

Spirituality

The DNA of Law Enforcement Practice

By SAMUEL L. FEEMSTER, M.Div., J.D.

“Peace officers are exposed to the worst that life has to offer. [T]hey see the denizens of society at their very worst—when they have just been victimized or when they have just victimized someone else. Peace officers see the perpetrators of evil and the results of their evil deeds. The constant contact with evil is corrosive, and those effects are cumulative. From the initial selection of a peace officer..., great care must be taken to ensure the emotional, psychological, and physical health of

that individual. That care must address preparation for contact with evil, not just address evil’s effects. Law enforcement managers must recognize the short- and long-term effects of this work and...must protect those who they task with the protection of others.”¹

These profound comments from a veteran law enforcement executive highlight a danger that no bullet-resistant vest, superior firearm instruction, or innovative tactical technique can protect against. These observations reveal the acute need

for those in the law enforcement profession, as well as the communities they protect and serve, to recognize the nexus between intentional care of the body and spirit and vocational survival of those charged with enforcing this nation’s laws. In today’s world of terrorism; mass shootings, especially of children; and other heinous acts of violence, law enforcement officers are exposed to increasingly toxic situations that adversely affect their bodies, their minds, and, most of all, their spirits. Ultimately, this unrelenting exposure to

inherently evil individuals and the scenes of their crimes can critically impact officers' abilities to effectively perform their sworn duties.

For clarity, this article is not about religion² nor is it a treatise about ethics, fundamentalism of any kind, popular fads, intuition, emotional or social intelligence, religiosity, or stress management, per se. Rather, the author's purpose is to acknowledge the link between spirituality and law enforcement to enable its embrace within the profession. In other occupations, including those in the fields of medicine, higher education, and business, many employees, managers, and their organizations have recognized the healthy effects of embracing a critical spirituality. It is time for the law enforcement community to begin a dialogue that recognizes the humanness of officers and the tragic consequences that can occur when the toxicity they face on a daily basis overtakes them.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONNECTION

While some may perceive the subject of spirituality as controversial because of the common misunderstanding of the establishment clause of the First Amendment,³ society must become aware of the inherent spiritual nature of law enforcement. Spirituality denotes the nurturing of the spirit

throughout a person's life in all of its dimensions and expressions.⁴ The four basic components of spirituality include 1) a value-based meaning that emanates from a personal belief system, 2) the total integration of self in pursuit of holistic meaning, 3) the total integration of self in academic disciplines and vocational service, and 4) the recognition of self as a spiritual being on a human journey toward the destiny of that personal belief system. Thus, its domain encompasses research and practice in many areas, such as law, psychology, sociology, anthropology, criminology, criminal justice, religion, theology, and law enforcement.

Spirituality—a sense of meaning and purpose larger than the instrumental duties of law enforcement—affects the most critical aspects of

practice, performance, vitality, and longevity in the profession.⁵ It energizes the ethics of practice, resulting in exemplary (efficient and effective) performance. Whereas performance refers to what tasks officers do to enforce the law, practice is how and why they fulfill their sworn responsibilities, doing so with a spirit that evokes the highest virtues of human dignity (the spirit of the law). Vitality depicts the resilience officers must garner to overcome the toxic evils they encounter in the discharge of their duties. Longevity, which some officers believe encompasses a bar higher than mere survival alone, constitutes the result of nurturing the spirit of the law across many challenges (stresses) and venues of service.⁶

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an awareness of the spiritual dimension of humanity that motivates and guides the establishment and enforcement of laws that fully promote justice.⁷ As one veteran law enforcement executive expressed, spirituality is “that look of gratitude when you have done a kind act, standing up for something important and meaningful to someone. That light behind a person’s face when I would show a dignity and respect for them when, perhaps, they supposed many thought them not worthy of respect.”⁸ The enforcement of statutes, regulations, and laws through practices and policies that immediately or subsequently affirm the dignity of the violator *and* the enforcer is spirituality personified. Human dignity is rooted inexorably in spirituality.⁹ It abounds when law enforcers, while adhering to the *letter* of the law, perform and practice their profession in accord with the *spirit* of the law. Spirituality is at work when, using the best judgment and tactical operations available, officers execute justice through selecting the least intrusive options or decide to favor alternative proven methods that engender trust for the enforcement service provider. In short, they seek the positive edification of the spirit of the person against whom enforcement is served by heeding that moral compass that restrains, compels, and enables

humans—in their law enforcement capacity—to do good: to do the right thing, the right way, for the right reason. As Dag Hammarskjöld, former secretary general of the United Nations, said, “Your position never gives you the right to command. It only imposes on you the duty of so living your life that others may receive your orders without being humiliated.”

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CONDUCTING EXPLORATORY RESEARCH

In May 2001, the FBI Academy’s Behavioral Science Unit (BSU) sponsored a satellite broadcast that focused on the responsibility of communities to answer the call to meet the needs of first responders. The following year, BSU hosted a Spirit of the Law Working

Group seminar to explore the feasibility of developing and initiating the spirit of the law into training academies and seminaries. The objective was to design a curriculum to enable public safety agencies to inculcate best survival practices and to teach faith leaders how to meet the needs of first responders, particularly law enforcement personnel. Pursuant to the recommendations of this working group, a Spirit of the Law Conference was held in 2003. Following this conference, a second satellite broadcast in 2004 focused on the collaborative multidisciplinary responses to the expressed needs of the law enforcement profession.

The Approach

One of the action items from these activities was to establish curriculum content by extracting from law enforcement practitioners the best practices for surviving the vocational call to law enforcement given the intentional exposure to toxicity. BSU felt that the seasoned law enforcement executives invited to attend the FBI National Academy (NA)¹⁰ could detail the best practices for vocational survival. Therefore, a Spirit of the Law research project was initiated to study four NA sessions. Out of approximately 1,000 students, 747 of them (a 74 percent response rate) participated via a

Covert Dynamics of Spirituality

- Intuition is a signal of spirituality just as the sonic boom is a tangible indication that a supersonic aircraft has broken the sound barrier by its excessive speed. Physicists measure light and sound as approximations of unobservable forces at the subatomic level. Intuition senses evil and danger at the hidden level of spirituality in much the same way.
- Emotion constitutes the coding or interpretation of, or reaction to, the signals provided by spirituality.
- Ethics refer to the observable habits or behaviors that measure or indicate spirituality and act as a barometer of spiritual wellness.
- Stress—at alarming rates and in excessive amounts—can activate the breakdown of spirituality. It acts as an ecological virus that precipitates conflicts in ethics, emotions, cognition, and intuition.

nonrandom, purposive sample using a survey research design involving a 52-item questionnaire. The project involved 56 females, 689 males, and 2 respondents who did not specify their gender.¹¹ As to marital status, 79 percent were married, 13 percent were single, and 5 percent were divorced. The median age was 42 years; the median number of years of law enforcement service was 19; and the median number of years of management experience within law enforcement was 7.

The Results

Table 1 (page 12) displays some of the exploratory findings about aspects of spirituality. Even though these initial data are quite preliminary, among those surveyed, matters of spirituality clearly infused their practice and performance

of law enforcement. According to the overall pattern of survey responses offered by officers themselves, spirituality affected law enforcement in many ways. As the percentages in table 1 indicate, law enforcement executives were keenly aware of the spiritual significance of their work and the consequences of toxicity in their relationships and careers.

Table 2 (page 15) shows how these law enforcement leaders responded to a series of survey questions about evil. These exploratory findings revealed rather persuasively that *more than one-half* of all respondents sampled had encountered evil in some form via belief, interactions, and feelings. Slightly more than one-half viewed their roles as combating evil. Amazingly, exactly one-half reported having a

direct experience with evil. With these findings in mind, no recognition of the concept of evil can occur without engaging the realm of spirituality in some form or measure. Surprisingly, less than 30 percent of respondents thought that they had been adequately trained by their police academy to encounter evil. Notwithstanding the number of missing responses, this finding alone suggests that grappling with the spirit of the law is no idle or trendy pursuit.

Taken together, these data indicate that spirituality matters. In this survey, law enforcement executives evidenced spirituality in and out of religious venues. They were astute enough to distinguish between spirituality and religion. Some attended religious services, whereas others did not. Over one-half of respondents felt the presence of

a deity or higher power at work. Judging from these data, a systematic case appears to exist for researching spirituality in law enforcement beyond exploratory levels. More rigorous survey questionnaires and other methods must be designed as soon as possible, preferably using more definitive probability samples pursuant to the best standards of applied research.

ANSWERING THE CALL

Eighty-five percent of the 747 law enforcement officials participating in the survey viewed law enforcement as a calling, rather than an occupation. What did they mean by this? Defined as “a summons or strong inclination to a particular

state or course of action,”¹² a vocation “is an expression of who and what the person is. If an occupation occupies or captures one, a vocation sets one free to be who that person is called to be.”¹³ In a law enforcement context, individuals who voluntarily place themselves between innocence and danger to protect others clearly demonstrate their calling to a vocation that gives voice and vitality to meaningful inspirational values.

As the survey indicated, because law enforcement executives reported feeling drawn to the law enforcement profession, they believe that “it is not a job but is, instead, an extension of personhood and the offering of life. Vocations ultimately do not

take energy from us but give energy and life to us.”¹⁴ With this in mind, first responders must persistently nurture the core spirituality that radiates their attitude, disposition, intelligence, and behavior to remain vigilant, healthy, and effective throughout their chosen vocation. Those either unaware of the spiritual dimension of humanity or not equipped to defend against toxic exposure are overtaken, in varying degrees, by the evil they are called to protect against.

RECOGNIZING THE REALITY OF EVIL

Law enforcement agencies are duly established to protect citizens from evil and the toxicity of evil’s effects. In many

Table 1: Aspects of Spirituality

Items About Spirituality	Proportion Responding
Believe in a deity or higher power	89%
Believe spirituality and religion are not the same	64%
Have felt the presence of a deity or higher power while at work	55%
Believe law enforcement is not just a job but a calling	85%
Believe calling has adversely influenced friends/social life	60%
Believe calling has adversely impacted marital/relationship status	53%
Someone close to them has committed or attempted suicide	32%
Contemplated or attempted taking their own life	7%

contexts, evil can be defined as a destructive, poisonous form of spirituality with outward expressions that degrade, dispirit, disintegrate, dehumanize, and destroy humans beings, as well as the set of ideas, dignity, freedoms, networks, property, capital, and activities engulfing the constructive social institutions that people depend on for survival.¹⁵ Evil is not registered merely in the physical, intellectual, and emotional realms of humanity but directly in the spirit. The corrosive, accumulative effects of evil upon a spiritually underdeveloped law enforcement officer can prove as deadly as any cancer, heart attack, or chronic debilitating disease.¹⁶

A listing of conditions that frequently overtake the good men and women who accept their call to a law enforcement vocation include alcohol and drug abuse, apathy, burnout, cynicism, dark humor, departmental disharmony, divorce, domestic abuse, emotional disorders, a personal crisis of faith, and suicide.¹⁷ Some of these persist in epidemic proportions in the law enforcement culture. The unequivocal evidence of these afflictions tragically culminates in the high number of officer suicides reported by law enforcement agencies. Robert E. Douglas, executive director of the National P.O.L.I.C.E. Suicide Foundation, Inc., said,

“If we lost a Boeing 747 every year full of passengers, the FAA would ground them all until they found out what the problem was. We need to find causative factors for police suicide and do something about them.”¹⁸ Judging from volumes of extant data, some law enforcement officers also may lack training about the importance of acknowledging and persistently nurturing the core spirituality that manifests itself as personality, behavior, and health.¹⁹

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Intentional, recurrent exposure to evil or the toxicity of its effects without any restoration, rehabilitation, or renewal deprives first responders of that inspiring *meaning* affirmed through spiritual awareness. Spiritual depravity, or dispiritedness, robs officers of discretion, thus rendering them

incapable of compassionate and protective enforcement. Dispirited law enforcement officers are unable to provide the services essential to a safe and healthy community because they are not healthy themselves. This disintegrated state, denoted by a separation of body and wholesome spirit or the presence of an evil spirit, results in the loss of discernment and caring and in the abdication of responsibility. This hidden terrorism of the spirit shows itself in a lack of concern for spirituality, in a deficient spirituality, and in an unrecognized spirituality. Left unabated, these pernicious indicators pave the road to malpractice in policing via corruption, disrespect, and intolerance. In this damaged state, officers cannot manifest for themselves nor extend to others the spirit of the law (enforcing laws in ways that respect human dignity in other beings). Just like the bite of a cobra, a poisonous spirituality can corrode officers' lives *long* after their careers end, as suggested by statistics on premature deaths, suicides, and other maladies.²⁰ To this end, best practices in spirituality can sustain both vitality and longevity for officers.

Yet, the primary survival skills that officers receive to defend against intentional exposure to evil and its toxic effects during the course of law enforcement training, when

present, are reactive at best. Each law enforcement candidate must demonstrate proficiencies in firearms and defensive tactics prior to graduating from accredited academies. While both skills are essential for keeping their bodies safe, neither proves sufficient for protecting their human spirits from the unavoidable toxic effects of intentional and repetitive exposure to evil. In the face of crises, catastrophic disasters, criminal behavior, or evil, officer safety training for *physical* survival does not morph into impenetrable protection for *spiritual* survival. Officers often face hazardous levels of stress, exponential dimensions of uncertainty, and unpredictable loads of complexity that can overwhelm their neglected spirituality. Altogether, too many negative stimuli and far too many psychological anxieties triggered by the uncertainties of daily police work can combine to produce an unfortunate stress that slowly kills or weakens the spiritual immune system of a first responder beyond critical levels, possibly triggering catastrophe.

FINDING A SHIELD AGAINST EVIL

Slowly, as careers progress, some officers sense that the compass directing their integrity, along with introspective

meditations about their responses to lawfully executed arrests, was implanted spiritually before they were sworn to protect *others* from evil and the toxicity of its effects. These officers cope with intentional exposure to evil by nurturing their spirituality through developed beliefs, rituals, practices, and positive activities. Meanwhile, other enforcers grasp the essence of the spirit of the law looking up from the bottom of the abyss that they have been looking down into via a crisis.

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Law Enforcement Participation

For first responders to guard against personal disintegration (frequently resorted to and sometimes employed as a survival skill against toxicity), they must become aware of their complex human

dimensions, as well as being equipped to nurture or protect themselves accordingly. As a seasoned law enforcement executive explained, “To stop or slow hardening of the heart, the officers must be taught to jealously hold onto their core values. They must believe that they are agents of good and that good will prevail over evil to promote balance within the heart.”²¹ Consequently, the absence of intentional instruction about spirituality (namely, the spirit of the law) inadvertently prevents officers from dealing with a root cause of stress, burnout, despair, cynicism, apathy, suicide, and other maladies associated with the toxic exposure to evil.²² Over the last several decades, a plethora of empirical research has arisen that supports this crucial insight.²³ To this end, law enforcement agencies must embrace policies and practices designed to address and accommodate the spiritual *renewal* of their officers. In an era when studies about workplace spirituality are exploding across many occupations and industries around the world, the spirit of the law in policing is more necessary than ever.

Law enforcement officers are the lifeguards of communities. If they cannot swim, then society faces grave difficulties. The safety, security, and vitality of communities depend, to

Table 2: Existence and Toxic Effects of Evil

Item Measured	Proportion Responding YES	Proportion Responding NO	Number of Missing Responses	More than 50% in Agreement
Believe in evil	86%	13%	8	Yes
Have met an evil person	71%	27%	10	Yes
Have felt evil's presence	55%	38%	22	Yes
Believe officer's role is good versus evil	52%	46%	12	Yes
Have experienced evil's presence	50%	40%	53	No
Have been trained to cope with evil	29%	40%	181	No

a degree, upon the *health* of first responders, along with the safety and security conveyed by their *presence*. Through physiological, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual expression, first responders benchmark norms of acceptable behavior to those they serve and protect. Thus, equipping them to guard proactively against evil toxins has the potential of enhancing their lives and the communities they serve.

Community Involvement

This challenge of furthering police-community relationships does not rest with law enforcement alone. Communities that

depend upon sworn personnel to serve and protect residents must enable law enforcement agencies to provide training and resources for the implementation of best survival practices. Until communities systematically and intentionally minister to the needs of first responders (beginning in the training academy and continuing throughout their careers), some officers will continue to surrender to dispirit- edness compounded by chronic stress inherent in intentional exposure to evil and the toxicity of evil's effects. Medical research verifies conclusively that evil stresses can progressively destroy the cells of the body.²⁴

Communities must embrace *both* the preventive and maintenance responsibilities regarding the holistic well-being of first responders to effectively meet the needs of dispirited law enforcement officers.

The implications of acknowledging the spiritual genesis of best law enforcement practices are enumerable.²⁵ One of the most obvious benefits is that communities will have access to multiple avenues, including innovations derived from systematic, ongoing behavioral science research, that can assist with the acute and chronic needs of their officers.

LOOKING AHEAD

Qualitative observations suggest several possibilities for the future expansion of this area of research. First, as this work emphasizes, the law enforcement profession must begin to appreciate the adverse impact of exposure to evil toxins. Next, it must equip officers to guard proactively against the self-disintegration that can result from exposure to unabated evil. Third, it must develop a curriculum of best practices to be implemented by officers, educators, and communities working together to stem the tide of self-inflicted officer causalities. In addition, law enforcement training academies must circumspectly collaborate by joining this evolution toward a more holistic curriculum. In conjunction with stress, conflict, crisis management, tactical, and investigative training, as well as physical exercise, an intentional emphasis on spiritual wellness will produce a more effective vocation.

Along with new levels of awareness, funding, outreach, and inclusion, researchers also must fully investigate those aspects of spirituality that influence health and stimulate optimal law enforcement vocational well-being. If successful, they will find, discover, and disclose why and how spirituality elevates the performance, practice, vitality, and longevity of the law

enforcement profession's most valuable resource, the men and women who valiantly persevere against the evil they encounter on a daily basis.

CONCLUSION

Just as DNA is the building block of human existence, spirituality is the DNA of law enforcement practice. One veteran law enforcement leader's own words aptly illustrate this, "Dedication to service—to the department, the community, to

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each other—is one of the greatest characteristics a police officer can possess. It is a characteristic we look for, recruit for, and encourage for an officer's entire career. I believe, then, it is incumbent upon us as police managers and leaders to reflect this dedication and devotion to duty by accepting that the mental and emotional well-being of our officers is vitally important to our organization, the community, and, most important, the officers themselves.”²⁶

Sharing the risk and responsibility for crime prevention will foster greater respect between the community and the police. In this environment, those who serve as the vanguards of America's communities will be better able to survive the exposure to evils that threaten all members of society. Moreover, acknowledging the spiritual genesis of the profession provides a promising framework for collaborative, multidisciplinary approaches to many of law enforcement's critical concerns.²⁷ ♦

Endnotes

¹ Lieutenant Adán Tejada, University of California Police Department, Berkeley, California, excerpt from midterm paper for Applied Behavioral Science for Law Enforcement Operations course, FBI National Academy 228th Session, Samuel L. Feemster, Instructor.

² R.C. Fuller, *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³ U.S. Const. amend. I, in pertinent part, states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

⁴ Beginning with the title and continuing throughout the article, the author intentionally uses spirituality as the designated focus, rather than spirit. Although related, spirit and spirituality have distinct attributes. Spirit depicts an unobservable dimension that people must sustain for the same reasons that they must nourish their bodies and minds. In contrast, spirituality refers to disciplines undertaken in the care and furtherance of the wholesome or holistic development of the spirit.

⁵ I.I. Mitroff, *A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America: A Hard Look at Spirituality, Religion, and Values in the Workplace* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1999); and G.F.A. Pierce, *Spirituality at Work* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2001).

⁶ G.C. Gallup, Jr. and T. Jones, *The Next American Spirituality* (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 2000).

⁷ This is the author's working definition of the term *spirit of the law*.

⁸ Captain Michael Arrowood, Covington, Kentucky, Police Department, excerpt from midterm paper for Applied Behavioral Science for Law Enforcement Operations course, FBI National Academy 227th Session, Samuel L. Feemster, Instructor.

⁹ J. Shea, *Spirituality and Health Care* (Chicago, IL: The Park Ridge Center for the Study of Health, Faith, and Ethics, 2000).

¹⁰ The FBI hosts four 10-week sessions each year during which law enforcement executives from around the world come together to attend classes in various criminal justice subjects.

¹¹ Without question, the views of female and ethnic minority law enforcement officials are underrepresented by this particular sample.

¹² *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.v. "vocation."

¹³ Michael Catlett, Ph.D., adjunct at the John Leland Center for Theological Studies, Arlington, VA, "Spirituality and Vocation," Spirit of the Law Conference, FBI Academy, August 28, 2003.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ R.L. Depue, *Between Good and Evil* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 2005).

¹⁶ C. Van Zandt, *Facing Down Evil* (New York, NY: Putnam, 2006).

¹⁷ D.C. Sheehan, ed., U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Domestic Violence by Police Officers* (Washington, DC: 2000); and D.C. Sheehan and J.I. Warren, eds., U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Suicide and Law Enforcement* (Washington, DC: 2001).

¹⁸ <http://www.psf.org>

¹⁹ D.C. Sheehan and J.I. Warren, eds., U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Suicide and Law Enforcement* (Washington, DC: 2001).

²⁰ D.P. Hackett and J.M. Violanti, *Police Suicide: Tactics for Prevention* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 2003).

²¹ Administrative Sergeant David A. Teem, Newport, Oregon, Police Department, excerpt from midterm paper for Applied Behavioral Science for Law Enforcement Operations course, FBI National Academy 228th Session, Samuel L. Feemster, Instructor.

²² E. Taylor, *Shadow Culture: Psychology and Spirituality in America* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1999).

²³ J. Garcia-Zamar, "Workplace Spirituality and Organizational Performance," *Public Administration Review* 63, no. 3 (2003): 355-363.

²⁴ D. Harman, ed., *Increasing Healthy Life Span* (New York, NY: New York Academy of Sciences, 2002).

²⁵ D.G. Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

²⁶ Lieutenant Rick Pippins, Odessa, Texas, Police Department, excerpt from midterm paper for Applied Behavioral Science for Law Enforcement Operations course, FBI National Academy 224th Session, Samuel L. Feemster, Instructor.

²⁷ Australian Police Multicultural Advisory Bureau, *A Practical Reference to Religious Diversity for Operational Police* (Sydney, Australia: Australian Institute of Criminology, 2004).

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Wanted: Photographs



The *Bulletin* staff is always looking for dynamic, law enforcement-related photos for possible publication in the magazine. We are interested in photos that visually depict the many aspects of the law enforcement profession and illustrate the various tasks law enforcement personnel perform.

We can use color prints, digital photographs, or slides. It is our policy to credit photographers when their work appears in the magazine. Contributors should send duplicate, not original, prints as we do not accept responsibility for damaged or lost prints. Send photographs to:

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