

Perspective

The Tragic Toll of Police Work It's Time for a Compassionate Approach

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Having served my community for 24 years, I have come to some understanding about this career in law enforcement and the things we do. Our profession calls on us to be the calm during a storm, the voice of reason in unreasonable situations, and the emotionless authority that makes things better. These are high ideals for mortal men and women.

The Observers of Society

From the time we graduate from the police academy, we are advised that we simply are observers of happenings. We are not personally involved in the events we encounter. We are told that the horrific scenes and the destruction of people's lives we witness are part of the job. The pain and suffering we see people living with are not our pain and suffering. Don't take it home with you. Forget about it. Ignore it.

That sounds easy until you are called on to tell a wife that her husband was killed in a senseless car

accident; to watch helplessly as a mother cries over the dead body of her drug-addicted child; or to see precious, innocent children abused by the adults in their lives. We as law enforcement personnel have to witness and live with such terrible situations every day. We are taught to push these images out of our minds and leave them at work. The culture of law enforcement encourages us to believe that we can just move on from these things, but I don't think it really works that way. I believe that these default positions build up and take a toll on us over the years. They wear us down emotionally.

The Effects of Policing

I point to the sobering statistics of law enforcement suicide. Every year in the United States, criminals kill between 100 and 150 of us.¹ This is a staggering reality and a tragic part of our job. What is worse, though, is that we kill ourselves at twice that rate, almost 300 police suicides a year.² That is higher than any other profession, and there is a reason. I believe that reason is the common practice of moving through the painful, emotionally draining situations we face every day and trying

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to ignore them. We are tough. Those things don't bother us. Right?

Cop humor is famous in our circles. The things we say and the jokes we make at some of the scenes we end up at would leave the people outside our profession speechless. If they heard some of the comments and wisecracks we make, they would run out of the room screaming, convinced that we were crazy. Cops, however, know that this humor is not callousness. It is a way to deal with the things we encounter and a way to have control over what we cannot fix or make better. The key here is understanding that this dark humor is a coping mechanism, not a "dealing with it" mechanism. These two expressions are extremely different and so is the emotional truth of the situation. It is between these two phrases and the real-life places we live that can damage us, not as cops but as people.

The Concept of Compassion

This is where the concept of compassion and the understanding of how it fits into our lives must come into play. The compassion I am talking about is not simply feeling sorry for someone or being upset that they are in a predicament. Rather, it is an all-encompassing emotion that has attendant actions. For our own good, we must seek out this compassion to help us not just live through these difficult situations but to survive them over the long haul.

One way to foster compassion is to see people for who they are, regardless of why they have come into our lives. Developing compassion for all of the people we encounter should be a goal. Extending it to the victims we deal with is not difficult. They deserve our attention and priority. But, for the "bad guys," extending our compassion often can prove challenging. These people usually

do not engender our warmest thoughts. It is here, however, that we can try to change our thoughts and actions. First of all, it is the decent thing to do; after all, we are the guardians in any given situation. Treating defendants with compassion helps reveal the decency within us. People end up in unfortunate situations for many reasons. Admittedly, most of them of their own doing but, sometimes, just because of problematic lifestyles. That does not excuse them of their actions; we all have to be accountable for our choices. My point here is simply that some people have made ill-fated choices based on the hand they were dealt. Anyone can find

themselves in a difficult spot at some point in their lives. We all know people like this, and some of us have those people in our own families. Treating such people with dignity and compassion speaks more about us than them.

Next, and most important, we must be compassionate toward ourselves. We must change the culture of law enforcement that ignores the emotional scars the job can leave on our souls. We must

address these situations, accept the horror of them, and talk about how they can affect us. We are not too tough to be moved by the death of a child or the collapse of someone's life. The purpose of this self-compassion and facing the terrible things we see is not to make us touchy-feely cops or to get in touch with our nurturing sides but, rather, to help us address the negative feelings that come with the experiences we have. Once we deal with these feeling head-on, we can put them into perspective, which will take away their power over us. It is only then that we can move on without damage.

Our career provides us with an unprecedented glimpse into the world of human interaction. It is a double-edged sword, though. On the one hand, we

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have a “backstage pass to life”; we see things and go places that most people only hear or read about. On the other, we sometimes have to conduct our business in the depths of people’s cruelty to each other. It is an honor to be in law enforcement and a great trust the people of our society have given us. We must not allow the rigors of the work and the fact that we are placed into some extremely difficult situations to deprive us of the joy this life has to offer. By making these changes in our police culture, perhaps we can save some of our 300 brothers and sisters who die by their own hand each year.

Conclusion

After 24 years on the job, I have made my peace with the evils people do to each other. The idealistic beliefs of my youth have matured over time.

I have come to accept the fact that I cannot save the whole world, but what I can do is make small differences in the lives of the people I encounter. In this way, I help them and take care of myself. We all need to take care of the person inside. All of the officers who have killed themselves call out to us. We must listen and learn from them. We must start a dialogue that is long overdue. ♦

Endnotes

¹ U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted*, <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm#leoka>.

² The National P.O.L.I.C.E. Suicide Foundation, <http://www.psf.org>; and Tears of a Cop, <http://www.tearsofacop.com>.

Readers interested in beginning a dialogue about this vital concern can reach the author at jpangaro@yahoo.com.
