Fulfilling the Mission - Police Tactical Psychology Bulletin

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Fulfilling the Mission

I don’t know if it is still a stock question in hiring and promotional processes or whether it is just to cliché to use, but “why do you want to be a…” is an important question when considering one’s job choice. In the beginning, aspiring police officers and rookies who are becoming cops are driven by a motivation to become a member of something bigger than themselves. But often times the only seemingly sensible answer to the question above involves some form of “…because I want to help people.” What is lacking in that stock answer is that the question is understood only on its face. However, the real question might be better posed, “If today we make you a police officer, what will you do with it?” The real question in the meta-communication level is one about meaningful contribution to the department, the community and society.

One aspect of our modern society that has been lost, and perhaps psychology has played a major role is in terms of what is regarded as a good or happy life. We have known for some time that employees that are stable and happy outside of work make better workers on the job. But because of the pleasure principle that was largely advanced by Freud, we have come to see The Good Life as one in which our feelings are happy. Happiness in this sense is a hedonic kind of happy. Another kind of happy that was spoken about by the ancient philosopher Epicurus is eudiamonic which is a meaningfulness and fulfilling type of happy (Joseph, 2011). Eudiamonic pleasure is a sense of fulfillment and purpose. It is the kind of feeling that one gets when he or she overcomes an obstacle or accomplishes some important project. That which is important about this for police officers is that many if not all officers go through periods of disenchantment with their careers (Kirschman, 2006). Some never resolve that apathy and begin to avoid engaging in work or actually despise much of what is expected. What has happened is a loss (or a theft) of their personal meanings about their vocations. At earlier periods, a sense of purpose that is even often over-optimistic, is what motivates newer officers to go out striving to be crime fighters. But a few questionable plea bargains, judicial decisions and pass-overs for promotion, etc. and apathy will start knocking on the door. A confusion between hedonic and eudiamonic pleasure that is so pervasive in our consumerist culture makes people seek “thrills” over “meanings,” even for emergency services personnel.

Hedonic happiness will never fill the hole in a person. Relationships are not sustainable when people seek the erotic love over the companionate and committed love. Therefore, home life for police officers has to be about cultivating meaningful experiences, interactions, and commitments with their spouses and children. It can be challenging to cultivate this if the officer has lost much of the meaning in his or her work. And this can happen psychologically by disappointments in oneself, the department and the system. But it can also be cultivated by officers that are only excited or motivated about doing the “big calls.” This is hedonic because it thrives on the rush and steps past how big the most everyday call can be for a citizen. Consider a five-year old whose bicycle was just stolen. It had “My Little Pony” on it and everything! She is feeling vulnerable and violated and a sense of loss. We empathize, but we won’t lose any sleep over it. Well adults have the same feelings over what we might see as minor. We see them as minor because we compare them to our sense of a big deal. You just can’t feel everyone’s pain and anxiety with them. However, by doing our work for them, it is still meaningful work to them and we should still honor ourselves in that as we did when we were new. The other side-effect is that we don’t talk at home about the little calls and we’ve learned not to share the bad stuff either. A psychosocial split with the family can creep in.

Once an officer begins leaving work completely at work, he or she is keeping a huge amount of his or her life undisclosed. Even though this is meant to protect them
from the terror, it leaves many hours of one’s day not shared with the person or persons closest to the officer. Each officer would benefit from asking him or herself, “Who is my officer-self who is living a parallel but disconnected life with my home-self?” Or, “Am I an officer at work and an officer at home too?” These can both be ways one deals with becoming too apathetic at work or too absorbed in it. All too often, the younger officers are absorbed so much that things whiplash through undesirable events and experiences to become apathy.

The studies on posttraumatic growth have discovered that many police officers and other emergency responders can actually become stronger through adversity. The philosopher Nietzsche (1990) said, “What doesn’t kills us makes us stronger.” From this, we find that people who have suffered a trauma but found some meaning in it can rise up stronger and wiser. That doesn’t mean that the lesson learned has to be positive. Many times the lessons learned are mixed, like having learned that one appreciates his or her peer officers more but has lost some general faith in humanity (Joseph, 2011). The point is that we can remember a very simple mathematic equation to help us. It is, $S - M = D$, that is, Suffering without Meaning equals Despair (Frankl, 2011). What this means is that no amount of hedonic happiness can fulfill our human need to live a meaningful life through meaningful interactions, relations and work.

As modern day warriors, defenders and enforcers of the law, we sometimes turn our skills and motivations inward. That means that we turn them in toward ourselves, but also we turn them on each other in the form of bad department politics and gossip. In our negative criticism and griping, we are battling our sense of those things that are unjust, unfair, or otherwise undermining of our identity and mission as police officers. But the fact is, serving and protecting our citizens and one another, even in the most minor ways, can still be the most important things we do to fulfill our mission. This is the challenge of seeking and sustaining the eudiamonic rewards of embodying the identity and mission of a cop.

REFERENCES