

GRANDTOUR

Law

AN INSIDER'S LOOK AT THE LACI PETERSON CASE

Dr. Anthony Napoleon

VISIT THE COURT TV WEBSITE and you will see the images of Laci and Scott Peterson. Laci looks beautiful. Her photo, like all the other photos we saw of her during the trial, was of a smiling, idyllic brunette with beautiful warm eyes. Scott's photo, on the other hand, with his bleached hair, flat-affect face, goatee and menacing eyes looks like someone who may be capable of murder. Even when his lawyer had Scott dye his hair dark and shave his goatee, the flat affect remained — and so did the Scott Peterson eyes.

Laci disappeared on Christmas Eve, 2002. In that year there were 16,200 murders in America, with five of those violent crimes occurring in Modesto, California, Laci and Scott's hometown. With so many violent crimes to choose from, each with their own cast of characters and implicit tragedy, what was it that captured not only the attention of the rural community of Modesto, but the entire United States?

Each and every high-profile court drama becomes so because of the characters involved; not the acts, per se, of those characters. What kind of a man would have an affair when he had a Laci Peterson at home? What kind of a man would leave his wife on Christmas Eve to go fishing? And the coup de grace in this high profile drama is that Laci Peterson was pregnant with a baby boy already christened before his birth with the name Connor.

The day the verdicts were announced a press-pool camera panned the sizable crowd outside the courthouse. The party atmosphere was palpable. When the first-degree verdict was announced, cheers and tears of joy could be seen and heard everywhere. The post verdict shows were replete with giddy guests who acted as though they had just won the lottery.

My own research strongly suggests counsel should ask whether or not their client looks and sounds like someone capable of murder. Even if the evidence screams out guilty, if the defendant does not look or sound like someone capable of such an act, then more often than not, the jury will give the defendant the benefit of the doubt. In 1934, a researcher by the name of Monahan noted that even seasoned prosecutors found

it virtually impossible to think of an attractive woman as guilty of a crime. The same is true for kindergarten-age children. When teachers were asked to pick out the photos of kids who had harmed another child, the teachers picked out the unattractive kids. On the other side of the coin, attractive people are often the target of envy, jealousy, petty competitiveness and yes, violence. Rebecca Schaeffer, Polly Klass, Selena, Lyric Benson, Lori Hacking and Laci Peterson were all killed by people who were judged to be cold and unattractive.

Pay close attention to the penalty phase of the Peterson murder trial. You are going to see photo after photo of a different Scott Peterson. You will see Mr. Peterson holding babies, petting dogs, standing outside of church and other visual images that are discordant with the behavior of a murderer. You won't see photos of Scott holding the animals he hunted down and killed. It is his image that his lawyers will attempt to soften.

If only they could do something with his eyes. During my fellowship studies in plastic surgery I remember one patient asking to have more life put into his eyes. "That is something that comes from within," spoke the senior surgeon.

I hope the jury was right in convicting Mr. Peterson of first-degree murder, because even if Scott Peterson isn't guilty, he looks like someone capable of murder. And given the circumstances, hardly anyone will believe that he is innocent if he gets a new trial and is acquitted. Those of us who research such matters will tell you people who look like Laci Peterson are the kind of women people identify with on a very deep and primitive level. When Scott Peterson left his wife to cavort with the likes of Amber Frye, he became every man who was ever unfaithful. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. **GT**

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