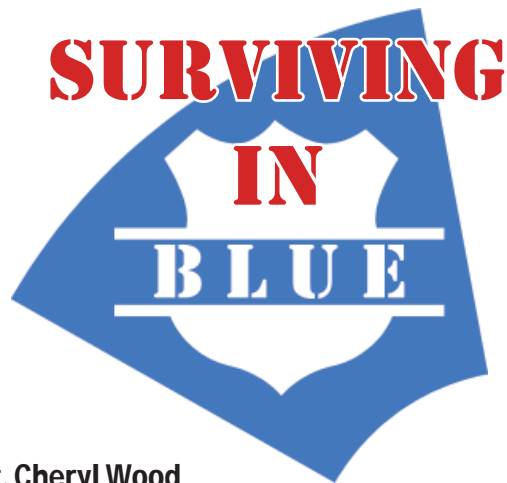




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**W**hen thinking of survival in law enforcement, the first thought is the obvious physical danger of the job. There is more to a law enforcement officer's survival than the obvious, which would be to survive the psychological stress effects. Law enforcement 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 also comes 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 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. The third stage was 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 didn't end but instead came full circle to the restoration of my faith, humanity, and empathy, and 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. He was a Chicago policeman from July of 1951 until he died of cancer in April of 1974. His 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.

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." 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.

In his book, **Death Work: Police, Trauma, and the Psychology of Survival**, Vincent E. Henry characterizes this emotional distance as survivor psychology, the natural tendency to distance myself psychologically from the death event. This was done for self-preservation in order to efficiently function in the capacity for which I was there. Nonetheless, I still remember thinking, "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.

## Developing the Skills and Knowledge of the Job

To be a street officer, one has to develop street sense that 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) that provided 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.

There are always calls for service that remain with you throughout your career. I had been with the department for three and a half years when I responded to a call where someone observed a human skull lying in a backyard near Arkansas Children's Hospital. 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**, philosopher Adam Smith 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 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 and 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 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.

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 was 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 cause negative effects in their personal lives.

In Kevin Gilmartin's book, **Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement**, Gilmartin explains that 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 easy-going young recruit can become the angry and negative veteran officer. However, being distrustful of human nature and motive has a purpose—*that is what keeps cops alive*. For every call for service, for every traffic stop, it is highly essential that police officers practice excellent officer safety skills, which translate into being distrust

ful. 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.

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 or 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. 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 remember 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. 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 should be in school; instead, there were 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 young enough to be my son, was telling me. Of course, the cop in me, thought, "What he is 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 an 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 was more than just a call 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 call involving the fifteen-year-old boy and his mother faded into my memory. I had lost most of my empathy and patience with parents with no control.

### **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. After the brief encounter, 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, "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. Vincent Henry 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.

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 lies ahead. We don't do it for the money, the thanks that never comes, 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 Rabbi Cari Friedman quotes Robert F. Kennedy in **Spiritual Survival for Law Enforcement**, "*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.*"



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