



REMEMBERING HUMANITY IN THE AMERICAN JUSTICE SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

As a police officer working for a municipal law enforcement agency, I see that human suffering and gross atrocities occur daily. This exposure creates much heartfelt struggle within me, as well as in other members of police department organizations throughout the United States. The struggle revolves around one's ability to maintain the capability of objectifying people or experiences, which is often necessary in order to protect one's own psyche from such traumatic events, while maintaining enough subjectivity to treat people with compassion, respect, humanity, and forgiveness. In my experience, the internal struggle that members of my organization and I are confronted with routinely is not addressed by the organizational context. For this level of human contact, I have found there is no training or conditioning required by the organization, and no real system in place to help officers develop these skills.

Officers are taught how to be professional in the face of adversity and conflict. However, little instruction is given in the art of forgiving and treating people compassionately. As a result, many officers, including me, do not always generate compassion or forgiveness on a frequent basis. Or else it turns out that when we get to the point of being forgiving and compassionate, the situation is one in which we no longer have personal contact with the people involved. In general terms, law enforcement officers are asked and required to treat people professionally. But often one can be professional without being compassionate or forgiving.



SERVANT-LEADERSHIP IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

Often people ask me why I became a police officer. For me the answer is simple: I became a police officer because I wanted to help people. I wanted to make a difference in people's lives. Although this sounds like an idealistic approach to choosing a profession, it is one that is common among many who have chosen to be civil servants: firefighters, teachers, paramedics, and police officers. Many people often refer to it as a *calling*—a calling that shares a link with the basic foundation of servant-leadership. “The servant leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve” (Greenleaf, 2003, p. 13). It is this passion for serving others that makes the way of life of servant-leadership and the profession of law enforcement ideal for each other. For most officers in the law enforcement profession, Greenleaf's servant-leadership premise is the motivating factor behind their work. It is in this pursuit of servant-leadership that officers will find ways to achieve their goal of helping others, thereby transcending themselves and helping those they serve in the community to *grow taller*.

So how does one start this journey in becoming a servant-leader within the confines of a punitive justice system? There is no simple answer, no specific way, and no model to follow. And yet officers have already been trained to employ many of the core principals of servant-leadership: *listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community*. Typically these concepts are applied when officers are called upon to help the victims of crimes. Many officers believe that it is only during these types of encounters that they are afforded the opportunity to help or serve people of their communities. This is a traditional way of looking at how law enforcement serves the public; yet applying these principles solely toward the service of victims precludes officers' helping anyone outside of those who have been victimized.

This is not the only way one can employ servant-leadership principles



as a police officer. What happens when an officer is faced with the opposite side of the coin—when the officer is confronted with those committing atrocities, those who prey on the weak? What about those members of society who try to hurt or kill others in order to escape or avoid going to prison? Can officers apply servant-leadership to suspects who have committed crimes? I believe the answer is unequivocally yes. Not only *can* they apply these principles during these circumstances, but they *must* in order to treat people with compassion, respect, humanity, and forgiveness. This is the true test of servant-leadership as an officer. Greenleaf asserts, “The best test, and difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while *being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 27). This means that if officers are to make everyone they come into contact with grow as people, they must make suspects grow, as well as victims. This is not a path that officers find comforting, and many experienced officers have become cynical toward the suspects they arrest. It is a much easier path to be disgruntled and disgusted, to look down upon those who have offended your sense of right and wrong.

In fact for officers, helping victims is the easiest and safest way they can apply servant-leadership principles in the performance of their duties. Officers typically prefer to help victims while objectifying suspects and tragic situations, in order to remain emotionally detached from the tragedies they see. But this stance does not allow these offenders to become healthier, to become wiser, or to grow taller. The difficulty in applying these principles within this environment is that it requires one to look inward at one’s self. Officers are required to look past their *ego* and into their own consciousness. This is a more difficult road to travel and often brings to light one’s shortcomings.

As I reflect on my own servant-leadership assessment as a police officer, I find myself lacking in what I aspire to be. This awareness and self-evaluation of my progress toward becoming a servant-leader reminds me of Greenleaf’s great notion:



[T]he servant views any problem in the world as *in here*, inside oneself, not *out there*. And if a flaw in the world is to be remedied, to the servant the process of change starts *in here*, in the servant, not *out there*. (Greenleaf, 2003, p. 57)

As I contemplate this I think of the times when I have failed to have a positive influence on those I have arrested or those who have committed heinous crimes. I also remember the times that I decided, or perhaps was guided by God, to discern the right type of influence and make a difference in people's lives.

I recall one such positive encounter I had with a person addicted to drugs. For some unknown reason, our paths had crossed on several occasions. I remember one spring day several years ago, I was driving to my office. My head was filled with the details of my busy schedule. I had become a detective now and was working in the undercover narcotics division. I arrived at my office and found a letter on my desk addressed to me. I did not recognize the name of the person who had sent the letter, so I kept looking at the envelope, as if it would somehow come back to me. After a few moments, I opened the letter and found a short two-page note. The letter started out by saying, "You may not remember me, but I remember the hope that you provided me in my struggle to get off drugs." The writer said that she had received treatment and had been drug-free for a year. She explained that her recovery was in part due to the times I had arrested her. According to the letter, each time our paths crossed I treated her with respect, I did not place judgment on her character, and I counseled her with hope. Now, as I read this letter several years after these encounters, I struggle to remember who this person was and the circumstances that brought us together.

She continued by saying that I had lectured her about how drugs were destroying her life and keeping her from her daughter. Due to her drug use, she had lost custody of her daughter, who was six at the time. As a result she was no longer a part of her daughter's life, which caused her great pain. She stated that her friends and her family had placed judgment on her



actions and looked down on her, making her feel as if she was not a good person. Her friends and family had all but given up on her. She said that I would remind her that she was a good person and that she had an *illness* that needed treatment. She also said that although our contacts had many negative aspects to them, including her going to jail, I always made her laugh and brought her hope. Apparently, I always told her, “Don’t be offended, but I hope I never see you again. Because this means you will not be involved in the drug scene.” I also explained to her that if I did see her, I would stop her, see how she was doing, and make sure she was not under the influence or in possession of drugs. The purpose of her letter was to say thanks for helping her reunite with her daughter and for believing that she would someday kick her drug habit.

To this day, I cannot remember this good woman’s face, or where our paths crossed. And now as I reflect on this experience, I find that “in those few minutes fate had passed me in many different forms” (Frankl, 2006, p. 54) and I am glad that I had shed my cynicism and made the most of my encounters with this woman. In every meeting lies an opportunity to impact those people with whom we come into contact. I know that this woman has a hard road ahead of her, and that it takes great internal fortitude to continually make the progress she has already initially completed. It is nice to know that one can help in making a difference in another person’s life, and that this woman and her daughter have grown a little taller.

OBJECTIFYING OTHERS

In order to pursue servant-leadership in law enforcement, one has to shed the cynicism that is prevalent when dealing with traumatic incidents. Given that officers view inhuman things routinely, how do they commonly get through the emotions that are evoked during these events? Typically, officers objectify the things they see and the people who are suffering. This is done as a manner of self-preservation and as a way of bypassing the emotions evoked by these events. This is why officers seem callous or are even seen as having inappropriate responses to horrifying events. However,



objectifying people causes one to deviate from compassion and empathy. By objectifying people, in essence you do not view them as people, and as such, you have a tendency to not treat them as people. When officers do this, they become less compassionate, less respectful, and more unforgiving toward those whom they have objectified. However, objectifying people and events is a natural response. As such, using it in a balanced perspective with compassion and forgiveness allows officers to treat people humanely, while still providing emotional protection.

Recently, an incident occurred within my organization that brought this issue to light. A local bank was robbed at gunpoint. Several officers located the suspect on one of the freeways. As fate would have it, the suspect was located during rush hour. The freeway was packed with vehicles; because of this, the speed of the pursuit was slowed to 35 mph. The suspect pulled out a gun and began to wave it around while driving, increasing the potential for him to injure himself or others. In an attempt to neutralize the threat, the officers used a maneuver to spin the suspect's car to make it inoperable and, they hoped, distract the suspect. Unfortunately, as the officers told the subject to put down his weapon, he put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger, taking his own life.

Later that day, I went to pick up my son from football practice. One of the parents had heard about the tragic event and asked me specifically how I felt about the way the situation ended. I explained that I was glad no bystanders were hurt, given the crowded traffic conditions. I also said that it is always disconcerting to me that people will take their own life because they feel there is no hope left in life and that such actions are the only solution. She was somewhat surprised, but relieved to hear my thoughts.

Unbeknownst to me, the football coach, a fellow officer within my organization, had come to practice and was listening to the incident on the police radio. He began to vocalize his excitement about the suspect killing himself. The woman who spoke with me stated that the coach yelled loudly, "Yes, you got what you deserved. Now we don't have to waste bullets on you!" He said this in front of the kids and some parents, includ-



ing the woman who later asked my opinion of the shooting. She was very distressed by his comments on the situation and wanted to hear my thoughts about it. In my opinion, unfortunately this officer failed to see the bank robbery suspect as human and failed to empathize. For servant-leaders, “*empathy* is the imaginative projection of one’s own consciousness into another being” (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 27). Clearly, this officer objectified the suspect and did not feel any compassion toward him as a human being. It is this type of reaction that I see far too often in my organization and, more importantly, in my profession. I have too often been guilty of it myself.

DEVELOPING SELF-RESPONSIBILITY AND HUMAN DIGNITY

Given this commonality, it is necessary for experienced officers to discuss the problems with the newer officers without becoming unbalanced and thereby objectifying people. “Your example reflects your core values and has a massive effect on others” (Bethel, 1995, p. 147). If senior officers treat others with respect, compassion, and forgiveness, other officers will follow suit. This process will not only make for a better community, but will also cause the officers themselves to further develop as persons. Officers also need to realize that treating people compassionately or with forgiveness does not absolve the person for his or her actions. Neither does it prevent the officers from doing their job. Officers can still arrest people and enforce laws while being compassionate and employing the principles of servant-leadership in an effort to make the arrested subject become a better person.

Sometimes it is the simplest gestures, like an act of kindness, courtesy, basic human dignity, and respect while enforcing laws, that can have an impact on those we are arresting. “The servant always accepts and empathizes, never rejects. The servant as leader always empathizes, always accepts the person but sometimes refuses to accept some of the person’s effort or performance as good enough” (Greenleaf, 2002, pp. 33-34). These simple acts sometimes make a suspect become a better person, a more aware person, someone who feels a part of society.



Although officers deal with people whose actions are sometimes inhuman, or with people who attempt to harm and even kill the officer, a more humane response calls us to look past these actions to realize the true meaning behind them. As Balic Smail said, "Of course every person is responsible for his or her actions, and no one is able to absolve the guilt that one person bears toward others" (as cited in Wiesenthal, 1998, p. 110). Typically the actions of offenders are not personal attacks on individual officers, but instead are based on the officers' profession. There have been times throughout my life as a police officer that I have not had an open heart; times when I have not treated people with compassion and have not forgiven those with whom I have come into contact.

And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity. (Frankl, 2006, p. 66)

During these times, I have burdened myself with anger, resentment, and a closed mind. Providing forgiveness releases oneself from this turmoil and opens both the heart and the mind. It has become apparent that I cannot expect other officers to display compassion and forgiveness, unless I am willing to demonstrate this myself.

STORY OF FORGIVENESS

On a warm August night, I was working the graveyard shift. On this shift, I had several good friends that had gone into this profession with me, and we generally worked the same shifts. This allowed our shift to have incredible camaraderie and excellent teamwork. As the shift left the station to patrol the city, I explained to one of my friends, Dave, that I had had a dream the previous night in which he was shot in the chest by a subject we



had stopped. In response, we made several immature jokes about our invincibility and went to work.

An hour of the shift had passed without anything of significance transpiring. Then Dave and I were sent to a Disturbing the Peace call. Apparently someone was having a loud party that was causing the neighbors to have difficulty sleeping. When we got to the residence where the party was being held, we spoke with the homeowners and found out that their twelve-year-old daughter was having a birthday party. My partner and I gave stickers to the girls and even participated in singing Happy Birthday to the birthday girl. We both left this call with a smile on our faces and thoughts of our unborn children who would be arriving in the world very shortly.

As we drove out of the subdivision, Dave received a report call, whereupon he went one way and I went the other. A short time after we had separated, I observed a suspicious subject who, for some unknown reason, caused the hair on my neck to stand up. I decided to stop this person. After a few brief moments, I noticed he had what appeared to be a gun under his shirt, tucked into his waistband. I asked him if he had a gun and he seemed to blankly stare right through me in what many people describe as a “thousand-yard stare.” Driven from my thoughts were the pleasantries of the innocent birthday party and my unborn son. I was confronted with someone who was thinking of killing me and I knew it.

The subject reached for his gun as I reached for mine. Fortunate enough to have been quicker on the draw, I was now pointing my gun at the subject as he held the gun in his right hand, still inside his waistband. For a moment the subject continued to stare right through me. Suddenly, the subject turned and started to run; I gave chase and requested assistance over the police radio. After chasing the subject for approximately four blocks, I had gained to within ten feet of him. During this time, I thought to myself, “Okay, he is going to throw the gun any time into some bushes. Why is he not throwing the gun away?” As we got to the next street, he began to round the corner; as he did this, he brought the gun in my direction in an attempt to kill me.



I became very angry and thought, “This guy is trying to take me away from the people I love, my unborn son, and all the things in life I cherish.” I shot the subject twice, knocking him to the ground and causing his gun to fall out of his hand. As he lay on the sidewalk bleeding, I remember thinking, “I hope you die, you son-of-a-bitch; you tried to take me from this world and now I have taken you from it.” However, this was not what God had planned for our encounter. The subject survived, and he was later held accountable for his actions in court. During some of the court proceedings, the man’s father apologized for his son’s actions and seemed to be deeply remorseful. The man was thirty-five when the incident occurred, and his father seemed to be in his sixties. I accepted the father’s apology and explained that he did nothing in raising his son that caused his son to act the way he did during my encounter with him. I had hoped this would bring some solace to the man, as I knew his son would be spending the remaining portion of his life in prison.

As time passed, my anger and hatred toward this man subsided. I was able to forgive the man for his actions. Once I had forgiven him, I found my thoughts wandering toward a sense of compassion. I realized that having malice in my heart for this man was not the right thing to do. I found that through this process of forgiveness and compassion, I was able to grow as a person. I realized that my thoughts toward this man, as he lay bleeding from the wounds I inflicted, required me to ask forgiveness of him. I truly did not want to take his life, but was willing to do so to save my own life. Once I was no longer in danger, I should have let my anger and resentment pass. I often wondered how someone could become so desperate that he or she would kill somebody or risk being killed just to avoid going to jail or prison. However, with this awareness comes responsibility. “Awareness is not a giver of solace—it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and an awakener” (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 41). Now that I understand the need to be forgiving, I must work hard in the future to communicate this forgiveness, as well as the responsibility to ask forgiveness, in my encounters as an officer. And



I believe I must pass this knowledge and awareness on to others who, like me, are continuing to learn how to be police officers.

CONCLUSION

I have come to realize that treating people with respect, compassion, and forgiveness gives me peace of mind and helps me push through difficult times. “It is crucial, when a relationship has been damaged or when a potential relationship has been made impossible, that the perpetrator should acknowledge the truth and be ready and willing to apologize” (Tutu, 1999, p. 269). Given the amount of suffering and inhuman actions police officers view regularly, it is necessary to have compassion and forgiveness as a way to connect to the humanity that is still a potent force in all our communities. Without it, nothing but anger and resentment would fill our lives.

The ultimate goal is to make those you serve become better. For law enforcement, this means not only those who are victims, but it also means those who are doing the victimizing. The simple act of basic human dignity and respect makes those served feel better about themselves and in turn want to be better. Employing the core values of servant-leadership in law enforcement will have a significant impact on those people officers encounter. Often “[s]ervant-leadership is a significant fulcrum for leverage. In this context, the leverage metaphor means that servant-leadership can be a force to cause something bigger to happen than appeared possible with the initial available resources” (Lad & Luechauer, 1998, p. 66). Officers can help one another make the most of the meetings they have with people because they will ultimately have an impact on these people. As officers we may not understand this fact specifically during our encounters with others, just as I was unaware of the impact I had on the woman addicted to drugs, and her daughter whom I never met.

Maintaining the balance of restorative justice and forgiveness while being a part of an American justice system that is based on retributive justice can be a difficult task. This difficulty is multiplied when officers are not trained in how to deal with such emotions. Officers who have exper-



perienced this and have the ability to treat people with compassion and forgiveness can come together and demonstrate this capacity for legitimate love and servant-based power, and lead the way for the next generation of law enforcement officers. “Thus, simply spending time exposing yourself and others to its core values and principles can go a long way toward understanding the essence, purpose, and practice of servant-leadership” (Lad & Luechauer, 1998, p. 66). The ability to serve starts within each and every one of us, and police officers never know when an encounter with the public might significantly impact their own lives and the lives of those they serve.

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