

UNDERSTANDING THE LAW ENFORCEMENT WORLD

By

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When we were little kids we used to play "cops and robbers." We were always fighting to see who could be Elliot Ness or Matt Dillon or Wyatt Earp or J. Edgar Hoover. Very few of us ever wanted to be Frank Nitty or "Slant-eye Muldoon, or Johnny Ringo or Al Capone. We wanted to be on the side of right and good and put the bad guy in jail. Today, the life of the "cop" or police officer or law enforcement professional is vastly different from what we envisioned as children.

Law enforcement professionals are highly trained and conditioned individuals. Their psychological make-up has been tested and their intestinal fortitude has been tried under simulations so real even seasoned officers break under the strain. Their stress levels never dip below critical mass and their confidence is being eroded faster than California oceanfront property. To confidently meet the challenges and demands of law enforcement administrators are beginning to understand that the law enforcement professional is a frail and fragile instrument made up of a myriad of stressors, precariously perched on the balance beam of reality.

Practically, the only way we as chaplains can fully understand the world of the law enforcement professional is to become one. When that happens, we may become more of a problem than a solution. So let's look at this from a different perspective.

To properly understand the law enforcement community a Chaplain must understand those stressors and be prepared to help the officer keep his balance throughout a career that may be cut short by a criminal's bullet or a momentary lapse in judgment. Ours is a depersonalized atmosphere where advancement is slow and pay is low. As each department grows beyond the point where "everybody knows your name" to the place where you are a career ladder hopeful in theory only, the officers struggle to find significance in a job of routine and rhetoric.

As the officer becomes frustrated either a lackadaisical or hostile attitude will emerge. If unchallenged, either attitude will become transferred to every area of relationship the officer engages: professional, personal, familial, custodial. We will attempt to identify some of the stressors, thereby helping you understand better the law enforcement world.

The F.B.I. Behavioral Unit surveyed officers in 1984, 1986 and in 1993 to determine their number one need. In all three survey's, 90% of the officers said their number one need was how to handle personal stress. Burnout is when you start to lose enthusiasm with the people with whom you work. Officers have problems giving up control to the point that they cannot rest or trust anyone else but a cop to look out for them. This places the family and the police administration in a very strange position of having to live with and

supervise walking time-bombs.

Chaplain Nils Friberg wrote a paper with Sgt. Dennis Conroy on a very academic level. They use terms like "Victimization", "Loss of Innocence" and "Negative Possibility". Theirs is an excellent paper and should be considered. In this presentation, however, I must be a little less academic and a touch more personal. I use phrases that seem to fit what I observe in my officers.

IMAGE ARMOR

Image armor is a major problem with the police officer. They are extremely suspicious. It is easy to become so good at one thing that you are bad at everything else. In other words, it is all right to act abnormally to things that are abnormal. They are good at what they do in order to survive. But they have problems switching off the image of officer when they go home at night.

Then there is a period of disillusionment that young officers go through that may wash them out of law enforcement. Dreams of saving the world die hard, but they do die. Officers need enthusiasm, tempered by limits of reality and strengthened by a sense of mastery and accomplishment at applying new skills will overcome the disillusionment of tarnished armor.

COMMAND PRESENCE

This image armor comes from that command presence the officer must present. It is the body language, the tone in the voice, the look in the eye that conveys authority of presence. Many times, just these simple tricks will de-escalate the situation to a manageable level. Other times, it takes more. Problems arise with a lot of male officers because when they come home they need to be strong enough to be tender and brave enough to allow their wives to love them emotionally not just physically. Many officers cannot divorce themselves from this command presence and many wives find the strain too much over a few' years of being dominated.

LIMITED PERSPECTIVE SYNDROME.

Officers usually are called to the scene of a crime or accident where they see the absolute worse in people. Whether it is a wife-beating, child molestation, drive by shooting, or a traffic accident where a drunk driver has slammed into a van and incinerated the family in the front, officers have a limited perspective on things. Anytime something is wrong, they are called and they see it all. They have a problem seeing anything good and pure in the world in which they work.

Some officers work narcotics, full of dopers, dregs of humanity and other sorts of riff-raff. Others work vice where they see disease-ridden prostitutes and substance driven pimps making money off moral less and pitiful business men. Others may simply write tickets but the abusive language spewing from the "upstanding citizen" curls his nose hair. The

officer cannot respond in kind or he will spend several hours defending his actions and attitudes against "anonymous complaints". With all this, it is easy to become cynical and hard.

GHASTLY EXPOSURE SYNDROME

Officers are exposed to the extremes of life. Fights, altercations, dying people and mutilated bodies are routine occurrences in most major departments. Even in smaller agencies, every suicide, every traffic accident, every "dog-bites-man" call adds to the cumulative buildup of ghastly exposure. Dr. James Horn of the F.B.I. retired, says there is a new field of study emerging called "traumatology"; The cumulative build-up of exposure to trauma. Pathological lying to officers by civilians is routine. This causes most officers to distrust everyone including spouse, children, even the car repairman. Everyone seems to have an angle. Working with sociopaths gives officers a dirty feeling. Dealing with the dregs of humanity negatively impacts all relationships. Dealing with lower moral strata humans demoralizes and clouds clear vision of higher and more nobler things.

The fire seems to go out of the belly after about 10 years. Events take place at the same places, with the same couples beating up each other, usual suspects for similar crimes, same street corner, same seller of drugs to the same girls selling hours after being arrested for selling, all turns to hard cynicism. It is hard not to express frustration in anger.

CONSTANTLY ON A NATURAL HIGH

The average adult rarely gets into fights after they are out of high school. But the average law enforcement officer, male or female, may see two or three fights a week in smaller agencies, and perhaps two to three fights a night in larger situations. Every time they attempt to remove a driver under the influence, or protect a child in the middle of a family disturbance, they are prone to do battle. The fight or flight mechanism in each of us must be suppressed in the officer because the officer cannot run. The adrenaline starts to pump, the hypothalamus works overtime and the levels of stress shoot off the chart.

. This defense mechanism works well on the street and allows the officer to go home but all too often they fail to turn it off when they get to the door. The family is looking for a wife, husband, or dad. Instead they get a souped up officer whose eyes are semi-dilated with exhaustion and a body moving only by the natural infusion of hormones.

A second problem linked to this nature high hits those officers who are able to "turn it off" when they get home. They convince themselves that they are able to open the faucet when the adrenaline is needed and turn it off when they don't need it. What they fail to recognize is that over time, the faucet never turns completely off. They become accustomed to the "high" and think they are normal when in fact they are abnormal to the high side. This "normality" soon peeks at abnormality and the officer is none the wiser.

Usually those who recognize it first are the children. Seven year old Danny meets dad at

the door one day and instead of dad, there's a cop. Dad never realizes it, but Danny does. Words pour out of dad who thinks the levels are normal when they are caustic. The result is seen in the dimming of the eyes in little Danny.

POLICE PARANOIA

Officers soon get to feeling that no one likes them They gave a ticket to a little lady who looks like their mom What friends are made soon will ask for a ticket to be fixed or a tag to be run or some other thing civilians think the officers will do for them because they are friends. The officer starts to ask himself, do they like me for me or for what I may be able to do for them?

More shows on television portray the officer in a corrupt light rather than a compassionate light. Rock stars record stupid songs like "Cop Killer" which promotes immoral ideas toward police, Loud-mouthed and so-called civil leaders focus on one isolated incident of a perceived brutality case and by doing so condemn the entire fraternity of the Badge and the Blue as racist or worse.

CONFUSING ROLE EXPECTATIONS

Police officers often have confusing roles' on the same call. A city may see the officer as a public relations representative and a liability all at the same time. Children may see the officer as the bad man who gave mommy a ticket, the bad man who put daddy in jail, or my friend when a stranger tries to hurt me. He is to be a family man, faithful to his wife while females attempt to seduce him because of his uniform. The strength of the badge is tempted to compromise with the emotional and physical needs that burn deep inside the vest. His decisions on the street must be made in an instant but conform to think-tank thoroughness.

Kurt Guindon., M.D. serves Boone County, MO. Sheriff's Department and gives these seven conflicting role expectations:

1. "Keep us safe but don't invade our privacy."
2. "Get the bad guys, but don't hurt them. And don't let us catch it on videotape if you do."
3. "Carry a gun to protect my 12 year old daughter from a kidnaping rapist. But use little bullets that won't offend our sensibilities with gaping holes."
4. "Be honest and incorruptible, and risk your life. But we'll only pay you half of what you're worth."
5. "Don't let anyone drive drunk because of the horror of motor vehicle collisions. But if you stop me, I am going to complain to your captain."
6. "Get drugs off the street, but not my drugs."
7. "We will give you power to do your job, but we will resent you for it."

Though these are unspoken or unconscious thoughts, officers recognize them. They should be kept in mind to protect against eroded morale and apathy.

VOLUMES AND VOLUMES OF LAWS

Codes of Criminal Procedure, Penal Codes, State statutes, city ordinances, ad infinitum inundate the officer. Laws can change with every legislative whim. Procedures, elements of a crime, search and seizure practices must be constantly studied so the officer can be current. How much force is allowable this week to stop an illegal act? When can deadly force be justified? Is it ever justified? And all this without considering the catalogue of departmental policies that deal with things like smoking in city vehicles to properly filling out information forms.

FISH BOWL LIFESTYLES

It doesn't matter where the officer serves, large city or village, two things constantly draw attention to them.

The Uniform: This is an obvious authority symbol looked upon 3 ways: 1) with respect, 2) with disrespect, and 3) with practiced indifference. One thing is clear, the uniform is noticed. It is necessary to be obvious but it is unnerving.

The Weapon: Guns carry awesome responsibility. Proper use demands correct decisiveness. It constantly reminds the officer of the fragility of life and immediacy of death and marks a distinction between good and evil. The weapon demands attention, proficiency in use and a constant awareness of presence.

MEDIA ATTITUDES

Words like "Pig" and "The Fuzz" ring in the ears of editors. Many media types operate under the theory that all authority is irrational and fundamentally corrupt. They don't see the individuals under the blue, just the image of authority. Almost all questions of the media relate to either facts or hostility toward actions taken. Nothing about the real person behind the badge is ever reported as if the concern does not exist.

ROUTINE RUTS

Keeping Watch: Being on constant vigil, the officer scans the environment. Always looking for robberies at convenience stores, reviewing license plates, never relaxing on duty soon bleeds into off duty stress. As the years roll on, keeping watch stress becomes tedious, often leading the officer to a fine line between confidence and taking too much for granted.

Being Good: Officers are to be good, obey the law, present the appearance of eternal goodness. The officer doesn't feel like he can "let go and be human" when he wears the badge. This goes on day after day after day.

Isolation: Long hours of routine duty, being set apart by the uniform, being held to higher

standards, all dehumanize and isolate the officer. The eyes of the public and every mini-cam are now focused on the one isolated, uniformed individual in every crisis situation.

Chain of Command: Submission of will to another without feeling resentment is a delicate matter. Waiting for advancement, climbing the hierarchy, can take decades. Being passed over when advancement does come breaks the morale.

SECRETS TO SURVIVAL

There are a multitude of programs in the world today that deal with peer support, stress management, ad infinitum. Many of these programs will be presented in this ATS. I do want to leave you with a few simple suggestions you can take with you to incorporate into your chaplaincy.

Encourage your officers to have other areas of life that are sources of satisfaction.

Help them find a mentor to guide them through occupational growing pains.

Lead them to find a place to put into words the stresses and disappointments of the new career.

Apply the awareness of stress to a program that seeks a balanced lifestyle.

Get connected into a stress reduction program on a consistent manner.

And when all else seems to fail, turn to Jesus Christ and learn of Him.

Friberg and Conroy offer these six things the Chaplain can do. I would recommend these as well.

1. Be available for the officers
2. Get to know them on an informal basis
3. Develop a theological point of view that helps us get on the inside of the problem. Don't sugar-coat world views or theological approaches to life. Reason out a theology that deals with inhumanity and pain and don't be afraid to verbalize it with the officers.
4. Discover a careful rationale as to how God's will for the officer involves a valuing of their task and a valuing of their person in a world in which the officer may see little value.
5. Offer incentive to involvement in the wider non-police community.
6. Portray to the officers an altitude of one who genuinely cares for them as hurting people, without patronizing or judging, and yet being sensitive.

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