

PROTECT YOURSELF FROM THE DEAD

By Chaplain Harold Elliott

Police officers are constantly being taught street survival, and most of us shudder at the behavior of an unthinking officer who fails to protect himself. There is the ongoing discussion of how large a weapon should be carried and how many spare bullets should be at the officer's immediate disposal. All this is important, but no less important is that the dead will kill you too. It just takes the dead a bit longer to do the job. The living will shoot you, knife you, club you, or run over you. The dead will blow your mind apart and vandalize your emotions until you become a shell of a human being. These are the trappings of death.

Ask any officer to describe the first death scene he worked, and he will remember almost every detail. He can recall the position of the body, facial expression, open or closed eyes, location of wounds, and type of clothing worn. No matter how many years ago, he'll still remember. Of all the things we forget, it never seems to be a death scene. That being the case, it only stands to reason that an accumulation of such sights eventually takes its toll on an officer, unless he safeguards himself.

There is a social norm among many police officers which says, "Thou shalt have no unexplained reactions to the things which thou hast seen." So, they spend a bulk of their lives trying to convince themselves and others that they are totally unaffected by dealing with the dead.

Lectures on the subject can help, but they don't eliminate the impact of direct, prolonged experience; that can be a killer. I remember an old man who used to stroll the streets of my hometown with a sad face, bland personality, and a walk that resembled a funeral march. I never knew his name, but my mother always referred to him as "that old man who's dead and doesn't know it." The dead may not physically kill you, but they can sap your emotional resourcefulness until you are about as useful as they.

How you receive death will make a considerable difference in the effect a corpse will have on you:

- Those who equate human and animal death will likely become cynical and persuade themselves that no scene is too bloody for them to view and remain unaffected. This illusion is generally exposed when the officer loses someone he loves.
- Those who view death as the doorway into eternity will normally feel a sense of tender emotion. They may feel stress because of man's inhumanity to man or man's inhumanity to himself.

The job demands that an officer view death scenes. However, it does not demand that each officer view them in the same manner. Whenever I see a body, regardless of the circumstances surrounding the death, I view it as a wax figure in a museum. Some officers



see the dead as mannequins. Others may view them as evidence in the overall investigation. Still another may see the victim as only an object that once was alive and is now only a shell. Whatever image one may concoct, the result is the same: dehumanization of the victim. This isn't wrong; in fact, it is a natural part of our built-in survival kit.

Some officers would rather not show their real emotions at a death scene. Certain feelings are simply natural to human beings, and should not be construed as signs of weakness. For example, when alone in a room with a body, experiencing an eerie feeling; if the victim is child, female, or helpless individual, feeling intense grief; if sexual deviation is involved, feeling repulsion.

Officers also feel angry if death and mutilation are related to drugs or alcohol; if the victim was viewed by a family member, especially children, the officer may be moved to sympathy; and he will feel shock, the same as any other individual, if the victim is known to him personally.

Though most officers will contain themselves at the scene, if the victim reminds him of a loved one, he will probably cry when alone. It isn't uncommon for sickness to affect those who must work an exceedingly violent scene. Nausea is common if the odor is overpowering and the body of the victim is decomposed.

The dead person troubles us, disturbs our peace, gives us the creeps, stirs our fears, and gives us nightmares. Even the policeman's badge isn't thick enough to prevent it, and there isn't enough authority in the book to ward it off.

But we aren't defenseless. Take a look at some safeguards against being overcome:

- **Talk it out.** Talk is good therapy. Some officers choose to talk to other officers. However, there is always the fear of appearing weak in the eyes of a comrade if true emotions are revealed. In departments where a chaplain is present, the officer may feel a freedom to bare his soul with the assurance of strict confidentiality. The officer who shares with his spouse is utilizing a good source of understanding. Every blood and guts detail need not be divulged to relate the story and get relief.
- **Crying is OK.** Obviously there is a time and place for everything, but it should not be forgotten that crying makes us no less professional. Tears are terrific for washing away hurt. Some officers have wept at the scene and there is certainly no reason for apology, but whenever possible the officer will normally do this when alone.
- **Humor.** Although humor should never be crude, and great precaution must be taken to avoid its use in the presence of family members or persons outside the police department, it should be recognized that well-placed humor is great release. It isn't necessarily disrespectful to use some humor at a death scene. Humor is a real salvation to those who use it wisely and at the appropriate place and time.



- **Take a break.** Though it is necessary to view the victim, photograph the entire scene, and sometimes handle the body, it isn't necessary to stare at it over a prolonged period of time without a break. Take time out to regroup your thoughts, get a breath of fresh air, and let your mind remove itself from the ugly sight of death.

Be prepared for and understand something about post-traumatic stress disorders. Two types of disorders are prevalent. First, the acute disorder has symptoms which occur immediately after or sometime during the event. They are things such as frequent urination, or an uncontrollable desire to just break away and run from it all. After a particularly difficult experience with a tragic death situation, one officer said to me, "I hate this job, I just want to get out of the whole mess." It had only been a few days before that he had sat in my office and related how much he loved police work.

Second, the delayed disorders are those which may occur two days, two weeks, or two years after an event or series of events. They include things such as sleep disorders, flashbacks, isolation and depression. I know one officer, who after working homicide in a major city, requested a transfer to any division in the department which didn't deal with death. Death had stacked up on him until he felt he could not stand it if he had to see another body. The number of gruesome death scenes the officer has experienced in a short time will obviously make him more prone toward post-traumatic stress disorders, especially the inexperienced officer.

The officer who is honest with himself will accept the fact that he is only human, and it is natural for humans to hurt at the sight of needless death, injury and mutilation. Wise is the officer who takes off his Superman suit, and allows himself to be just plain Clark Kent.

Officers can't avoid blood in the alley and brains on the ceiling, but they can learn to deal with it in a manner which will preserve their own mental and physical health. If professional help is needed, get it. It is a weak person who thinks of himself as too strong to need support.

How strongly a person reacts to a situation depends on that person as an individual. The officer who continually holds in painful emotions or does not react at all is a likely candidate for severe emotional problems. The wise officer takes the precaution of watching the living, avoiding needless danger, and not living in a mental graveyard.

Remember, the living can kill you physically, while the dead can kill you emotionally.

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