

Baby Steps Toward the Abyss

by [Robert Edgar](#) (January 2019)



Elephant Celebes, Max Ernst, 1921

“Oh, I should think a bottle of wine lasts about a week”

“Is that between the two of you?”

“Oh yes, of course.”

To be honest, I was that morning suffering from the effects of a little too much of the grape the night before (dry mouth; a little nausea; a sense of malaise) and dropped this massive fib in response to the question, ‘how many units of alcohol do you consume each week?’ The point of this inevitable and intrusive probing is something I’ve never been able to fathom. For starters, I’m thankfully yet to meet the sort of crashing bore who tots up their weekly units like a form of alcoholic bean counting; for seconds, I’ve never met anybody who admits to telling the truth about their drinking to an NHS busybody. Far more effective, in my view, would be for them to take their patients down to the pub for a few pints and extrapolate from there.

You might be thinking that I’m writing about a recent visit to the doctor, perhaps registering with a new practice or even enduring a dental checkup but you would unfortunately be wrong. My wife and I have recently moved from London to a cottage in the Northumbrian countryside as she is expecting our first child and we felt a strong draw towards fresh air and privacy whilst we adapt to an enormous change of status. In short, to nest. To prepare. To become settled.

That *unsettling* question was one of several asked by some professional meddler whose job title was sufficiently meaningless to be instantly forgotten (*Area Healthcare Support*

Manager?), but inflated enough to betray that here darkening our door was not a doctor, nurse or midwife. We had, in fact, been expecting a visit from one of the excellent midwives who have been looking after us superbly from the moment we arrived, but it was soon clear that this was to be an interrogation (confirmed by the words, “don’t worry, it’s not an interrogation”).

“How would you describe your childhood? What were your parents like growing up? Did they share parenting duties equally? None of this, ‘wait until your father gets home?’ I hope?” –asked with all the salivating expectancy of the predator stalking its prey.

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“Do either of you smoke or use tobacco?” On learning that I switched some 3 years ago to a discreet electronic cigarette and have absolutely no intention of stopping, I was told only to use it outside. There’s no evidence of the vapour’s second-hand harm of course, “but it might ‘normalise’ the smoking process you see, and we wouldn’t want that would we?” –who is this ‘we?’

“I’m required to tell you about the benefits of breastfeeding. Better than formula of course, only a tiny percentage of women actually have a physical inability to breastfeed don’t cha

know. There's no scientific evidence for this, but anecdotally we know that the milk changes with every feed depending on what you eat" –as long as we know it 'anecdotally,' eh?

The culmination of this disagreeable hour was a film we were 'required' to watch called, *'Coping with Crying'*. It charts the appalling story of a mother whose child was shaken to the point of brain damage (death resulting from the injuries some years later) by the child's thuggish father. Doubtless the



implication intended was that a lack of sleep could turn even the meekest, most doting dad into a raging infanticidal maniac, but I felt more than a little condescended to. Was it really necessary to produce a video (no doubt at some expense) explaining that an infant who is unable to support his own head would be

unable to survive considerable physical violence? Again, the point of this escapes me. Surely, the sort of man capable of committing such an unspeakable crime on a defenseless baby is unlikely to be put off his wickedness by some hectoring film, while the rest of us wouldn't be very likely to act on such a monstrous idea whether having watched it or not.

"It's always the bloke isn't it?" I said with a certain sardonicism which was clearly ill-appreciated.

There is a serious and disturbing point to this. It is not that this type of screening is inadequate, which it is, nor is it the odious double-standard (my wife has privately been asked if I'm beating her senseless or, even more absurdly, if

there is any history of female genital mutilation in my family of Scottish Presbyterians). It is a frightening example of just how much the barrier between the family and the state has been eroded: Note the 'we wouldn't want that, would we', so casually rattled off as though our son was the centre of some grotesque triptych with his parents on one side and a National Health apparatchik on the other; note the sneering dismissal of the apparently outmoded idea of the father as provider and disciplinarian.

To be clear, I am not some reactionary hermit who views all official advice as an encroachment. Indeed, I am almost pathetically grateful that help will be on hand if the baby is ill. If he is underweight—for example—I should like to know how best to rectify the situation. Nor do I care if other families *do* hold the idea of the father at work and the mother looking after the home in contempt. It is precisely none of my business after all. What I object to is the idea that the state feels it appropriate to dictate the style of parenting; that it feels obligated to send one of its agents to your home and ask deeply intrusive questions about family life, as if we must all be guilty of something so better to presume guilt rather than innocence. Of course, things are not as bad as they could be—I would not suggest that we live in a totalitarian state—but if the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, then so too must the journey to the gulag.

"I know where you live now so I won't have any trouble getting here for my next visit"—was it my imagination or did I detect a hint of menace?

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