

May 9, 2017

I sat down Monday with Chief Andrew Mills for a long chat. I was greeted warmly, he pulled his chair around from behind his desk to sit closer. I did not see, when I looked into his face, fear, or suspicion, or anger, which is unlike other experiences I've had recently with officers of the Eureka Police Department.

For I had been invited to come in and discuss the issues surrounding my recent arrest, which had prompted from me a public letter illuminating inappropriate use of force during the event.

I started off by saying there were two perspectives of my case I wished to discuss. First, the overlying issue of police aggression and insensitivity growing, not only here, but across the United States, and secondly of my case in particular.

Of the former we spent most of the time, clearly it is of great interest to both of us. It was a discussion, not a pair of simultaneous monologues. He is a bright, and careful thinker, and I can see that he is a caring man.

Of the later, there is not much to be said. In the spur of the moment, an officer has tremendous discretion, actions that carry the weight of law.

Chief Mills has done a fine job, his few years at the helm. Every one of the many people I spoke with this week noted the improvements. He has developed a citizen's committee, and honed internal procedures and protocols. Yet the improvements we considered are those that have to happen in the intention of the officer on the street. They are people just like each of us, yet the faces they look into show distrust, fear and anger. We ask them to be feeling people, but not feel that? The populace, in turns, pick up their dour mood and the feedback loop continues. It is an established notion, and we talked of this too.

I don't necessarily feel the solutions lie in more rules, strictures, oversights. There are plenty in place, and I can see Chief Mills is doing his part to empower them. It is not helpful to tear down the department, the officers, the chief, or burden his officer's trust in him by demanding blood. The solution is to be brought by the officers themselves, in the arena they command, and not forced upon them. I feel we cannot, in general, compel compassion. That is a thing freely given.

In the time since my arrest I have been doing a lot of research. Particular incidents do me little good, the hairs are split until nothing is solid. Pan out, and every camp has shored up their positions. These are not the droids I am looking for. I want to know what the beat officer is experiencing, and why, in that moment of unassailable discretion, the officer is more and more often deciding to be insensitive, even brutal, when any reasonable person can see it is unnecessary.

Because use of force is assault, and an assault leaves trauma. That is why it is regulated by law. And the trauma remains long after the jail doors open, and one is let out on the street. This, I feel, is a big part of what the officer isn't realizing: that their action, which is efficient because they deal with so many people every day, has a much larger impact on the individual, and the fabric of their community. An impact which is out of proportion to the crimes committed.

But I couldn't break past it: understanding the moment an officer decides whether to respect a citizen, as they do everyday when they encounter the school teacher, the grocer ... or decide the "subject" is now not deserving of any respect at all. It is actually a pretty fickle moment in time to pin down – it changes from day to day, officer to officer. I've tossed and turned thinking of ways to scale the respect to the situation it will never happen. You can't hand a memo to the whole police force saying "oh, be nice like this, in this situation, and just a little less nice in this one, at your discretion."

Alas, that eureka moment. One doesn't have to turn off respect, at all. It is actually more efficient that way. The person in front of you made a mistake, or has a mental illness. Just regular folks – they are not mean people. Or maybe they beat someone, or robbed a bank. Behind them there is a long road of traumas, that led to that moment. Pity is appropriate. Disrespect? Well, no. The officers are doing themselves a disservice by relinquishing that ground. We do not walk in another's shoes, know not their struggles. It is not our job to judge, and turning off basic human respect is moral failure. Escalating force beyond what is necessary is meting out punishment.

Chief Mills, in our conversation, pointed out that an officer may have only milliseconds to react, or decide, whether use of force is necessary. Yet, the officer rarely faces that constraint, and in most cases is certainly not required to decide instantaneously. Courage is recognizing fear, respecting it, and stepping through it. Yes, one feels a bit more vulnerable, but that is where the work is done. Work that we hire police officers to do. When I was arrested, the very first moment of contact was use of force, in the presence of three other officers. That does not resemble courage. It did inflict trauma, and our community is, as of yet, not the better for it.

So I would say to Chief Mills, encourage your officers to hold these values, and strive to weave them into their work. Those in power have no need to climb down from this higher position. When we look into their faces let that respect be what we see, and may we reflect it back to them.