



## THE BLUE FAMILY TREE

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### My Cup Runneth Over

“My cup runneth over.” A phrase typically associated with love. “I am so in love with you that it cannot be contained. My cup, runneth over.”

When I was 21, I became a cop. 21 years later, I have spent exactly half my life as a cop, and my cup runneth over. Not with loving feelings for a child, or a spouse, but with grief. The grief of humanity. In the beginning I was strong. I said it didn't bother me because, it really didn't bother me. I remember my first dead body. I even remember his name. I have had hundreds since, and I don't remember them all, but I remember him, and I remember a handful of others along the way. The first deceased in certain methods: first homicide, first suicide, first child. The list could go on and on, and I'm not lying to myself when I say it didn't bother me then.

Why does it bother me now? Because my cup runneth over. I'm still well adjusted. I don't have nightmares. I'm not drinking myself to death. I can still function effectively at work. The signs we are told to look for are not there...or are they? Maybe they are less obvious. -Confession time- I cry at the simplest of things on TV. When watching a cop drama, the characters get to me.... fast. I see where the scene is going and I know what the characters are feeling and I can't contain it. It's sympathy. It's empathy. It's pain. It's real to me. I feel it because I've seen it. I understand it. It's not make-believe anymore.

When we started our careers it was surreal...but now it's just real and if it doesn't make you sad to see the pain of fellow humans, then you are better prepared than I. I would guess that the stress and depression and pain that we are exposed to daily, builds up in many more than just myself over 20 years. We become a backstop for the anguish of others, with no relief of our own.

There must be a cultural change in our profession. We absolutely must mandate mental healthcare for police. It's not about being mentally

unstable. It's about maintaining stable mental health. If you go to the gym, do you wait until you're fat? When you sit down for dinner, do you wait until you're malnourished? When you go the doctor, do you wait until you're dying?

Like anything else important in your life, we've got to maintain our mental and emotional health, and we need to acknowledge that we absorb an incredible amount more abuse, mentally and emotionally, than the average person. We all pass a battery of mental testing to become police officers. For this reason we know unequivocally that we were emotionally sound and mentally prepared for this job when we began. But we injure our brains with every call. Consider it death by a thousand paper cuts.

I'm not destroyed, but I am damaged. I drive around the town I police in, and every block has a story to tell. Sights, sounds, smells, from calls two decades ago are still as clear as the day I responded. Alone, they do not bother me, but after years of exposure, I feel the grief of those I have helped, those who I couldn't help, and all the people affected by circumstance along the way. To all those who have died on my streets and on my watch, I'm experiencing the world they will never see. I'm enjoying the things they will never know...and it's not just death. The saves creep in too. I feel proud of them. I know I have saved lives and that makes me proud of my job, but they can bring me to tears faster than the deaths.

It's a tough job. Certainly not everyone is cut out for it. If you are not 20 years in, I have advice for you, so listen close. Listen to the words of those salty dogs around you. You are injuring your brain. You don't know it, but you are. Insist on the proper care now and make less work for yourself later. Even though you do not see it, I promise you, you need to take care of your mental and emotional health. Don't ever turn it down if your agency offers it. The collective years of experience at your command level that are suggesting it to you, know exactly what they are talking about, and you'll need it.

You may have heard various reports in the last several years stating we lose more officers to suicide every year than we lose in the line of duty. This is a frightening and eye-opening statistic, created to bring light to a much-needed topic. However; some of these statistics can also be a bit misleading. In 2018 we lost a startling 159 to suicide, but LODD came in at 163. 2017 LODD beats suicide by 6, 2016 by 33, and 2015 by 63.

Many of the misleading reports headline with “suicide, more deadly than line of duty” but when you delve in, you find they’ve only accounted for LODD by gunfire. This is how you see suicide claiming more lives: In 2018 suicide took 107 more lives than LODD gunfire, 2017 114, 2016 76, and 2015 61. I don’t believe we need the shock factor of bent stats. We’re cops. We see the world for what it is, and we know when we’re being manipulated. The truth is we should be very alarmed at the real statistics. There is no need to inflate them to get our attention. These numbers are staggering by themselves so there is absolutely no need to compete with each other for the leading cause of death within the law enforcement profession. It’s not as if the leading cause is the only cause important to focus on. We need to focus on all causes. The number of officers killed each year in drownings is relatively low, but it still should require our attention when we are faced with circumstances that merit it. Daily we are faced with circumstances that merit us actively monitoring our own mental health and that of our partners. The number of officers we lost last year or the year before, should have no bearing on our concern for our colleagues today.

Please do not ignore the trauma you are exposed to. It may not bother you today or tomorrow or next year, but one day, your cup will runneth over. You will cry watching sitcoms. Your spouse will wonder when you became such a sissy, and you will have to explain that even though it wasn’t in your own life, you have seen the devastation that Hollywood just glamorized for entertainment.

So how do we protect our brains and allow them to heal? Obviously, there are many remedies we can use. Just like the above analogy, we do not go to the doctor for paper cuts. We know how to treat those ourselves. So here are some recommended options.

Perhaps the biggest mistake I hear new officers make is excluding their spouse. They married you for you, not for half of you. You can’t separate home and work. Aside from your own mental health, this can lead to much greater problems like a broken home as well as long-term negative impacts on your children, who are learning how to deal with the stuff in their life by your example. You wouldn’t tell them to shut out those closest to them and bottle their feelings and experiences, so why would you show them to do that? Your spouse should be the safest place in the world for you to talk. If you think talking to a co-worker about work stress is safer, I

suggest you talk to those salty dogs again...I'm sure they have plenty of stories about co-workers practicing the culinary arts in the backs of others. Unloading daily through verbal expression is imperative. Unload anything that was exciting, because today it doesn't bother you, but if it brought a level of excitement to you, it likely won't go away with time, but will only gain momentum in your heart. Your spouse wants to be included. They think your job is pretty cool. It makes them feel special to be a part of it. Sharing with them is only positive in every aspect and shutting them out, only negative.

This is a drum that has been beat before but will continue to be because it is that important. Consider it the rhythm that keeps the song intact. GO TO THE GYM. Ignoring all the obvious positive benefits of the gym with regards to a healthy lifestyle and officer survival in general, going to the gym also allows you to physically burn off the hormones produced by stress and emotion. Seeing dead, and dying people, and then intervening in a barking dog dispute before speeding to a mangled motorcycle accident and then arresting a kingpin who tells you all the way to jail that he will find and rape your children, tends to cause a variety of stress and emotional responses. Those responses are physiological in nature and have a major additive effect on the body over time. Much like smoking cigarettes, one at a party may not do permanent damage, but if you smoke 2 packs a day, 20 years later the damage is irreversible. We cannot avoid the exposure...go to the gym and cleanse it from your body.

There are many more methods used daily to maintain stable mental health that don't require you making appointments with a PhD. The last one I would like to touch on is faith. God knows he has dumped the hurt of the world on your shoulders. If you picked this job, you will resign in a few years. Those of us that stay, we're picked by God before we were ever conceived. We were meant to do this, and we were given the tools to handle it. God will take the anguish from you if you give it to him. He has provided the spouse and the gym, and the healthy foods and recreation to you as ways to do so. He has made you physically, mentally, and emotionally strong, but you need to consciously have that relationship with Him to see the answers you need in order to maintain it. Keep faith in God, in humanity, in your co-workers, and in yourself. Without faith, the rest is worthless.