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Volume 2 2021

Article 4

2021

Lessons from the Central Tower

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Recommended Citation

Lee, Grace (2021) "Lessons from the Central Tower," *Best Text Collection*: Vol. 2, Article 4.
Available at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/best_text/vol2/iss1/4

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ENGLWRIT 112

2 November 2021

Lessons From the Central Tower

Larry E. Chapps, assistant chief of the Missouri City Police Department: "Although much police work does not specifically address illegal acts, crime can cause major problems in communities and create social unrest. Law enforcement personnel need to remain aware of chances to discover such issues and act accordingly."

When I was born, my father drew an X on both my feet with a marker before the nurse carried me to the nursery. He did that for each of my three older sisters too. Always expecting chaos and skeptical of hospitals, my father acted accordingly. From my earliest breaths my father's learned instincts from his work as a police officer, such as the ones described by Chief Chapps, were written out on my feet before I could even use them to walk. The first lesson my father taught me was to always prepare for the worst case.

"Additionally, officers need to remain aware of crime trends and patterns in their patrol and surrounding areas and at least partially direct their activities based in this data."

When I was seven and the Xs had long worn off, my father enrolled me in a self-defense class. It was a total of three sessions, and I hated going. Me and a dozen other seven-year-olds with paranoid parents took turns kicking mats and screaming with all the strength in our young lungs. We learned how to gouge the eyes out of a potential threat and escape their bear hug. The other kids' parents usually walked to town to get coffee or finish up errands, but my dad waited at the doorway to make sure I stayed. When I fussed on the way to lessons, he would say that I had to learn to protect myself-I was too shy, and more susceptible to danger. The second lesson my father taught me was to be defensive.

"Police applicants must know and adhere to federal and state laws."

When I was twelve, my sister got caught shoplifting at Target with her friends. My father had been dead four years by then. But his physical absence did not diminish his presence. His words were

etched in my brain. “Why would you do that?” I heard him asking over and over while slamming his palms on the kitchen counter, hard and with intent. Then, I tried to picture a version of him that comforted me, calmer, sitting on the couch in the basement, bingeing episodes of Cops. I separated myself from my sister at that moment. *I would never do that. I want to be just like dad. Dad taught me better.* I had inherited my father’s alliance to rules. The third lesson my father taught me was to be compliant with the law.

“Police officers exercise a prominent role in society and wield immense authority and power.”

My father was quite paranoid and enforcing that was two things: my mother and his job. On the rare occasion that my mother and I are driving in the car together, we often slip into a discussion of my father. The story goes that they met in college, although he never did graduate. He enrolled in the police academy after dropping out of college and became a full-time committed officer for three towns, and continued for 25 years until the day he died. At his funeral, almost every other person told me how dedicated he was, and it was true enough to inscribe on his headstone. The truth is my father was dedicated. He was a hard-working, arguably overworked, proletariat committing his life to, as Foucault would put it, “disciplining the non-disciplinary spaces” (215). To be a cop, is to believe blindly in a disciplinary system.

From my father’s example, it seemed to be that discipline was a natural component of everyday life. I was raised to respect authority figures, fully and without question. Stapled to my understanding of order, was credence to the falsity that law enforcement officers are hired to protect and serve. The panopticon structure that Foucault writes about consists of a “peripheric ring, one is totally seen without seeing” and a “central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen” (202). My father spent most of his breathing life in that tower, existing as an extension of the government, acting as a compliant facilitator of the police system we have in the United States. Foucault argues that the Panopticon, which is designed to impose self-discipline, is mirrored in almost every significant civil network, such as schools, hospitals, and police force.

Attendant to Foucault's argument is the subtle phenomenon that police officers, if trained accordingly and properly integrated into their positions, will inherit the ideals of policing, and incorporate the practices into their personal lives. The power of surveillance is then protected, integrated into everyday life, and discipline is normalized. In my case the idealization of discipline is passed onto later generations, further perpetuating the system. This is essentially how I came to believe that prison is where the bad guys go, and the good ones get the privilege of freedom. Additionally, by learning the ways of the world through my father's lens, I was convinced that freedom is a commodity available and equal to everyone, and that rights are not rights rather than a set of privileges that can remain in your grasp if compliant with the law.

"Officers also must seek out new knowledge personally and simply not expect their departments to provide all their training and education."

Foucault writes, "[Police] is an apparatus that must be coextensive with the entire social body and not only be the extreme limits that it embraces, but by the minuteness of the details it is concerned with." (213) By that logic, it is easy to understand that, when my father became a police officer, he became concerned with exercising discipline on every minute detail of life. So much so, that the lessons he taught me during my upbringing were in alliance with the values of policing, or rather the principles learned from the central tower. I internalized my father's lessons of discipline and continued to practice them even after his passing. I disciplined even the smallest spaces of myself and my character, no matter how crazy it drove me. I always kept in mind how to escape a bear hug, I drew Xs on all the stuff that was mine, I never stool even a piece of gum. And my respect for authority figures turned to pure fear: I was fearful most of the time.

When I was seventeen, I enrolled in a government class and some of our course material consisted of reading cases about police officers abusing their power. We read how systems were formed and who they benefited. It led me to question the lessons my father had taught me, which had dictated my life thus far. I began to uncover the ways in which my father was influenced by systems much greater than himself. Until then I had never witnessed anything greater than my father-he was the end of all truth. Now, with an abundance of knowledge and lessons beyond my father's grasp, self-discipline

no longer holds the glamor it once did. In my view, panopticon systems promote self-discipline and only benefit the observers and pay no mind to the sanity of the surveilled.

On the day I turned nineteen I went to visit my father's grave. I was grappling with my new formed perspective of discipline. I was stuck between wanting to escape the invasiveness of self-discipline and wanting to be *just like my dad*. I wanted the X's tattooed on my feet, or I wanted to be rid of the letter altogether. I stared at his headstone which reads, "Dedicated Police Officer" for quite some time. Amid my contradiction, I glanced at the grave right beside him. It was freshly covered, new grass just beginning to sprout. On the headstone it read a perfect declaration of in-between "Be ruthless with systems, be kind with people." These words are the fourth lesson my father taught me.

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