



FORGIVENESS

A Humble Path for Police to Servant-Leadership

—MARK WHITSON

In an attempt to make sense of the often difficult task of being called to “protect and serve” society, I begin this article by setting the stage for servant-leadership as vital to the police endeavor. The world is ever-changing. It is becoming more complex and diverse. In an effort to better manage in a multicultural environment, leadership styles are evolving. Researchers Mayer, Bardes, and Piccolo indicated “a growing interest in ethical styles of leadership” (Mayer, Bardes, and Piccolo 2008, 180), and one such leadership style is servant-leadership. I have found in my thirty-two years as a public servant that servant-leadership is an ideal leadership model for police officers, which complements their “Serve and Protect” attitudes. The term *servant-leadership* was conceived by Robert K. Greenleaf (1903–1990). This term was revealed in Greenleaf’s 1970 article *The Servant as Leader*. Greenleaf proposed that a leader is one who serves his or her followers, and spent most of his sixtyfive year career as a researcher in the fields of management, development, and education. He believed that a servant-leader “first makes sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served” (Mayer et al. 2008, 180).

For centuries, leadership was cloaked in the suit of command and control. Transforming this style of leadership to one of serving others is difficult. A transition of a hierarchical organization to a community of equality and respect for each other “starts small, goes slow and is very underfunded” (Ferch and Spears 2011, xv). A servant-leadership-focused community builds for one on one interaction. It spreads slowly. The members become independent, stronger, knowledgeable, and increasingly destined to becoming servant-leaders. Greenleaf’s servant-leadership vision “was to stimulate thought and action for building a better more caring society” (Spears 1995, 3). Ferch compares servant-leadership to the light in the darkness (Ferch 2011, 21). He stated that “light is vision, clarity and hope [for the future]” of



humanity (ibid.). Greenleaf's proposed servant-leaders put others first. In a workplace atmosphere, servant-leaders are challenged to put "employees, customers and community as number one priority" (Spears 1995, 3).

Spears (1995) suggest ten critical characteristics of servant-leadership:

1. Listening: listening intently to others and one's self
2. Empathy: understanding others and respecting them as individuals
3. Healing: forgive others to restore community
4. Awareness: conscious of ethical values and concerns
5. Persuasion: leading with influence not authority
6. Conceptualization: consider the larger vision
7. Foresight: understanding the consequences of a decision
8. Stewardship: being open and trustworthy
9. Commitment to the growth of people: value people and their potential
10. Building community: construct strong relationships and kinship

In their recent book *Lead with LUV* (2011), Ken Blanchard and Colleen Barrett defined servant-leadership as "love in action" (104). They quoted the Bible to define love:

Love is patient, love is kind
It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud
It is not rude, it is not self-seeking
It is not easily angered; it keeps no record of wrongs
Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth.
It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always serves.
Love never fails.
1 Corinthians 13 (cited in Blanchard and Barrett 2011, 104)

Servant-leadership is based on interpersonal relationships. It is a human-to-human exchange. Magnuson and Enright posit forgiveness as essential for the maintenance and growth of these types of relationships. Forgiveness is defined as "the cessation of resentment...or resumption of a beneficent response toward an offender" (Magnuson and Enright 2008, 114). They also offer the moral principle of beneficence which "may include compassion, unconditional worth, generosity and moral love" (ibid.). Forgiveness is a gift of goodwill. It results in returning humanity to someone who has wronged



you. Forgiving does not “condone, excuse, forget or even reconcile” (ibid.). Love, mercy, and forgiveness are at the center of servant-leadership.

Having given a brief introduction to some of the foundational thoughts that define servant-leadership, I want to detail some of my own struggle to draw closer to the tenets of forgiveness and healing found in servant-leadership. In so doing, I hope to illumine some of my own weaknesses and help draw myself and others toward greater health.

MY PERSONAL STORY OF FORGIVENESS AND HEALING

I have a daughter, now sixteen years old, who is the love of my life. A treasured gift, who over the past couple of years has struggled with growing up. Her struggles led to depression. In a depressed state she experimented with marijuana and alcohol, trying to self-medicate her pain. I am proud to say she has recovered nicely and no longer uses either drug. She is still trying to cope, and her battle has left her with the scars of frustration and anger. I have supported her and I struggle with how much I should involve myself.

One morning, she was obviously having a bad day. I attempted to get her to talk and open up to me. The more I questioned her, the angrier she got. I just wanted her to vent. I got what I asked for. She vented and placed the burden of her frustration on me. I was unprepared for this weight placed on my shoulders, and I lashed back at her. She yelled that I was an inadequate father, whom she hated. She also said I didn’t understand her. I responded with white hot anger. I told her she was a mean and vicious girl. Things got out of control, and I don’t remember to this day what exactly was said. In the heat of the argument auditory exclusion and tunnel vision took over. I do remember hateful words exploded like grenades and we both were wounded. We got away from each other and passions subsided. I began to calm and started thinking normally. I quickly experienced a second phase of anger when I recognized my immaturity. I directed this anger at myself for not being the adult. I should have been a better person. I should have been more mature and healthy. I know humans are emotional. I understand that sometimes emotions overwhelm all cognitive processes. This is when anger is out of control. Barriers are removed and anger is unleashed. Unfortunately, this can result in violent outbursts.

I decided I needed to step forward. I needed to put my ego aside and look to the future. This incident could have destroyed my relationship with my daughter. I didn’t want this to happen. I decided to ask for forgiveness



from my daughter. I asked her to sit down with me. I looked her in her eyes and said, “I am sorry. Will you forgive me?” I apologized for my angry reactions and the way I talked to her. I explained to her I was not apologizing for being a father and telling her how I felt. I was apologizing for the words I used to communicate those feelings. I explained that she is growing and learning to be an adult, just as I am growing and learning to be a parent. She accepted my apology. I told her I would be respectful to her and understand when she didn’t want to talk. We agreed our future talks would be tempered with love and respect for each other.

I remember how calming it was to decide to ask for forgiveness. I unburdened the load of guilt and shame. When my daughter accepted my apology all tensions left the room. I felt close to her again. Our broken relationship was restored and became whole. Anger fled and a warm feeling of love filled the void. I learned that anger is a barrier to love and compassion. I learned a new path of communication with my daughter. I could talk to her more as a loving father, rather than the angry parent. I felt more positive and hopeful about our relationship in the future. This personal forgiveness and healing story reminds me how important forgiveness is in all relationships in our life. As a police officer, I came to realize forgiveness is a path to building partnerships within our communities. Forgiveness will allow me to serve others better.

A TIME TO KILL AND A TIME TO HEAL: POLICE AND FORGIVENESS

During the interview process to become a police officer I was asked, “Why do you want to become a police officer?” I wanted to serve. I wanted to help people and keep them safe from harm. All police officers are asked this question when they apply for this job and 99 percent will answer the same. When you transition from civilian to commissioned police officer you raise your right hand and take an oath to serve with honor and integrity.

I have been a police officer for more than thirty-two years. For sixteen years of my career I was assigned as a negotiator in my department’s Tactical Operations Unit. On one particular callout, our team responded to a barricaded suspect holding another person hostage. The suspect was armed and wanted for several robberies and shootings. The hostage he held was his mother. During my negotiation our team managed to rescue the mom. Our team made plans to deal with the suspect. My hope was that he would choose compliant, peaceful surrender. But the plan also, by necessity, included all



options. At one point the man entered a bathroom off the main bedroom. Suddenly he emerged, gun in his right hand, pointed to the floor. He walked slowly toward our containment positions at the door. I talked to the man as our team responded. For a moment I stopped hearing my voice, but I heard the familiar sound of a spoon releasing from a “flash bang” diversionary device. As it went off I heard a loud explosion and a bright light temporarily blinded me. I heard a shotgun go off twice as our less lethal operator attempted to get the man to drop the gun. He fired two “bean bag” rounds. We were hoping the man would drop his gun. Instead, I watched the man slowly raise his right hand, placing the muzzle of the gun to his right temple. I remember in detail, to this day, seeing the man’s head rock to the left and his body drop to the floor.

Over the next three days, the team and I relived the events of that morning. Our team debriefed the incident and completed an After Action Report. We relived the callout in our training the next week. During this time I felt several emotions. I felt guilt because I couldn’t stop this man from killing himself. I felt loss at seeing another human’s life end tragically. I felt failure for violating an oath to keep all safe; even if it is protecting someone from himself. I felt overwhelming anger because this man made me feel these emotions. Every member of our team was touched by this incident. We all changed that morning.

This is just one example of many traumatic or potentially threatening incidents that jar the psyche of police officers each day. These incidents are relived each night in the dreams of the officers. The world is a violent place. Lt. Col. Dave Grossman states, “We are arguably in the most violent time in peacetime history. The murder rate is being held down by medical technology, but the aggravated assault rate, the rate at which we are trying to kill or seriously injure each other, might be the highest in peacetime history” (Grossman 2004, 3). Seeing this human-on-human violence can be an extreme stressor for police officers. Human aggression toward another human is very personal. For people who are victims or witnesses to such aggression it can be traumatic. It is something that changes the very being of each of us. Police officers’ trauma can lead to hostility and anger. This anger includes the perception many officers have of not being supported by citizens and media, whom they resent for such attitudes. Anger leads to resentment. Meffert et al. define hostility as “an attitude with a predisposition to dislike and mistrust others, and interpret others behavior as egoistic and hurtful” (Meffert et al. 2008, 410). Hostility is embedded in the



process. Notably, mistrust “increases the frequency of anger” and shows “that measures of hostility and anger have overlapping content” (ibid.).

According to Sherman, Plato described anger with the word “thumos, the spiritual part of the soul” (Sherman 2005, 68). Roman stoic philosophers believed all emotions are cognitive and thus controllable. Police officers are expected to control their emotions. Anger is an emotion police officers are expected to keep in check. “Police officers are expected to act personally, but in a detached manner, rather than becoming personally involved when dealing with distressing operational instances, with effectiveness being compromised if they fail to maintain that distinction” (Brown et al. 1999, 315). Brown, Fielding, and Glover state that “emotional control is an important part of the officer’s occupational identity, both in terms of the public’s expectation and demands of the informal culture” (Brown, Fielding, and Glover 1999, 315). Am I not human? Am I not supposed to feel? One emotion I feel while at work is anger. Personally, I feel anger can be a positive emotion. If I did not feel anger after seeing the inhumanity that I witness it sometimes feels to me as if it would mean I do not care. Police officers cannot allow the buildup of negative emotions and need, a buildup that often ensures anger will morph into hate or revenge. I know at times I have felt anger and the want of revenge. This feeling is sometimes personal, but it can also be in the form of seeking justice. Sadly, I sometimes felt I would be in search of justice in the form of vengeance. It would be a payback for all victims of crime. All officers must avoid this transition to revenge, which can result in an officer’s excessive use of force or verbal abuse. Police officers should use anger to motivate, not express itself in the form of excess retribution. When anger becomes hate it turns emotion into a runaway train. It becomes sudden out-of-control fury, and everyone is a potential target.

I discovered an answer to anger in Marleen I. Ramsey and Cami Ramsey’s article *Forgiveness: A Response for Therapists in Dealing with Empathy Fatigue, Vicarious Trauma and Suffering in the Therapeutic Relationship*. Ramsey and Ramsey note “to be human is to suffer” (Ramsey and Ramsey n.d., 4). They state humans are “vulnerable to all types of fears, anxieties and distresses that result in significant mental anguish or suffering” (ibid.). Suffering has been described as “a strong emotional response caused by anything that threatens the self or integrity of a person, whether physical, emotional or spiritual” (ibid., 5). “Suffering can be experienced vicariously as in the empathetic response of a person seeing another emotive anguish or distress” (ibid.). Brown et al. agree police officers could be primary victims



to these stressors as well as “policing tasks that expose officers as secondary victims to the trauma of others” (Brown et al. 1999, 324). Weiss, Bruner, Best, Metzler, Liberman, Pole, Fagon, and Marmer confirm “the dangerous aspects of being a first responder (e.g., exposure to life threat) increase the likelihood that these individuals will experience trauma-related symptoms” (Weiss et al. 2010, 734). Asmundson and Stapleton, in the study of 138 police officers, indicated “all officers reported having experienced trauma” (Asmundson and Stapleton 2008, 734). Ramsey and Ramsey state that, just as hostility forms an attitude of displeasure and doubt, “learning of other people’s acts of cruelty, deception, betrayal and violation can cause therapists to have their own serious issues of trust, making them cynical, suspicious of people’s motives, or perceiving others as untrustworthy” (Ramsey and Ramsey n. d., 8). According to Asmundson and Stapleton, one of the symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) includes “emotional numbing” (Asmundson and Stapleton 2008, 66). Ramsey and Ramsey agree that therapists can be vulnerable to emotional numbing. They state, “Sometimes we become desensitized by human emotion, experience and acute overdose of feelings; we turn ourselves off” (Ramsey and Ramsey n.d., 9–10). Ramsey and Ramsey describe a defense mechanism utilized by people who experience trauma as disparagement. As a result of trauma, a person’s “view of the world and values changes” (ibid., 10). “He or she can become cynical and lose a sense of hope and optimism in humanity” (ibid.). In my experience, this loss of hope tends to generate anger that has no healthy outlet.

Just like therapists, police officers are expected to be stoic and suck it up, which can be dangerous for the officer and the public he/she serves. “Elevated anger has been found to be linked to adverse individual and public health outcomes” (Meffert et al. 2008, 415). PTSD and anger “could lead to increased community problems with physical health, interpersonal relationships and violence” (ibid.). Sherman describes anger as a state of being “thirsty for bloody revenge...an urge to ‘lash and lacerate’ to seek retribution not for its own sake but for pleasure....In short, anger terrorizes others as it torments us” (Sherman 2005, 83).

What is the answer to this serious problem for our law enforcement officers? What is the answer to potential individual and public health issues? Sherman states, “We are to learn to ignore, endure or forgive. We may access, punish and reeducate wrongdoers, but we are to do so without any angry feelings” (Sherman 2005, 83). He continues, “the urge toward forgiveness and reconciliation, in some cases independent of a change of heart by the



wrongdoer, may be a response to one's urgent need to find time to move on and heal, even if those who have committed the wrong have not repented for their sins" (ibid.). Glaeser noted, "[F]orgiveness is one of the key concerns in Judeo-Christian tradition" (Glaeser 2008, 337). Forgiveness has been defined as "overcoming of resentment toward an offender...one merciful response to someone who unjustly hurts us" (Ramsey and Ramsey n.d., 13). Cicero reminds us that "we must exercise respectfulness towards humans, towards the best of them and also towards the rest" (cited in Sherman 2005, 56). It is through the process of forgiveness that the victim releases the hateful thoughts that lead to revenge. Sherman assures us that "to forgive is to move beyond or overcome punishing anger for moral reasons" (ibid., 85). It is through empathy, walking in their shoes, seeing others as equals that we are able to forgive. We see the good and positive in others and for moral reasons move beyond our anger. It is different from forgetting and acceptance. Sherman reminds us that "[f]orgetting is something that happens to us over time...but it is not something we do for moral reasons" (ibid.). Forgiveness "increases emotional and physical benefits, including relief of chronic pain, cardiovascular difficulties and violent behavior" (Ramsey and Ramsey n.d., 15). Forgiveness reduces anger and resentment. It allows a person to release "negative behaviors such as revenge seeking or retaliation towards a transgressor" (ibid., 16).

Personally, I believe I am responsible for my attitude toward others. When I see others in a negative light it is easy to dehumanize them. Anger that I have because of their conduct and actions can be replaced by hate and resentment of them personally. All people are made in God's likeness and, I believe, are equal. My duty is to "temper control with forgiveness, soldierly strength with tolerance for human frailty" (Sherman 2005, 12). My responsibility includes knowing that I share "human frailty" with those who offend me. I must make a conscious choice of an attitude of forgiveness. Ramsey and Ramsey ask us to "internalize the act of forgiving and visualize absorbing the suffering...holding it in a meaningful place, and then letting it go" (Ramsey and Ramsey n.d., 18). It is a process that takes time, and I need not rush. Over time, I believe the process of forgiveness will allow me to vanquish the trauma other police officers and I experience each day at our jobs. The forgiveness process is something I need to understand and utilize so we can perform our job in a professional manner, with respect for others. In fact, I've found forgiveness is a vital necessity for officers. It is not only crucial for their jobs but also for their health. Forgiveness is important for their relationships at home and with others in the communities they serve.



FORGIVENESS, HUMILITY AND SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

“Anger is a heavy burden to carry but Dad realized that revenge didn’t make it any lighter...forgiveness did.”

—*My Name is Earl*

One’s ability to forgive offers benefits to emotional and physical health. Forgiveness offers “significant reductions to anger, depression, anxiety, grief and post traumatic stress symptoms and increases in...self esteem, hope, positive attitudes, environmental mastery and finding meaning in suffering” (Magnuson and Enright 2008, 114–15). It helps erase from the mind the painfulness of trauma and allows for relationships to be rebuilt. Solomon, Dekel, and Zerach stated that “forgiveness may be important for individuals suffering from PTSD to overcome their fears and memories of certain events and can ultimately affect not only their well being but their personal relationships” (Solomon, Dekel, and Zerach 2009, 548). In the Christian tradition, St. Paul explained that Jesus died on the cross to gain forgiveness for our sins. Jesus subjected himself to humiliation and death because of his love for man. St. Paul notes Jesus’s followers “forgive one another because they themselves had been forgiven by God through Christ” (cited in Magnuson and Enright 2008, 114). Humility is a part of forgiveness. Sandage and Weins advance humility as a way “to view others as one’s equal” (Sandage and Weins 2001, 205). At Philippi, St. Paul urged humility and “to consider others better than yourselves” (cited in *ibid.*). St. Paul equated humility with being unselfish. “Paul is encouraging the Philippians to humbly care for others and to put their concerns ahead of their own” (*ibid.*, 206). St. Paul believed humility and putting others first promoted unity in a diverse Christian community (*ibid.*, 205).

Humility is “an understanding of one’s imperfections, and to be free of arrogance and low self-esteem” (Sandage and Weins 2001, 207). Bethal, in *A New Breed of Leader*, states that humility is the opposite of arrogance. Arrogance is the fear of one’s inadequacies and fear of being open and vulnerable (Bethal 2009, 336). Low self-esteem can obstruct being altruistic to others. Sandage and Weins indicated that low self-image can lead to defensive narcissism that is “contrary to humility, empathy and forgiveness” (Sandage and Weins 2001, 207). Empathy is vital to humility and the ability to recognize others’ need for forgiveness. It takes strength and courage to be humble. T. S. Eliot wrote, “Humility is the most difficult of virtues to achieve” (cited in Bethal 2009, 336). Just as humility is important to forgiveness, it is also necessary to servant-leaders.



James C. Hunter states that humble leaders “listen to the opinions of others” (Hunter 2004, 95) and view leadership “as a position of trust and stewardship” (ibid., 96). Humble leaders are open and confident. A confident leader understands that mistakes are learning opportunities. A confident leader, who is humble and possesses the ability to forgive and ask forgiveness of mistakes, allows the learning process to advance, which results in growth for individuals and the organization. Jim Collins, in his *Harvard Business Review* article, describes a Level 5 leader as an executive who “builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical combination of personal humility and professional will” (Collins 2001, 70). The practice of humility and forgiveness opens our eyes to the humanness of others and is “related to psychological healing and releasing feelings of vengeance and anger” (Solomon et al. 2009, 548). This results in the practitioner becoming more human. Paulo Friere points out that “the pursuit of full humanity, however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity” (Friere 2000, 85). Police officers seeking “fellowship and solidarity” with the communities they patrol can use servant-leadership to obtain this goal.

POLICE AND SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Bill Miller, in *Police Leadership in the 21st Century* (1999), states, “The future of police leadership cries for openness, vision, wisdom, compassion and men and women of goodwill. If you love public service, are willing to generously share your talent and time with the department and the community, value the dignity of others and decree a sense of purpose—answer the call” (International Association of Chiefs of Police 1999, *Reflections on Leadership*, para 9).

The “call” Bill Miller is referring to is a leadership that treats others equally. He believes that to be effective in the new millennium law enforcement needs to partner with the citizens of the communities they serve. In 1999, at The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) First President’s Leadership Conference, several recommendations were made on the subject of police leadership. The IACP suggested development of an “Every Officer as a Leader” training program. (IACP 1999, Sec I, para 1) Another recommendation suggested law enforcement should prioritize “communication, collaboration, partnership development, and understanding of and responsiveness to the needs [of the community]” (IACP 1999, Sec II, para 3). Community needs require that police officers prioritize equal treatment and



fairness. Researcher Tom R. Tyler suggests that the public judge “the fairness of procedures used by authorities” (Tyler 2001, 215). Procedures were judged in two ways “(1) how people were treated by legal authorities with whom they deal and (2) whether people think that those legal authorities make their decisions fairly” (ibid.). Tyler further proposes that

all residents—majority and minority—are very concerned about how the police generally treat people. They make their evaluations of the police not primarily in terms of whether the police are effective in solving community problems or by whether they make good decisions when they are regulating public behavior. Instead, residents are strongly influenced by whether or not the police and courts treat people with respect, dignity and fairness. (ibid., 218–19)

Every police officer in the community is a leader. To meet the expectations of equality and fair treatment, law enforcement would be wise to lead in the style of Robert Greenleaf. Police servant-leaders partner with the community and lead with an attitude of influence and not authority. The successful police servant-leader must be humble, see humanity in others, and forgive. Listening, openness, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment, and community are words to characterize servant-leadership. These words also describe the skills required for accommodating communication. According to Giles, Barker, Fortman, Dailey, Hajek, and Anderson, police officers utilizing accommodating communication can obtain positive satisfaction during interactions with civilians. Police officers displaying accommodating communication during their servant-leadership practices will achieve cooperation, a willingness to follow and obtain a positive perception from citizens. As I conclude my reflection here on the anger officers experience, and the forgiveness that can set us free, I turn to the beautiful thoughts of Paulo Freire, who submits that there are two dimensions within all words: “reflection and action” (Freire 2000, 87). He also suggests “There is no true word that is not at the same time praxis” (ibid.). For me, this means the way we speak is also the way we live. Law enforcement can find the true word in servant-leadership, and apply this in the daily experience of seeking to protect and serve society. In the true word is social change. I believe that, as police servant-leaders, we must remember “to speak the true word is to transform the world” (Freire 2000, 87).

Look with favor upon a bold beginning

—Virgil



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