

Truth - An Officer Wellness Foundation

Thomas J. Lemmer

When we minimize, we reduce an issue to the smallest possible degree. If we do this with an apprehension about air travel, we can calmly board a plane and fly. Such is a positive outcome. But what occurs when we minimize the essential contributions of others? What occurs when we minimize contributions that carried risks and required sacrifice? Our words and actions communicate that those efforts are viewed as having limited value. Rather than gaining a sense of appreciation, those making the sacrifices can be left feeling belittled, even disparaged. Minimization that diminishes, downplays, and trivializes the essential efforts and sacrifices of others is not a foundation for their wellness.

The police profession is one tied to the realities of sacrifice. The work often requires sacrifices, from work schedules that accentuate separation from loved ones and missed family events, to extreme risks and grave dangers. Individuals can willingly endure through even the most difficult of these challenges when they believe their sacrifices will serve a larger and valued good. We seek purpose. Why do this? When officers are left struggling with this question, a foundation of wellness is not being strengthened.

If I ask you to do something difficult, does it matter whether or not I acknowledge that what I have asked of you is not easy? Of course it does. I might know what I ask is difficult, but not acknowledge that truth to you. However,

it is even worse when I knowingly deny the truth and minimize the full scope of what I have asked you to do.

Merely not knowing, or choosing not to know, or attempting to deceive others into disbelief does not alter the truth. When the truth of an issue reflects an undesired outcome, only actions sufficient to move the underlying reality can alter what then becomes true. Entrepreneur William Clement Stone drew this comprehensive, yet succinct, observation: "truth will always be truth, regardless of lack of understanding, disbelief, or ignorance."¹

In truth, within the policing profession, the ongoing challenges of officer wellness are a reality. Many police officers believe that their leaders and communities do not fully understand them or acknowledge the full extent of the challenges they face. The strains of their work are made more difficult when those holding formal leadership positions are perceived by officers

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▲ Above: Thomas J. Lemmer

as downplaying or ignoring the full scope of what is being asked of them. This reality may explain, in part, why there is far too often a divide between police officers and those in command positions within police agencies. When the truth is known, trust and confidence are always undermined in those who advance what is not true.

A Fundamental Starting Point

In life there is suffering, and evil is real. Understanding these two core truths is essential, particularly for those who have sworn an oath as a peace officer.

We live in a culture that often promotes a me-centered, no-pain outlook. Yet, in our own lives, have we experienced suffering? Have we seen it among those we love? Suffering is evident among individuals in the throes of severe illness. Hurricanes, tsunamis,

tornados, earthquakes, and wildfires are among the natural events that can cause mass suffering. Many rely on faith to respond to suffering. The Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religions each seek to prepare their believers for the reality of suffering in this world.

Suffering has many causes, but it is worse when it is the result of intentional acts – evil. Clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson has extensively studied the evils of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th Century. Among his findings is that evil is differentiated from the suffering born from tragedy based upon two elements; A lack of necessity and the volunteerism of those who engage in it.² Evil does not occur naturally, and it is always the result of someone's choice to inflict suffering and worse on others that would not otherwise have occurred.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor, theologian, and anti-Nazi dissident. In 1942 he wrote "After Ten Years," providing guidance to his fellow Germans on the moral response to the evils of Nazi rule. In essence, to ignore evil is to be complicit. Regarding evil, should the avoidance of suffering be our highest objective? On the reality of a higher good, Bonhoeffer instructed: "The ultimately responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation, but how a coming generation is going to go on living."³ In the face of evil, being concerned only about ourselves is not enough. Even with suffering to ourselves, resisting evil is morally required. The very essence of the police officer's role is founded on this reality.

Many professions have a public safety

focus. Firefighters, paramedics, security personnel, and even lifeguards are among those seeking to foster public safety. Yet, the duty to protect all within our communities from evil makes the police officer unique among professionals with a public safety mission. The police officer's role is essential because evil exists, and suffering is increased when evil is left unchecked.

The Full Scope

Are we acknowledging the full scope of what we are asking of our officers? As I have previously written: "The very nature of policing regularly necessitates propelling police officers into circumstances that are not of their own making, and into situations that are already tragic or at grave risk of quickly turning tragic."⁴ Even in fast-evolving incidents with limited information, responses that are short of perfection pose the risk of severe consequences for the officer. In the performance of their duties, each year officers are murdered, killed or catastrophically injured, and exposed to deep and accumulating trauma. Miscalculations by officers can lead to criminal charges and the loss of their liberty, civil liability, and termination. Then of course there are the health consequences from sleep deprivation, unnatural sleep cycles, dietary and nutrition complications, and all of these are before the potential challenges of isolation, depression, and substance use.

Fortunately, the possibility of redemption is also true, and there is reason for us not to despair. Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl knew the full reality of suffering and evil. During World War II, he survived the Nazi death camps

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but lost his parents and wife to evil. His "Man's Search for Meaning" is more than an account of his time in the camps and more than a survivor's tale. It is a testament to truth and how to overcome the worst of evil and suffering. Frankl found the daily search for meaning was key: "Those who have a 'why' to live, can bear with almost any 'how'."⁵

Why? Why be a police officer? Why take the risks? Because the instruction provided by Bonhoeffer and Frankl is as accurate and powerful today as ever. Each person has a moral responsibility to resist evil, and for those who have sworn an oath as a peace officer, this duty is paramount. When we know why we must carry on, we can overcome the challenges and suffering that we experience. Helping our officers see the essential nature of their role and acknowledging the importance of their work is vital. This is true in the effort to build safer communities and in fostering officer wellness.

Equally true is this; most police encounters involve people who are not evil. This is true even if those involved are making bad choices necessitating intervention. Bad choices, particularly those involving lawlessness, always come with consequences. Such is true, even if the "who will pay" the consequences, and

the “when and where” those consequences will play out, have expanded or shifted. Police officers help address these actions as well, and in so doing restore the peace, prevent tragedy, reduce suffering, and encourage goodness.

Embracing Truth

Through all of the challenges, serving in the role of a peace officer remains an honor. The role carries with it great

responsibilities and great opportunities. Those working in law enforcement can garner great strength from the truth, and the truth is discernible through both reason and faith. For each officer there is the opportunity to find great meaning in the service of their work.

The way forward must be a proactive one. When the police are one with the community, the community is safer, fre-

er, more stable, and better positioned to help foster the well-being of all of the community’s members – including our police officers. During these challenging times another truth is apparent. In fostering officer wellness, police executives must consistently lead from a foundation of truth and acknowledge the full scope of what officers are being asked to do.



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