

Surviving in Blue

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Abstract

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2006), law enforcement is listed as second of the top ten stressful jobs in the United States. This paper is going to be about a personal journey in surviving in blue, surviving in law enforcement. All officers will take this journey, and even though we will all share experiences in common, not all of our journeys will be the same. I am going to use my experiences against a backdrop of law enforcement literature to explain my own journey of surviving the realities of the job. This is a paper that is based on experiences, not facts. It is a subjective record of my own personal memories, as close to accurate as I can make them.

This paper will take you through my four stages of my life as a career law enforcement officer, using experiences from both past and present.

Surviving in Blue

When thinking of survival in law enforcement the first thought is the obvious physical danger of the job. There is more to a law enforcement officer's survival than the obvious, which would be to survive the psychological stress effects. Law enforcement officers have a job that requires them to be constantly vigilant and exercise a great amount of restraint under extremely emotional conditions. In a career an officer will evolve from idealistic rookie to cynical veteran. This evolution will come with experience and the negative effects of the job. With awareness comes also hope that no officer will have to experience a death, not a physical death, but a professional one.

“Surviving in blue” is my personal journey. All officers will take this journey, and even though we all share experiences in common, not all of our journeys will be the same. I am going to use my individual experiences against a backdrop of law enforcement literature to explain my own journey of surviving the realities of the job. This is a story of some of my experiences as a police officer of fifteen years; it is a subjective record of my own personal memories, as close to accurate as I can make them. It is a journey of what I have experienced, what I've seen, and why I think the way I do.

This journey will take you through my four stages: the first which is the beginning of a career filled with idealism, enthusiasm, empathy, and beliefs, to the second stage of growing in knowledge and developing the skills of the job, then the third, becoming the seasoned, disbelieving, cynical veteran who questioned my faith, lost my empathy, and struggled to hold onto my humanity. The fourth stage is when my journey doesn't end but instead comes full circle to the restoration of my faith, humanity, and empathy, remembering why I first applied to wear a badge and serve my community.

The Beginning of a Career

My grandfather was a strong influence in my life, I remember from a very young age. My grandfather was a Chicago policeman from July of 1951 until he died of cancer in April of 1974. The influence wasn't anything directly apparent as I was very young. It was subtle, something I find difficult to describe, and I would actually have to say it was more instinctive. When I first applied to become a police officer there was a background packet that had to be completed by answering several questions, the most memorable of which was whether or not I could take someone's life. Never having been asked that question or faced with that reality, I took a moment and thought that in the face of a threat I would not have issues in taking someone's life.

Yet in the back of my mind, I thought about God's sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." Knowing that I would not hesitate to protect myself, and I may in reality have to kill someone; for me, there were moral and ethical implications that I needed to consider and resolve. The Bible discusses the definition of murder, about which Miller (n.d.) has said:

God knew when He created men with free wills that not all would follow and obey Him. He also knew that many would want to love and serve Him. In giving men free will, He also had to establish laws for men to live by.

When we look at the Ten Commandments listed in Exodus 20: 1-17, we can see that these laws were given for the good of mankind. One of these laws is in verse 13: "Thou shalt not kill." The reason is that the Hebrew meaning of the word translated as "kill" actually means "to murder or to slay someone in a violent manner unjustly". So, in the Ten Commandments, God is saying, "Thou shalt not murder." Unjust premeditated killing with the wrong motives of hatred, vengeance, greed, jealousy, etc. is murder. Killing in self defense, to protect oneself, is not

murder (Miller, n.d.). I found my resolve by the support of my faith, but that would be tested early in my career.

Every officer, if asked, could tell you the first call they answered that first day they went out on the street. For me it was a homicide, where a drug deal had gone terribly wrong and a woman was shot several times and died. While working the crime scene an unknown detective walked up to me and said, "Get ready, because if this is your first call, the rest of your career is going to be a roller coaster ride," and he did not lie. Prepared somewhat by a previous job I had in a hospital, I understood even then the importance of keeping an emotional distance and professional decorum.

This emotional distance is characterized by Henry (2004) as survivor psychology in that I facilitated the natural tendency to distance myself psychologically from the death event (p. 109). This was done for self preservation in order to efficiently function in the capacity for which I was there. Nonetheless, I still remember thinking that, "Here's this woman in a neighborhood far from her home, buying drugs, and now she is dead. There is no doubt, she is someone's daughter, and maybe someone's mother, sister or wife and now her family will have to bury her before her time." It is difficult not to take in what you see and what you feel as you experience other people's lives.

From the first day on the job, I didn't realize that I would be starting down a path leading to cynicism. Police are taught to be skeptical and distrusting of people in general, but for a police officer that is survival. During the first several years of my career, I was rich with enthusiasm and wanted to be the best officer that I could be. I was eager for every experience and every challenge that awaited me. At this stage of my career, I paralleled Blackace (2006)

when he wrote about the first stage being between the first and fourth years of law enforcement. For most officers, this is their first time outside of the middle class bubble. They have never seen a dead body, never seen life-threatening injuries, never dealt with a family disturbance, never witnessed the squalor some people call “living life,” and never really understood the phrase “Man’s Inhumanity to Man” until now (Blackace, 2006).

For me, I had been exposed to life-threatening injuries and death in a previous job I had in a hospital, but I had never dealt with the intensity of a family disturbance or the cruelty people inflict on one another. That would soon change as the street is the ultimate learning field.

Developing the Skills and Knowledge of the Job

To be a street officer one has to develop street sense and it can’t be taught from any book in any classroom. I was very fortunate that there was a departmental combination of experienced officers, old guards, and us, the rookies. The combination of experience mixed with the young guard enthusiasms was the ultimate working environment. There was also humility when working with these seasoned officers as they were open to teaching and guiding us as we learned the street. I commonly refer to that time as the golden years as I couldn’t have asked for any better working conditions with the officers I had the pleasure of working with and learning from.

There are always calls for service that will remain throughout one’s entire career. I had been with the department approximately three and a half years when I went to a call that officers were responding to where someone observed a human skull lying in a backyard. The home was surprisingly secluded among businesses and administrative offices associated with the Children’s Hospital located a half block away. We found that the skull was human and was that of a local retired university professor. It was obvious that the professor had traveled all over the world as

there was evidence of this in photographs, coin displays, and assorted artifacts from the places where he had visited. We found from the overstuffed mailbox and a receipt for a purchase of canned dog food that he had died approximately four weeks prior. Unfortunately, the professor's dogs turned to him, their owner, as a source of food: therefore, his cause of death was never determined. I experienced profound sympathy and was overwhelmed by the terrible irony, for the professor had family, but no family or friends missed him those four weeks. I began to imagine how lonely he must have been having only the company of his dogs, but I also thought he might have preferred it that way.

In "The Theory of Moral Sentiments", Adam Smith (1759) defines sympathy as the effect that is produced when we imagine another person's circumstances as our own. That is what I had done with the professor and his dogs. Having the ability to feel empathy for someone else is human, but it can be a costly emotion for an officer. As officers we deal with so much with other peoples' emotions that in order to handle a highly emotional situation an officer needs to develop detachment and emotional control. This control is expected from an officer as we are expected to have sympathy, be empathetic, but also within a moment's notice we may have to kill someone to protect the lives of others. Being in this state of control will eventually take a toll.

A study which relates to this first stage is one conducted by Doctors A. Goldfarb and S. Aumiller, who have run a counseling center for Long Island Law Enforcement Officers since 1984. They have listed ten reasons police are different, from most career types, and one of those reasons listed explains the stress and emotional control factor. The seventh reason is the need to be in constant emotional control. Law enforcement officers have a job that requires extreme restraint under highly emotional circumstances. They are told that when they are extremely excited, they have to act calmly. They are told that even when they are nervous, they have to be

in charge. They are taught to be stoic when emotional. They are to interact with the world in a role. The emotional constraint of the role takes tremendous mental energy, much more energy than expressing true emotions. When the energy drain is very strong, it may make an officer more prone to exhaustion outside of work, such as not wanting to participate in social or family life. This energy drain can also create a sense of job and social burnout (Goldfarb & Aumiller, 1984).

As I continued to develop as a patrolman, I had first thought that getting to know the people living in the neighborhoods where I patrolled would help me differentiate the neighborhood people and their everyday activities from those people who were there solely for the purpose of committing crime. However I found that, over time, this issue became a difficult line to define because many of the neighborhood people were committing crimes in their own neighborhoods against their own neighbors. I had made some naïve assumptions.

My experiences have taken me down the path of other people's lives and right into their homes. Of course, people don't call police when things are great, saying, "I'm having a barbecue, do you want to come over." So as officers we see people at their worst, when they are extremely negative and desperate. As the years go by, we begin to realize that all things that make us good at what we do come at a price, and if we're not careful it could be our demise.

The overall distrust and cynicism that develops with experience is a double-edged sword. This experience allows the police to keep their edge, which keeps them alive, but then an internal struggle begins. The struggle is to keep perspective and not fall prey to the job totally so when you go home your personal life will not be affected. This can be a difficult task because good

officers who become dedicated to the job soon begin to acquire the emotional baggage of the people that they serve. The results of this causes negative effects in their personal lives.

According to Gilmartin (2002), all officers go from idealistic to cynical veteran. For almost all law enforcement officers, the career begins from a position of enthusiasm, motivation, and idealism, but the journey over the years from new recruit to experienced officer produces changes. Idealism can become cynicism, optimistic enthusiasm can become pessimism, and the easygoing young recruit can become the angry and negative veteran officer (p. 3). However, there is a reason for this and being distrustful of human nature and motive has a purpose; that is what keeps cops alive. It is highly essential that every police officer making every call for service, making every traffic stop, practice excellent officer safety skills, which translates into being distrustful. Officers don't know which traffic stop is going to culminate in an officer-involved shooting, so they have to be distrustful of human nature and motive at each and every traffic stop and at all calls for service. This is common sense to the experienced officer. It's a mindset that works well on the streets, but wreaks havoc on one's personal life (p. 24).

The negative mindset that I developed wasn't directly apparent until my fifth to sixth year. Officers are taught early on in the academy about street survival. It is a top priority, as it should be, but no one tells us how to survive the constant negativity; that being distrustful of human nature is something we are going to have to survive as well. I found that staying connected with my faith, beliefs, and keeping my friends whom I had before I became an officer to be essential. Those friends kept me grounded, grounded to the reality that not all people are beyond hope. There is no other civilian occupation that takes with it the amount of responsibility and immense weight that is placed on an officer's shoulders. Over time, the way I viewed the world in general began to deteriorate. I would not be totally aware of the consequences of that

negativity and its effects until a year later. As time went on and I became a more experienced officer I also became aware that I had less empathy. After dealing with the negative forces of human nature, day in and day out, it began to take a toll. I began to think there weren't any decent people in the world, and, at that point, I realized I was losing my faith.

A Loss of Faith

During this time of struggle, I remembered responding to an assault in progress call. I thought the call was going to be the typical "he said, she said" but it turned out to be much more than that; it was the beginning of a lesson I wouldn't fully learn until over a year later. The fifteen year old boy I encountered told me he had been shoved around by a man his mother brought home. He was visibly shaken and teary eyed, and his voice quivered as he spoke. He wasn't physically hurt, and the threat of being hurt was no longer present as the man he spoke of had already left. He said his mother was addicted to cocaine, and she was bringing strange guys home; and sometimes she wasn't coming home at all. The last time she didn't come home was because she had been arrested and ended up in jail. He went on to tell me that sometimes the electricity would get turned off because the bill wasn't paid and he and his little sister were left in the dark. He continued to tell me that there were things he was doing he didn't feel good about. As this young man spoke to me, he became increasingly emotional, and I felt his torment. He said he knew he was supposed to be in school; instead, there were some days he was out on the street selling dope so he could buy formula and diapers for his sister. It was difficult for me to wrap my mind around what this fifteen year old, who was old enough to be my son, was telling me. Of course, the cop in me, thought, what he was doing is against the law; the person in me knew and understood why he was doing it; it was survival. I knew it was important for me to choose my words carefully in order not to alienate him. There was a fine line here, one I knew I

needed to balance. I told him that I understood that he had to deal with something no young man of his age should have to deal with. I told him that it isn't fair that he had to be the adult in all of this because like his mother, adults do make wrong choices, and they do make mistakes. I told him that I didn't have all the answers and sometimes, very simply, life is not fair. I told him that I thought he already knew what he was doing was wrong and against the law; I fully understood why he was doing it, but just because I understood didn't make it right. I told him the young men in his neighborhood and the surrounding neighborhoods were being killed at alarming rate due to street violence and narcotics, which both seem to go hand in hand. I told him to think about what would happen to his baby sister if something were to happen to him. I told him to talk to his mother and tell her what he had told me. I told him that things can change; he can have a future if he could survive this time in his life. I told him that he had a lot of life to live for and many life's experiences yet to experience, and I personally would like to see him experience them. This call was a lot more because not only do I remember how I felt, but how it got to the heart and soul of me. Appreciating how this young man struggled but didn't surrender the goodness within him to the streets was definitely part of my reaction.

The next day it was business as usual as I went on with my daily routine of calls, people calling 911, then when we arrive they're angry with us forgetting of course that they called us. The call involving the fifteen year old boy and his mother faded into my memory. The days rolled on, and I continued to struggle, desperately trying to make sense of it all. I recalled, over the years, numerous calls to parents contacting the police because their children refused to go to school or refused to take their medicine. It wasn't like any of those calls for police service needed law enforcement intervention but simply for those people to exercise their parental right to enforce direction. I had lost most of my empathy and patience with people. People in general

disappointed me; I truly believed that people I had contact with, day in and day out, were beyond hope. I began thinking about the world as a whole. People in other countries were sometimes sacrificing their very lives fighting for their freedoms, whereas often in our country people are simply ready to give theirs away. People don't see it, but every time the police were called because a child wasn't taking medicine or going to school, they were inviting a form of government into their homes to assist in the most basic of life's functions. I just didn't get it.

I began to realize that you can lose yourself and I didn't want being a cop to be the only way I would identify myself. I reminded myself that even though being a cop was in my blood, there is so much more to me than that. Throughout my career I have had experiences that held great significance to me, and there would be yet another experience to occur in a time when I needed it most.

The Restoration of Faith

Approximately a year later, a bizarre chain of events unfolded, leading me to a place where I ended up speaking to the fifteen year old boy again. I received a call to assist a stranded motorist who had been locked out of her vehicle. The woman I met had locked her keys inside of her car and was waiting for her husband to bring her another set. I stood by her until her husband arrived. When I was getting ready to leave, she waved for me to stop. The woman told me that she didn't know how, but her husband, who had just left, took both sets of car keys with him. I caught up with her husband and pulled him over in a gas station parking lot. After a brief encounter with him, I began to pull out of the parking lot when I noticed a young man on a bicycle waving wildly at me, wanting me to stop. I recognized him as he got closer; it was the fifteen year old boy. He told me he did what I told him to do and spoke with his mother. The

more he talked, the more excited he seemed to get with the news he was telling me. He told me that his mom was “off the stuff” she was no longer using cocaine, and he and his family were living in the country near his grandmother. He told me his mother had a job, and he had returned to school. I told him it was nice to see he was doing so well; he then reported that he was glad he ran into me because he had wanted to tell me what he had accomplished. As the boy rode off on his bike tears welled up in my eyes. I literally looked up, acknowledging to The Man Upstairs, that “I got it.” He delivered to me something he knew I needed; hope. It came at a time in my career that I had lost my empathy, optimism, and faith. This simple event was symbolic for me as it restored my hope and reminded me of why I chose police work as a profession.

All officers will take the journey, and even though they will share experiences in common, not all of their journeys will be the same. I have shared my journey with you in hopes that you find some understanding and resolve in my experiences. Henry (2004) refers to this journey as a process which evolves one’s professional identity and initiates a lifelong struggle to balance numbing and feeling, to both limit intrusive emotions and hold onto one’s humanity (p. 34).

Officers today are expected to be all things. We are tasked with being social workers, psychologists, protectors, and mentors. In some cases, we are even considered fortune-tellers, expected to know what lay ahead. We don’t do it for the money, the thanks that never come, or the glory and prestige that many think we covet. Rather, we do it for the self satisfaction that comes from service to others.

Finally, regardless of the risks and the negative forces of human nature in law enforcement, I couldn’t imagine doing anything else. I will stay the course. As Friedman

quotes Robert F. Kennedy in *Spiritual Survival for Law Enforcement* (2005), “Each time a man stands for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope” (p.34).

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