



Thoughts on Father's Day for Cops

Capt. Brian Nanavaty (Ret.)

June, 2024

As we observe Father's Day, I want to reflect on the importance of quality parenting, with a focus on our law enforcement fathers. I started my police career in 1984 in Indianapolis, and had the honor of working alongside five generations of officers: the greatest generation, baby boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z. As founder of the Development and Wellness program at Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department, I was able to interact with fathers from each generation, learn of their family experiences, and understand how important their own fathers and other male role models were to their overall happiness and development.

While we tend to think each generation had a distinct family and parenting experience unique to each era, I discovered that being a "good" father usually boils down to a few simple choices men make based on learned observation. To become a good father, modeling is paramount, and it is helpful to see both good fathers and not-so-good fathers in action to understand the extremes and settle on the best traits. From my childhood to my time with the department, I saw fathers who had no relationship with their children, fathers who doted on their kids, and fathers who were somewhere in the middle. All parenting experience is helpful to observe, as we adopt the best behaviors, discard other behaviors, and evolve into the father we will become based on those traits.

Through working with officers, I found that observation of random fathers or male role models throughout the officers' lives was an equal or sometimes greater influence on father behavior

than the officers' relationships, or lack of, with their own fathers. I noticed some officers who experienced not-so-good parenting became not-so-good parents, while others learned from their poor experience, vowed not to make the same mistakes, and became great parents. I saw divorced fathers who were "better" fathers than fathers who lived in an unbroken home and saw their kids every day, while some divorced or separated Dads wanted no relationship with their kids.

If observing parenting traits is as influential as actual experience, what are the traits fathers should model? **What separated good fathers from the not-so-good fathers usually came down to the fathers' characters and their practice of *selfless* versus *selfish* behavior. I found that good fathers usually put family needs before their own.** They invested in their families and in their children's futures. They displayed respect for their spouses or partners. They understood the need to be present and supportive, but also the need to balance that support with accountability and with the goal of raising good citizens in a loving environment.

Good fathers understand that children tend to be emotional and will act like kids, not little adults. Good fathers set their own emotions aside and act rationally. They practice patience and don't fly off the handle. Good fathers listen, ask uncomfortable but important questions, and don't preach. They understand children are sponges and will model what they see— so good fathers try and set good examples. **Good fathers understand they need to be part of their children's lives. They accomplish this by managing their schedules and by being home, and *more importantly*, being engaged when home.** Good fathers plan, but understand those plans sometimes change, remembering the famous John Lennon lyric, "life happens when you are making other plans." **Sometimes plans don't work out—even with the best of intentions—so good fathers remain calm and flexible.**

Sadly, many of the officers who poured themselves into police work in an unhealthy and over-invested way failed to recognize their limitations and show flexibility in their work. This same problem can render the same officers well short of the kind of parents they want to be at home. No amount of planning, preparation, or effort will guarantee that things won't go sideways in the professional or personal life of a cop. The real question is: how do you respond to the uncertainty and unexpected developments? Do you muster up resolve and flexibility and perspective, or do you become emotional and inevitably make things worse?

I coached little league when my kids were young and had an officer's kid on my team. The officer would rarely show up to his son's games and when he did, he was in uniform and working. I noticed that he worked a lot. As we talked, he told me his story. He and his wife started dating in high school and married soon after. Their ideas about parenting were similar and their plan was to have a large family (both were from large families.) Their goal was for Mom to stay home and raise the kids while the officer worked as much as he could, so they could afford to keep Mom home. The officer worked hard, had a solid reputation and got assigned to a special task force where he could work unlimited OT.

All that OT afforded them a big house in a nice neighborhood with a large backyard, two SUVs in the driveway, and a week at the beach each summer. Within a decade of starting their lives together, they were divorced, and Mom and the kids moved in with her parents. The verdict: Irrespective of their "plans," Dad needed to balance time at work with time at home.

I had another officer who complained about his 18-year-old daughter wanting to go to college, and how he refused to help because when he was her age his parents told him he was an adult and they kicked him out of the house. He joined the military and was proud of how he made his own way and wanted his daughter to experience similar maturation and growth. When I spoke to his daughter, she told me she loved her dad, but they didn't really have any type of relationship. She confided that she thought he loved his motorcycles more than his kids. The officer acknowledged he had no real relationship with his parents, and he was never comfortable parenting his daughter, and as time went on, the gap between them just grew bigger and harder to navigate. He admitted his motorcycles were an excuse and an escape. He confided that he wished they had a better relationship.

I arranged for them to meet with me as an intermediary. At this meeting, the officer's daughter provided a reasonable plan for continuing her education in a much sought-after degree program at a local university, tuition to be supplemented by a partial scholarship which would renew based on her grades. I did not take a side but made a few "gentle" suggestions. I got the officer to sit quietly while his daughter explained what her contribution would be and what she hoped her father might be able to contribute. He talked about his relationship with his parents and how that influenced his relationship with his daughter. He eventually agreed to help, and we set up a state 529 college savings plan (which offered a generous 20% state tax credit) which would cover his contribution. He even sold one of his motorcycles to help his daughter buy a used car for school. Their relationship improved tremendously from that point forward, and she later

graduated with honors, got a great job, and Dad felt a part of her success story. The verdict: Dad was home but needed to be more engaged at home.

Diogenes (400 BC) was a Greek philosopher and a founder of the *Cynic* movement. He is credited with what we know today to be the saying, “**actions speak louder than words.**” Officers routinely tell me their kids are their greatest joys, or the most important things in their lives, and that they would do anything for them. What would Diogenes say about such statements? Do we really mean what we say, or do our actions belie our words?

Officers tell me their families are more important than work, yet when pushed, will admit they spend more time at work, or are still focused on work—even when they are home. Many officers have a work phone and a personal phone, and if honest would admit they spend more time using their work phone. Which phone do you truly believe is more important to your life? Be honest.

If your kids are the most important thing in your life, how do you show it?

I have a slide in my training which always earns a laugh. It is a picture of a gravestone with the chiseled words “Here lies John Doe who wished he could have worked more.” It is funny because no one dies wishing they had worked more, but some officers in class later admit they fear that they do work too much. When I started my career in the 1980s (before the Fair Labor Standards Act and overtime at time and a half) we would have done anything to work OT and earn more money. And now, with many agencies being short-handed, the opposite is the case, with some agencies now requiring mandatory OT. This makes achieving the work-life balance more challenging. How are you managing your schedule? Are you someone who works too much OT? Do you defend working off-duty and extra-duty by claiming you are doing it for your family? If you find you are only going home to change uniforms, your work-life balance needs maintenance.

When he returned from the moon Apollo 11, Astronaut Buzz Aldrin wrote about his experience. In the book “Return to Earth”, Aldrin discussed being an absentee father during the space race of the 1960’s (during which the goal was to put an American on the moon before the end of the decade.) Aldrin wrote about working long hours, multiple weeks at a time at Cape Canaveral, and flying home to Houston for short visits with his wife and kids. He spoke about trying to condense a month’s worth of parenting into a few short days or hours— never successfully, and then flying back to the cape feeling a terrible failure as a father.

Like Aldrin, in my own career, there were periods of my kids' youth I feel I missed— and I rarely left my city, much less the planet. Each Christmas, we gather as a family and watch holiday videos of our kids when they were little. As a rule, I have always had a great memory for events, but as I watch my kids as toddlers, there are long stretches of video I don't remember— even though I know I was usually the person with the camera filming! Was I home? Was I engaged? Or was I thinking about work or some other distraction? Was I Buzz Aldrin zipping home for short, unsatisfying visits with my kids before returning to work?

I share my own experiences to reiterate that parenting is hard, even with the best foundation. I had a good father and I observed good fathers during my lifetime, and I knew I wanted to be a good father who utilized good parenting traits, and yet being a good father and maintaining a solid work-life balance was still a challenge. There were many occasions in my career where I was climbing the department ladder and was preoccupied with work, thinking what I was engaged in at work was a top priority. I can honestly say I did a lot of important work during my career, but I know now that work was never more important than my family and my commitment to being a father.

Being a father isn't easy and being a good father is even more of a challenge. Life is full of surprises and kids have great and immediate needs, which can be challenging and frustrating. Being a father requires patience and understanding, and above all, flexibility. There is no script that one can follow that guarantees a successful ending. There will be curveballs thrown at you and you will strike out occasionally. In the end you must decide what is most important and work towards that endeavor.

So how do we become fathers who are engaged and invested? It starts with modeling— observing how fathers behave at home and at work and adopting the behaviors we see that are effective. It continues by exhibiting selfless versus selfish behaviors and understanding that kids are kids and not small adults. We must understand work is work, and it is necessary to maintain a work-life balance and be present and invested when home. It helps to remind yourself that even the best plans go awry, and it is ok to make mistakes occasionally—but learn from those mistakes and don't repeat them.

Being a father is one of the hardest jobs a man could experience, but it is also one that will provide the greatest joys and rewards. Nothing that comes from hard work is ever wasted. Most fathers have the best of intentions, but intentions are merely pipe dreams if they are not

nurtured and acted upon. **Being a good cop and a good father are *not* incompatible. As we approach this Father's Day and celebrate being fathers, let us ask ourselves a very simple question as we wake each day: "What could I do today to be a better father?" And as we finish each day, ask ourselves "Did I do everything I could today to be a good father?"**

Enjoy your Father's Day, be proud of what you have accomplished, and don't ever stop striving to do better. Happy Father's Day!

About the Author

Capt. Brian Nanavaty (Ret.)

In 2010, Captain Brian Nanavaty created the groundbreaking Indianapolis Metro Police Department (IMPD) Office of Professional Development and Wellness (OPDW) which initiated a culture of health at IMPD and resulted in a reduction of officer disciplinary referrals by 40%. The IMPD program and Nanavaty were credited with inspiring the US *Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act of 2017*.

Upon retirement in 2017, Nanavaty continued to instruct employees, executives, union officials, insurance providers and clinicians in personal and career survival for the Department of Justice, the Valor for Blue and SAFLEO programs, the FBI, and the Dolan Consulting Group. He has presented at all major conferences including IACP, ILEETA, IADLEST, NOBLE, FOP and EAPA, and was a headline presenter at the 2017 *National Crime Summit*. He has been featured on *YouTube*, *Police One*, and in *Law and Order* magazine and the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*. He was additionally a police wellness consultant for the television show *Law and Order SVU* in 2019.

Nanavaty previously served on the FBINA Wellness Committee and the Fraternal Order of Police Safety and Wellness Committee where he designed a training portal for members and helped create an alcohol and mental health treatment and recovery network for first responders and families. Nanavaty additionally was

a member of the Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) working group for the IACP Policy Center, and the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) SME on police wellness issues.

In 2015, Nanavaty received the inaugural *Destination Zero Valor Award* from the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund and in 2016, in addition to appearing in front of the US Congress on issues of officer wellness, he was a finalist for the prestigious International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) *Officer of the Year* award. In 2016, the White House sent US Attorney General Loretta Lynch to meet with Nanavaty as part of the *President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing* where Lynch stated, “*Captain Nanavaty's officer and agency wellness program in Indianapolis should be the model for law enforcement across the US.*”

In 2016, Nanavaty and IMPD were awarded the BJA/COPS Microgrant for Officer Safety and Wellness and were part of the BJA/COPS Officer Safety and Wellness Group. In October 2016 IMPD was chronicled in the BJA/COPS *Improving Law Enforcement Resilience* publication. In 2019, Nanavaty's work at IMPD was part of the 11 successful agency case studies summarized in the DOJ's *Report to Congress* and in the NYPD Commissioner's *Officer Wellness Review*.

Captain Nanavaty attended Franklin College (IN), Drew University (NJ), and the University of Virginia. He is a graduate of the 255th Session of the FBI National Academy Quantico VA. From 1994-2003 he was Adjunct Professor of Criminal Justice at Indiana and Purdue Universities.

His training courses include [*Officer and Agency Wellness—Hiring and Retiring Healthy®*](#), [*Navigating the Officer Involved Shooting and Critical Incidents*](#), and [*Peer Support and Mentoring in Law Enforcement: Enhancing Health, Performance, and Accountability*](#).