

Policing and the Sanctity of Life



Police need to be highly trained and thoroughly multi-racial. They need, indeed, to be the ones who take the lead as we rebuild our social system based on the sanctity of life. (Photo: [flickr.com/fibonacciblue](https://www.flickr.com/photos/fibonacciblue/))

This is so much bigger than personal accountability.

Yes, the four police officers present at the [Memorial Day killing](#) of George Floyd in Minneapolis were fired the next day. The case is being investigated by the FBI. And the mayor of Minneapolis and lots of other politicians are talking about “values.”

But later that night, police [fired teargas and rubber bullets](#) into a crowd of protesters, showing us that the national divide remains deep and wide and nothing has changed. The nation is split—racially, economically, politically—into

us vs. them, and only one side (which is armed to the hilt) gets to be boss.

As long as this paradigm remains intact, occasionally chastising, or even prosecuting, a police officer for committing murder, or some other blatant act of racist overstepping, accomplishes virtually nothing. The instilling of "values" in the armed enforcers of a racist social order will result in, at most, superficial change. And the world will not be any safer.

George Floyd died on May 25 because he was deprived of his right to breathe. He—or someone—was accused of using a counterfeit bill to buy groceries. Four officers responded to the call of a "forgery in progress" and, on arriving at the scene, ordered a suspect to get out of his car. He "resisted arrest" and may have been "under the influence," a police spokesman said later, all of which resulted in one of the officers, after a scuffle, keeping Floyd flat on the ground and immobile by kneeling on his neck. This lasted for seven or eight minutes; Floyd cried out in pain, cried that he couldn't breathe, then eventually passed out. The officer continued kneeling on the neck until an ambulance arrived. Floyd was pronounced dead at the hospital.

Shortly afterward, the Minneapolis Police Department issued a statement that George Floyd had died of a "medical incident." How forgettably abstract! And that would have been that—incident forgotten, let's move on—except for the horrific ten-minute video that went public, showing a murder in progress as passers-by cried out to the officers to let the man breathe. The public outrage over the video led to official "action"—the four officers were fired—but . . . now what?

As we know, Floyd's death is only the latest hell inflicted on a community of color somewhere in this country, either by police officers or armed white vigilantes, in recent weeks and months. But of course this goes back decades, centuries—to the

arrival of Europeans on the North American continent and their determination to claim the land as theirs and start importing slaves to make it productive.

This is not history. This is the present moment: Officer Derek Chauvin kneeling with his full weight on George Floyd's neck, until the man dies. All that has changed in the last three hundred years – the progress we've made—is that today a race-based murder can get you fired.

I'm sure we're at a point where the majority of Americans recognize the terror and insanity of this, e.g.:

“Being black in America should not be a death sentence.” These are the words of Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, putting the matter about as clearly as possible. “What we saw is horrible, completely and utterly messed up.”

And the police chief, [Medaria Arradondo](#)Medaria Arradondo, put it this way in a public statement: “When Mayor Frey appointed me as chief of the Minneapolis police department, I was very steadfast and strong on what our department vision, values and culture change would be moving forward. One of those pillars is sanctity of life.”

So, as I say, now what? I assume these words are spoken sincerely, and I also understand that no one individual, no matter his or her level of power, can declare lasting and far-reaching social change on a moment's notice. All they, and we, can do is put something into motion: the creation of social order truly and honestly (unlike, say, the Declaration of Independence) based on the sanctity of life.

What could this mean?

This is social change at a level that is almost unimaginable, and certainly not limited to America's police departments. It requires an ongoing national conversation: a unity of purpose – a sense of patriotism—that is the equivalent of, and also

the opposite of, waging a world war. It's nothing short of participatory evolution.

But let me scale the matter back to the level of policing, and make note that effective, compassionate policing exists right now and simply needs to expand beyond the reach of militarism and racism, which invade policework like a virus.

Here's something that happened to me many, many years ago. One Saturday afternoon a neighbor called and said some guy was out in the alley, opening my car door. I went out to check and saw a huge, drunk guy who turned when I spoke and heaved a beer bottle at me, then stumbled toward me through my yard mumbling obscenities. My daughter, then about 5 years old, had come out to see what I was doing. I scooted her back into the house and we shut, and locked, the door. The big guy pounded on the side of our house for five minutes, then collapsed backwards into a bed of poppies. My wife called the police.

Two petite female officers arrived. They opened a popper under his nose, restored him to consciousness and escorted him through the yard to the squad car. The drunk easily had 100 pounds on each of the women. He was an incoherent, BB-eyed hulk, but they approached him with a complete absence of aversion or moral judgment.

[As I later wrote](#): "They addressed a certain basic dignity of his personhood, even though he wasn't showing it himself. They went straight to it, like experts in applied psychology, emotional jujitsu: 'Sit up, sir. That's right.' Looking on, I could see the words hit their mark; he straightened up and began pulling himself together. It was a deft, fearless display of peacekeeping."

No one was "them" in this incident. The lost soul who was causing the havoc was restored to his humanity in the process of preventing harm from occurring. Social order requires complex understanding of the human condition, far, far more

than it requires a tough-guy swagger, handcuffs and a gun. Police need to be highly trained and thoroughly multi-racial. They need, indeed, to be the ones who take the lead as we rebuild our social system based on the sanctity of life.

About the Author:

[Robert Koehler](#) is an award-winning, Chicago-based journalist and nationally syndicated writer. His new book, [Courage Grows Strong at the Wound](#) is now available. Contact him at koehlercw@gmail.com or visit his website at commonwonders.com.

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