in an Asian courtroom; or the disapproval of emotion in courtrooms just about everywhere), hearing about these things on the radio might be fraught with danger, as far as understanding goes, at least.

Not everyone has that aim, of course, for a variety of reasons. The same can be said of the visual media, particularly in this age of 'celebrity': a title that one can acquire pretty quickly these days, irrespective of other characteristics.

One of the curiosities in the reporting of the last days of the arch-celebrity Pope John Paul II was the differing levels of knowledge of what the Pontiff and his organisation actually do, and what they believe in. This resulted in some uneasy on-camera moments for some reporters, clearly sent to Rome with no knowledge or ability other than standing in front of historical landmarks. Their information was limited, and sometimes inaccurate.

Information does not necessarily lead to *facts*, or to *truth* for that matter. And facts are not necessarily of interest—not even for sensing types—unless they fit with conscious experience. For intuitives, well, there's the vision.

Knowledge and development overlap these approaches. For information to make sense there has to be a context in which the facts are recognised and decisions can be made.

We can bypass the rationality of *thinking* or *feeling* and operate on impulse or emotion—but more of that later.

It's clear, in any case, that in this technological age, communication is a byword. Mobile phones, iPods, laptops and the like foster impressions of ceaseless activity and exchange of ideas, or words and images, at any rate. Advertisements encourage the successful business person to be plugged in or otherwise connected in taxis, patios and aeroplanes.

Somewhat curiously, Australians are now lauded as hard workers, whereas a decade ago we were excoriated for sloth. So far, no-one has sought to explain this apparent contradiction, nor to suggest that working hard might not be a good idea in terms of real productivity, as criteria other than long hours and sweat come into play there.

We are also considered the Lucky Country and the Clever Country, notwithstanding the sardonic origins of the former, and the introduction of the latter as something for Australians to aspire to, not something we might already be.

With regard to these labels and their real meanings, perhaps that's where the philosopher Harry Frankfurt comes in (2005). Bullshit may be the opium of the day, an obfuscatory practice that treats all information the same, in that it's only useful to defend your turf.

The scandal concerning the practices of the surgeon Jayant Patel at Bundaberg Hospital appears replete with collusion and avoidance, and even denial of facts, from people presenting as STJs, from what I've read. Of course, if conventional behaviour is to obscure and hide, and even to bullshit, then other principles such as responsibility and duty can go by the wayside.

You'd think that if the system can *identify* an error, it might also be able to *describe* it

For some people, idleness appeals more than productivity or running around being active (Hodgkinson, 2004). Whatever one might think of that (and Tom Hodgkinson points to the moral opprobrium heaped on idlers of various sorts over the past two centuries or so), a non-idle world is without reflection and contemplation. Action without ideas seems rather meaningless to me, and I would think it unhelpful in general. But there are other views.

The 24/7 world conjured up by technology also has its leakages. Recently, communication between my iMac and hp printer was halted by something called Error 87, the provenance of which was unknown to both my available information and the mysterious call centre I had to contact in Bangalore, India, in order to get help.

I rang up the genial men and women of Bangalore several times over an afternoon, providing opportunities for them to practise their English and discover differences in cultural etiquette. Regrettably, the various bits of advice I received failed (essentially the same advice recycled), until one call after 6pm provided the unwelcome news that the centre was only available between 8am and 6pm Monday to Friday, as was the online help. All this seemed incompatible with hp corporate vision as expressed in their advertising.

My problem was mysteriously solved just by being out of the office, as the printer functioned perfectly a few days later. But I'm none the wiser; there seems to be no list of errors and their descriptions, which seems strange to me. You see them on your computer quite regularly. Some have four numbers, so there must be a lot of them. You'd think that if the system identified an error, it might be able to describe it in some way, and a solution would follow.

But the best recommendation I had was to 'Google it' and hope someone else had the same problem and had solved it. I found someone with the same problem—but no solution. I can't believe that a major industry has the temerity to leave people in the lurch in this way. It seems unprofessional, but maybe it's all about money, or something more arcane.

Perhaps it's also like being on the phone, or at the airport, particularly the latter, when a disembodied voice thanks you for your patience. This statement seems to magically absolve the organisation concerned from meeting basic standards of efficiency, fixing the problem quickly, or providing some sort of meaningful assistance to customers or clients.

Implicit in this sort of thing is the presumption that one listens and accepts what has been said, and doesn't look for facts, or principles. One opinion might be as good as another, something that would confuse both Isabel Briggs Myers and C G Jung were they around today, as both showed an intense interest in facts, expressing that interest in their writing and work.

Asking for evidence seems a vexed question these days, and it's easy to get into trouble. The recent re-ascent of Gallipoli as a defining myth for Australian identity is a case in point. Participants in this military event are now presumed to have fought for altruistic and noble reasons such as liberty, rather than for the reality of Empire, much as Australians did in the Boer War.

You can check this out by taking a cruise along country roads to seek out memorials to the Boer War and the Great War, even of Gordon at Khartoum, and read what they say. This is not to deny notions of military bravery *pro patria sua*—simply that the reasons for being brave, or simply serving in the armed forces at that time, are different from what is currently expressed. They are consistent, though, with what has been said by centenarians and others who were veterans of these long-ago events.

In purveying the modern myth (sometimes celebrated complete with music video entertainment), excursions to history texts to discover facts are necessarily avoided. In popular English history, the myth of Charles II as the 'Merry Monarch' continues, notwithstanding the reality of a cunning and devious man not wishing to go on his travels again, as he had been forced to following the execution of his father (Harris 2005).

The saga of Dan Brown and *The Da Vinci Code* is similar in some ways. A ripping yarn takes on such plausibility to the unwary, or to those unable to distinguish between a tale and reality, that it has the form of fact. And it's not easily disabused, even when the experts and proponents are examined closely (Robinson, 2005).

To be fair, it was a seductive tale when I read in the area decades ago, and there's something appealing to the unconscious about the mythical.

The American interest in Marlo Morgan's *Mutant Message Down Under* (1994) a decade ago is apposite here, a story concocted on the idea of mystical aborigines, a variant on the noble savage theme popularised by Rousseau in the 18th Century (Geyer 1995). I met several Americans in the type community who wanted the story to be true, and were disappointed when informed it was not.

One of the reasons stories like Brown's become popular is that, although we may know the names of some of the people involved (Jesus, Mary Magdalene, etc), we know very little about their stories at all. It's a version of public/private: we know them; there's not much on record about them; we don't know them. And so that makes speculation all the more easy. You have to know something about history, and perhaps theology in Brown's case, in order to query the romance, as it were, and risk being identified as a killjoy.

The search for an Australian identity is an ongoing process, helped and hindered by a general lack of knowledge and information about the facts surrounding Australian history, and the paradoxes inherent in having key players, at one and the same time, hero as well as villain. Fairly normal in some sense, but there seems a tendency to go for one or the other, rather than recognising both as part of the whole. We have to take Mr Hyde along with Dr Jekyll; Redmond Barry and also Ned Kelly. 'Un-Australian' has to be jettisoned in terms of 'what kind of Australian'

Without that perspective there is only a naiveté, an unconsciousness even, about the complexity of Australians—the pre-

sumption that we mean well, for instance, and that we are a generous nation. All that can be true, but just as true is the brutality expressed at various times and places; the 'compliance' and detention associated with immigration; and the varying perspectives on aboriginal people from pioneering days, from 'pests' to valuing their hard work (Waterhouse 2005). Much of what is true has been wrong, or unacceptable, but it's no less true for that.

But some seem to want to have it one way, and argue we can withdraw our favours when we feel spurned, or express moral outrage at the notion that Australians might be drug smugglers. Yet history over several decades at least, shows that Australians are over-represented in this activity, often engaging in it for a lark without care for consequences, which seems part of the Australian *mythos*, no matter how reprehensible it might be to some (McCoy 1980).

Historically, too, Australians have been world leaders in the consumption of drugs in general, from the early days of the general availability of heroin a century ago, to analgesics, like the now faded cultural icon Bex, but more particularly aspirin, paracetamol and the like.

Alison Cameron recently reported on the use of such drugs by some Australian mothers to placate or otherwise control their children. Perhaps it's done in order to avoid engaging with them as human beings, but who knows? But it fits neatly into a lengthy documented pattern of Australian behaviour, as consistent as success at sport and other endeavours.

In the end, perhaps it's better to see things as tensions between opposites. Whether you are nominally after the facts or the vision, searching out facts is hard work. And the facts may not fit your logical or personal perspective—or mine, for that matter.

But it's a challenge that's necessary in order to understand the presentation of information in our time, and the emotions that often accompany it, like a cloud from the unconscious.

Something like Error 87, really. ❖

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- Facts are not merely finding a footing-place in history, but they are usurping the domain of fancy, and have invaded the kingdom of romance. Their chilling touch is over everything.*
- Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying*
- I think that we should make our judgment once we get the facts.*
- Tony Blair, on the death of arms expert David Kelly.
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