

A police officer's view from street level

“At any given moment, I may need to be a psychologist, centurion, street lawyer, or soothsayer.”

[David Heim](#) interviews Adam Plantinga in the [March 15, 2017](#) issue



Photo courtesy of Adam Plantinga

Adam Plantinga has been a field training officer for the Milwaukee police department and is currently a sergeant for the San Francisco police. He went to Marquette University, where he studied literature and criminal justice. He is the author of 400 Things Cops Know: Street-Smart Lessons from a Veteran Patrolman.

You write in your book that being a cop “hammers the compassion out of you.” How does that happen?

There's a 90-10 rule in law enforcement: 90 percent of people are decent, 10 percent aren't, and as a cop you deal with that 10 percent about 90 percent of the

time.

This means you often encounter people at their hopeless worst in toxic social conditions. You see victims of violent crime who are criminals themselves (gang members, drug dealers) and who are, to a certain degree, culpable in their own fate. You become accustomed to battered spouses returning time and time again to their abusers, and addicts ending up in the ER time and time again for overdoses. You also deal with big systems—mental health, county jails, the courts, your own police department—that don't always seem to work the way they should.

All of this has a tendency to make you skeptical and disillusioned—to distort your worldview. It's part of what's known as compassion fatigue, the main symptom being a vague sense of loathing for human frailty. Compassion fatigue isn't unique to law enforcement—it affects everyone from social workers to nurses. It's like a virus. In its most damning strain, goodness starts to look something like weakness.

Is there a defense against that? How can you keep that experience from shaping how you live as a citizen, husband, or father?

You need to recognize it and recalibrate yourself. If you have a good partner, he or she will check you when it's called for. The police must try to make the wrong things a little more right. We need to be telling legitimate crime victims things like "I'm sorry this happened to you" or "You seem like a strong person. You're going to get through this." That's what basic humanity requires.

That being said, some clinical detachment is understandable and even necessary in police work. You aren't doing anyone any favors by becoming emotionally invested in a case. If you get caught up in it, you'll miss things. Your job requires you to be an objective fact finder. But there's a way to do that without being robotic and dismissive.

On my end, I try to eat well and exercise. I spend time among wise and good-hearted people, like Episcopalians. I steer clear of alcohol and listen to a fair amount of NPR. You need to tether yourself to something healthy and true. I did that by marrying well. I have two young daughters who, when I'm not fishing their Cheerios out of heating vents, amuse and delight me. It has made all the difference. It helps me recharge for the next day.

Why do you think people go into policing? Why did you?

Some are continuing a family tradition of policing, or they believe in right and wrong and providing service to the community that they may have grown up in. With the downturn in the economy in 2008, I saw a lot of new hires who simply wanted a trade that came with a pension and a low chance of being laid off. Some of them are doing just fine. Some are floundering. Police work isn't for everyone.

I came from a home that emphasized service. My father is a pastor and former president of Calvin Theological Seminary. My mother was a fourth-grade teacher in a Christian school. I was on the hunt for a real job—I wanted to kick down a door or two, protect folks who needed protecting, and go after violent felons. As an English major, I was also looking to do work where there would be some good stories. I believe I have found that.

The nation has been focused in recent months on incidents of police misconduct, especially cases of white officers charged with abusing the rights of African Americans. How do you view that wave of reports and the public discussion of them?

It's all fair game. What the police must strive for is equality under the law. If that isn't happening, attention must be paid. But in some people's minds, every time a white police officer has a negative encounter with a black suspect, racism is clearly afoot. To be sure, racism is threaded through every institution in our country, from mortgage lending to how kids are disciplined in school. Go into any courtroom in America and you'll hear about the time a black defense attorney was confused with a defendant.

It's both foolish to assume a police encounter between a white cop and a black suspect is about race and foolish to assume it isn't. Like any important issue worth exploring, it's best to have some facts or at least informed theories before rushing to judgment. Did this particular officer use a racial slur? Does he have a history of race-based complaints? Did he see both a white suspect and a black suspect commit precisely the same offense and only detain the black suspect?

I know the perception that police departments are staffed by irredeemable racists isn't some anachronistic notion that materialized out of thin air. From Bull Connor and his dogs and hoses in Birmingham to a deputy police chief in Florida named David Borst who was found to be a member of the Ku Klux Klan in 2014 to my own department's recent texting scandal, in which multiple officers referred to blacks as

monkeys and made reference to burning crosses, the tension between cops and communities of color is well documented. Police have a tendency to blunder down the block when we need to tread lightly, and a tendency to predesignate an entire neighborhood as bad.

But that doesn't justify an automatic claim of police racism without a shred of evidence. You're talking about what's in an officer's heart, and it's difficult to know such things. When accusations of police racism are well founded, those offending officers need to be aggressively rooted out in the same way you'd go after a cancer. But if a police controversy is about race only because some people arbitrarily decided to make it about race, the damage that can be done is much more than simply the Boy Who Cried Wolf syndrome. Accusations of racism are incendiary.

Are there some of these cases where it seems, from what you've read, that the police officer violated norms of justice and procedure, and other cases where you fully understand and would defend the officers?

I come to this discussion with all my own biases. My natural allegiance is to the men and women in uniform I serve with and that informs my outlook in ways that I am aware of and probably in some ways that I'm not. In terms of high-profile instances of alleged police wrongdoing, I am hesitant to point fingers.

That being said, some of these recent cases generate such a visceral reaction that they demand a response. The Walter Scott case in North Charleston, where the officer shot Scott while Scott was running away, looked to me like a straight-up assassination. The shooting of Terence Crutcher in Tulsa bears all the trappings of an officer tragically overreacting to a perceived threat.

The case of the Michael Brown killing in Ferguson was steeped in misinformation. The Justice Department rightly cleared officer Darren Wilson because the weight of the evidence showed that Brown robbed a store, punched Wilson in the face, and tried to take his service weapon. After watching the video from the Alton Sterling case in Baton Rouge, my main takeaway is that there were two officers in a fight for their lives as they grappled with a man armed with a handgun.

The key factor in all of these matters is whether the officers acted reasonably given what they knew at the time. Would another officer with similar training and experience have likely done the same thing? The "reasonable officer" litmus test is not a perfect barometer, but it's the best anyone has come up with.

How big a factor was race in these cases? Statistics show blacks are roughly four times more likely than whites to be shot by the police. That's a deeply troubling figure. Equally troubling are recent FBI crime stats, adjusted for population, that show black men are five times more likely than white men to kill police officers. (I get most of my data courtesy of Peter Moskos's thought-provoking blog *Cop in the Hood*.)

The governor of Minnesota was quick to say that if Philando Castile had been white, he wouldn't have been shot by police. I'm not sure how fair that is, but it seemed to resonate with a lot of people as true. But if Michael Brown were a large white man going after Wilson's gun after slugging him in the face, would Wilson have just brushed it off as the misguided antics of a fellow Caucasian? That doesn't strike me as plausible.

How does a traffic stop of an unarmed man end in a shooting?

For reasons ranging from the officer defending his life to criminal negligence. It's worth pointing out that just because a suspect is unarmed doesn't mean he isn't a deadly threat. Maybe he's looking to arm himself with your gun or use your own baton to crack open your skull. Or run you over with the car itself. The best cops are ready for those possibilities. They operate in a constant state of suspicious readiness. You are trained in the academy that you don't give the suspect a head start. It isn't a gentleman's game out there. If you hesitate, you are already dead or well on your way there.

But then you have cops making fatal miscalculations. At night, under stress, and when things move fast the way they do on the street, a wallet can look a lot like a gun. Language barriers arise; you're telling a sweaty, fidgety driver to show his hands and instead he digs in his pocket. He knows he's just searching for his license, but you don't know that because you cannot read minds—in fact, you fear he's going for a weapon because you patrol an area teeming with felons who will kill to avoid going back to jail.

Then there are the cases, and I believe they are rare, where a life is lost because officers didn't know how to properly use the equipment on their duty belt or they panicked or they simply made an awful decision that they can never take back. There may not have been malice involved but the damage is done. Those officers' cases should be decided in criminal court where they are entitled to the same due

process as anyone else.

What do you think is the biggest misunderstanding people have about a police officer's job?

"Without the public believing in you, you might as well fold up shop."

There's a perception that cops are one-dimensional, trigger-happy bullies who took the job because they didn't want to go to school past the 12th grade. Not so. Law enforcement is a volatile, highly challenging field. You have to draw on skills you have and some you're still working on. At any given moment, you need to be a psychologist, centurion, street lawyer, pilot, coach, marksman, and soothsayer. You have to hit like Hagler and tend to wounds like Florence Nightingale and be crafty like LBJ.

Those who claim there's an epidemic of police shootings would be wise to look at the actual statistics. For instance, after a five-year study of officer-involved shootings culminating in 2010, San Francisco found that about one in 10,000 arrests in the city resulted in a police-related shooting. It's important to note that we're talking actual arrests here, when police are trying to take someone's liberty away, which always brings with it the prospect of violence. And ask any street cop and she'll tell you about a host of times she could have justifiably used deadly force but elected not to.

That's why cops bristle when they see a protester screaming that the cops are indiscriminately murdering people as he holds up a sign that says "It Could Be My Son Next." Good sir, if your son comes at the police with a knife or a gun, then yes, God help him, he could be next. Otherwise, your son has about as much chance of being murdered by the police as he has of dying while canoeing.

Anytime an officer fires his weapon, it should be subject to intense scrutiny. The police are to uphold the sanctity of life whenever possible and must justify every bullet we fire. But don't overstate the problem.

One response to issues of police misconduct is to set up independent review boards, so that charges against an officer can be weighed by those outside the police department. How does that sound to you?

I have mixed feelings. I know the community has fair doubts about whether the police can appropriately monitor themselves. But I have had personal experience

with civilian review boards that simply don't understand police procedure or criminal law and have made wrongheaded decisions as a result.

San Francisco uses a hybrid approach. A civilian body handles certain cases, but for weightier matters, the police chief takes an active role in disposition and discipline. That seems reasonable to me.

Another response to concerns over policing is to emphasize the need for police to gain the trust of the local community. What do you think of that demand?

It's an eminently reasonable demand. Trust is everything. That's why high-profile instances of police wrongdoing or corruption are so damaging. Without the public believing in you, without citizen cooperation, you might as well fold up shop because you aren't going to get anywhere. Why would a citizen want to be a witness and testify in court? Or tell you which way a suspect just fled?

You build trust in a lot of ways. It starts by getting out of your patrol car and talking with people. The neighborhood's contact with you must be more than simply knowing you as the arresting officer. You've got to explain to folks why you're doing what you're doing. It doesn't always work, but it's still a worthy endeavor.

A prevailing police weakness is the habit of brushing off people's questions, as well as an inability to seriously consider a point of view other than our own. The public might be wrong on some issues, or have unrealistic expectations of the department. But we have to listen to them.

"Just because a suspect is unarmed doesn't mean he isn't a deadly threat."

One wrinkle in the trust-building project is that it's a bit of a one-way street. The police want the public to trust them but are slow to respond in kind because the experienced officer is hesitant to trust anyone other than a fellow officer. As a police officer, people lie to you a lot, so you're constantly navigating slippery terrain. Your guard is up at all times. In the academy, you're taught to be wary of even shaking hands with the public because if your hand is occupied, you're compromised—someone could pull you off balance and go for your gun. It's a hazard of the profession. So you bump fists or give the public a curt nod.

I find myself straying from the no-handshake policy on occasion, especially with crime victims, witnesses, and even some suspects. At times it strikes me as wrong not to shake hands. At times a handshake is exactly what is called for. And I figure the high commercial value of the public seeing a cop shake hands with a citizen is also worth considering. That being said, every so often I move in to clasp hands and think, “Well, this could be a mistake.”

It’s hard to talk about violence in a city like Chicago without talking about guns. As a police officer, what’s your view on gun control?

People have the right to defend themselves. They can’t always count on the police to do so. I also believe the old saw that no matter how strict you make gun laws, determined criminals will still get their hands on guns.

But that doesn’t mean we should just throw our hands up in despair. I’m all in favor of legislation that makes the act of unlawfully killing another human being with a firearm as cumbersome as possible. I’m intrigued by smart gun technology that senses fingerprints, and I would support laws on the books that restrict the magazine capacity on assault rifles to just a few rounds—the way duck hunters in some states are allowed only three shot clips. On the seesaw between individual gun rights and public safety, I tilt toward the latter.

One of the very best forms of gun control is aggressive police work, including stop-and-frisks in crime-ravaged neighborhoods. If a felon thinks there’s a strong likelihood that an officer is going to pat him down when he’s slinging dope on the corner, he’s going to think twice about keeping that .45 in his waistband.

What’s the most satisfying part of police work? What keeps you in this work?

It’s a righteous job, if done right. As a cop, you’re right in the middle of the national conversation about justice and race relations, immigration and poverty. You’re part of a legitimate effort to make your community safer. Predators are locked away in state prison because you put them there through your muscle and wits and sometimes literally your own blood. There’s meaning in that.

When I get home after a hard-fought day, a cold drink tastes all the better because I feel I’ve earned it. “It’s a tough job,” a partner of mine liked to say. “But that’s OK. You wouldn’t want something that was easy.”

I also relish my coworkers. They are some of the toughest, funniest, smartest folks I've ever had the pleasure to know. They've taught me a lot. I salute them and everyone else who holds the line.

A version of this article appears in the March 15 print edition under the title "A cop's view from the street."