Wellness and Spirituality
Beyond Survival Practices for Wounded Warriors
By SAMUEL L. FEEMSTER, M.Div., J.D.

"Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart." 

— William Butler Yeats

Policing can become lethal and toxic for unprepared law enforcement officers dedicated to protecting and serving their communities. Empirical data have suggested that exposure to crime can harm the brain, as well as relationships that matter most to officers. Thus, to combat the diabolical schemes and toxic complexities of criminal evil (e.g., violence, terrorism, and gangs) during the 21st century, officers must constantly revitalize and safeguard their inner spirituality. In law enforcement, spirituality is about proactively nurturing the souls and performance of all officers. Along with the best wellness practices that support physical abilities, spirituality focuses on the inward forces that sustain the external instruction officers receive at police academies, during on-the-job probationary periods, and while attending in-service courses throughout their vocational lives. In the same vein,
recent studies have indicated that tactical and legal training are not sufficient for preparing law enforcement officers when their spirituality is neglected or wounded.2

Yet, when some officers hear the term spirituality, they unfortunately dismiss it in superficial ways. Spirituality in policing is not about adopting religious dogmas or creeds unless officers choose to embrace these worldviews. Moreover, glib or authoritarian approaches to religious indoctrination can actually kill or suppress authentic spirituality.

These concerns emerged as leaders from the law enforcement, academic, and faith communities throughout the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom met for the first annual Beyond Survival: Wellness Practices for Wounded Warriors conference in June 2008. Representatives came from California, Texas, New Mexico, New York, Minnesota, and other jurisdictions. Members from the U.S. military, the Army National Guard, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police also participated. Sponsored by the Behavioral Science Unit at the FBI Academy, the conference brought these individuals together to analyze how spirituality enhances law enforcement practice. Participants delivered more than 27 detailed presentations about the impact of spirituality in law enforcement. The culmination of the conference occurred as attendees tackled a set of pertinent questions.

- Are spirituality and religion the same?
- Where is the intersection between the police and the faith community?
- What is a wellness curriculum for policing, as well as for the faith community?
- What other issues and questions should be addressed in seeking wellness?

CONFERENCE FINDINGS

Collectively, attendees concluded that spirituality in law enforcement constitutes a vital key to wellness practices for wounded warriors. Law enforcement officers everywhere are wounded and in need of protection from intentional, repeated, long-term exposures to evil and its toxins. Although armed and vigilant for the protection of the innocent and defenseless, as well as their fellow officers and themselves, these brave guardians sustain wounds through the persistent assault of human predators.

As an invisible weapon, spirituality does not weaken the best aspects of policing; rather, it greatly accentuates them. Spirituality matters to effective practice and performance in seven primary ways.

1) Spirituality nourishes the inner being of officers, inoculating, protecting, and refreshing them from dangerous levels of multiple stressors.

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Special Agent Feemster serves in the Behavioral Science Unit at the FBI Academy.
2) Spirituality unleashes vitality by reengaging officers in the spirit of the law.

3) Spirituality heals the deepest, most invisible trauma of wounded warriors.

4) Spirituality provides an antidote for the toxicity of evil, thereby promoting wellness beyond survival.

5) Spirituality nurtures longevity in law enforcement.

6) Spirituality enhances intuitive policing, emotional intelligence, and stress management.

7) Spirituality, according to new evidence, strengthens brain functions.

**Distinguishing Spirituality and Religion**

Recognizing that spirituality is not necessarily related to religion constitutes one of the

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**Spirituality in Law Enforcement Practice Model**

Spirituality is the human dimension that shapes law enforcement practice, performance, vitality, and longevity. This model connects spirituality with these four areas. Moving from left to right, the model posits that spirituality is the source of effectiveness for stress management, ethics, emotional intelligence, and intuitive policing. In short, it amplifies them and they, in turn, feed back into spirituality in a healthy officer. On the right side, spirituality affects the vitality, longevity, performance, and practice of law enforcement by enabling officers to recharge themselves in the spirit of the law throughout their period of vocational active duty. A nurtured spirituality improves practice, performance, vitality, and longevity, which all feed back into spirituality to improve emotional intelligence, intuition, ethics, and stress management.

supreme findings from the vast majority of conference participants. While acknowledging an officer’s constitutional right to have a specific religious affiliation if desired, conference maintained that spirituality and religion are distinct phenomena. Religion is more involved and organized institutionally, whereas spirituality incorporates the entire being by connecting the inner person with that individual’s approach to life. As human software, spirituality encompasses everyone. It involves a person’s values and ideals, emphasizing the human spirit. Moreover, spirituality can actively embrace and include the tangible pursuits of those who find it within the confines of organized religion. One group of conference attendees noted, “All religion is spiritual, but spirituality is not necessarily religious.” They asserted that some dogmatic religious people do not always understand this distinction. Hence, religion is a human attempt to control spirituality with sectarian rules, regulations, policies, and rituals.

Spirituality is linked to a full concept or interpretation of wellness. That same group of conference concluded, “We do not find any examples of someone who is emotionally unwell and spiritually, as well as physically, healthy. Conversely, there are many examples of people who are spiritually and emotionally healthy with a matching level of physical health.” They advocated a hierarchy of wellness, from the spiritual realm to the emotional and physical domains. Here, spirituality is rooted in a belief in something or someone greater than yourself that relieves stress and does away with a toxic self-centeredness. Spirituality allows officers to unburden themselves by nurturing a
deeper, collective consciousness with colleagues and trusted others. While clergy and community leaders can occupy parallel, intersecting support roles, law enforcement officers always must take the lead in nourishing their own spirituality. After all, the practice of policing is inherently spiritual by enforcing laws, maintaining order, serving others, and upholding peace.

Another group of conference participants targeted the use of force, racial profiling, prison abuse, citizen complaints, and preventative strategies for spiritual examination by law enforcement personnel. Addressing these sensitive matters with best practices clearly represents a law enforcement initiative.

**Connecting Police, Spirituality, and Faith Communities**

Spirituality is akin to a software upgrade for the invisible, internalized competencies instrumental to effective law enforcement practice. Emphasizing spirituality predisposes a cultural shift—for many officers, a paradigm change—in how law enforcement does its job. Conference attendees insisted that top law enforcement leaders must accept the concept of spirituality to reduce burnout, destructive behaviors, absenteeism, and police suicides. Here, “good cops” must press the profession well beyond the tipping point of old paradigms to new levels of integral spirituality. Sworn personnel must see that spirituality can revitalize the recruitment process, especially for the next generation of officers. Trainers can integrate spirituality into existing curricula, while clergy can nurture it in their interactions within communities. Networks in the United Kingdom and Canada can focus on management training, along
with agencies in the United States. Different levels of training are needed for police chiefs and agency heads, mid-level supervisors, and rank-and-file officers, as well as new recruits. Spirituality brings a holistic emphasis—beyond stress management or suicide prevention—to the intact paramilitary structures endemic to law enforcement regimes worldwide.

In brief, conferees agreed that officers must cultivate their own spirituality, individually and collectively. Law enforcement agencies must nourish spirituality via training, curriculum, policies, and recruitment. Clergy and community leaders must ask officers how they can help. Residents must support these efforts. Governmental leaders must recognize that nurturing spirituality among law enforcement officers is in the nation’s best interest. Media should aid citizens in understanding the role and complications of law enforcement. Of course, educators, especially in the aftermath of such tragedies as Columbine and Virginia Tech, often support the efforts of peace officers on schools and campuses.5

Developing a Wellness Curriculum

In policing, vision nurtures spirituality. Consequently, leaders must foster the core beliefs and values of the law enforcement community via clearly stated agency principles. Members must buy into a revitalized spirituality in the profession. Conference participants wanted a curriculum at the level of the FBI’s National Academy4 with effective safeguards or incentives that guaranteed balance in the training and practice of spirituality.

Spirituality is akin to a software upgrade for the invisible, internalized competencies instrumental to effective law enforcement practice. For example, they did not favor any departmental policy that placed too much emphasis on Christian spirituality to the detriment of other expressions. On the other hand, no one wanted a Pandora’s box of confused, divisive spirituality within the profession. Agencies must give organizational space to spirituality without projecting an atmosphere of hostility or indifference. Meanwhile, those who embrace their spirituality in the workplace never must allow it to become associated with mediocrity in any aspect of law enforcement practice. The ultimate intention of spirituality is to ensure wellness for wounded warriors. Spirituality is not advocating religion or faith-based interventions. It aims to reduce turnover, improve the quality of service delivery, encourage healthier organizations, and curtail internal hazards to vitality and longevity.

Conferees remained adamant about identifying healthy versus dysfunctional models of spirituality. They wanted videos of officers sharing their genuine spiritual experiences. They felt strongly that stories matter because they can bring wellness to officers and their communities. Such personal accounts make officers feel positive about serving others by highlighting their moral authority within their jurisdictions. Given these antecedents, conference participants suggested some subjects for inclusion in a curriculum focused on spirituality in law enforcement.

- Violence and Its Effects Upon Police Officers
- Looking Forward from Within (exploring the meaning of spirituality)
- Police Training for the Whole Person: Body, Mind, Soul, and Spirit
- Policing with the Whole Officer (respecting communities)
Table 1. SOP Themes Under Development

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<th>Themes</th>
<th>Curriculum Implications and Practices</th>
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<td>For Law Enforcement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spiritually Optimized Practices</td>
<td>Develop enabling mission and vision statements that promote best practices</td>
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<td>Standard Operating Procedures</td>
<td>Embody the transformative spirit of the law through tangible action steps</td>
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<td>Souls on Patrol</td>
<td>Equip officers with invisible weapons to combat toxic exposure to evil</td>
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<td>Save Our Police</td>
<td>Address and reduce maladaptive behaviors with community collaboration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Serving Our People</td>
<td>Nurture vitality through positive networks</td>
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<td>Spirituality-Oriented Policing</td>
<td>Practice Robert Peal’s Principles with critical spirituality</td>
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- Navigating with Your Own Moral Compass
- Policing and Your Brain: Scientific Findings
- 21st Century Paradigm Shifts in Policing
- Is There Spirituality in Criminology? How to Get There
- Bibliography on Spirituality in Law Enforcement (with associated readings)
- Spirituality in Policing or Spirituality-Oriented Policing

- Cut the BS: Bureaucracy, Leadership, and the Anaclitic-Depression Blues
  In addition, one group of conference attendees identified funding, bias, organizational resistance, and personality conflicts as salient points. Of course, these and other issues must be scrutinized thoroughly. Perhaps, other focus groups would be utilized to set priorities for law enforcement. Clergy would adapt themselves in concert with these matters.
  Spirituality represents a paradigm shift in health perspectives for peace warriors. Incorporating spirituality in law enforcement and community venues will not be a perfunctory task for leaders and citizens during the 21st century. It must be an intentional effort as depicted by the matrix identified in table 1. Conferences immediately noted the law enforcement profession’s preoccupation with the acronym SOP and the role spirituality plays. They agreed that it contributes to Spiritually Optimized Practices. It affects Standard Operating Procedures. It nurtures the Souls on Patrol.
It Saves Our Police. It Serves Our People. It sanctions Spirituality-Oriented Policing. Table 1 sets forth these six SOP themes currently under development as they relate to curriculum implications and practices for law enforcement, clergy, and communities.

Planning for the Future

Conferees wondered about how spirituality might be institutionalized throughout law enforcement. They recommended a succession plan for the current facilitators and the development of mentors for the next generation of officers. These and other items, such as community support, will be tackled in a special working group of officers, agency leaders, clergy, and others.

In addition, conference participants felt that divergent interests and social spaces must be acknowledged. New, creative intersections must be forthcoming between police chaplains, clergy, community leaders, and officers that will move well beyond current ad hoc groups. As the attendees pointed out, law enforcement officers, like the citizens they protect and serve, often are members of faith communities. Clergy must meet their needs, acknowledging cultural competencies. Officers must inform pastors and other religious leaders about the job of policing. They must educate seminaries about how clergy might nurture the spirit of first responders via sermons, classes, lay involvement, and church policies. They must articulate distinctions between spirituality and religion. Clergy can host community forums and hold special services in honor or appreciation of law enforcement, thereby actively demonstrating that spirituality and officer wellness are connected inextricably.

Conference participants wanted a curriculum...that guaranteed balance in the training and practice of spirituality.

CONCLUSION

During a week in June 2008, leaders from the law enforcement, academic, and faith communities discussed the compelling issues surrounding wellness practices for wounded warriors. All agreed that merely surviving the rigors of the law enforcement profession no longer can be the goal of those called to this duty. Sworn personnel must acknowledge that the act of protecting and serving their communities is endemically spiritual. It involves a sacred trust between the guardians and those they shield from danger. Upholding the law and maintaining order require great effort and sacrifice from those charged with these tasks. But, who protects the protectors?

Conference participants have embraced an agenda. To facilitate this effort, future initiatives entail developing a working group that will devise curriculum, define or clarify key concepts, assemble requisite bibliographies, coordinate relevant research, and market or disseminate findings to appropriate audiences. The work has begun and will continue because it is crucial to the well-being of all first responders and to the future of this nation. “Come and stand beside us, we can find a better way.”

Endnotes

4. 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.