On the First Day

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This project began with a suicide.

Among the different kinds of events that fall within the purview of the New York City Police Department’s Hostage Negotiation Team (HNT) are the high profile hostage events you see on TV, with gunmen barricaded at a bank or in a public building. Also included but often less “newsworthy” are domestic hostage situations and attempted suicides: the team considers these to be individuals taking themselves hostage.

However, the suicide problem that I was confronted with on the first day of my collaboration with Jack Cambria, the longtime head of the team, was not one that the team had to try to defuse, but one that had recently taken place within the team’s own ranks.

Lydia Martinez was a police detective held in high esteem by all of her colleagues, and was often described to me as someone who was a pure empath, who could create a personal connection with people from all walks of life on the turn of a dime. She will be described at the end of this book by Dan Shapiro, who knew her. But her death was the incident that eventually brought such diverse people to the table to begin this project, not only because it was a tragedy that had affected every member of the HNT on a personal as well as a professional level, but also because it highlighted the simultaneously bold yet fragile power of one of the most
progressive approaches to policing and police training that exists in our nation today.

We began, though, without a specific project. Jack and I were simply put together “on spec,” from a hunch on the part of Chris Honeyman, a conflict management consultant and a mutual collaborator of Jack and myself. I have a personal background in using creativity for addressing crisis, and a professional background in complex collaboration; Jack had a professional interest in finding a new way of approaching the issues within his field; Chris had an interest in seeing how the two of us might bring the intersection of our work to the wider police force. We had no roadmap and no direct sanction from the department, so the approaches we employed, as well as the understanding of what we were trying to do, changed over time.

The only way to begin was to listen as widely and as openly as possible. And so I listened to story after story, and we tried out different ways of articulating the underlying question of the project. First one out was: How can police officers learn emotional competence as a policing tool and cope with the fallout of doing so? This was a solid start. As more context emerged about the particularities of the Hostage Negotiation Team and its position within the larger landscape of police departments, both in New York and across the United States, the question developed to include: What do we do with the power and the pitfalls of failure and vulnerability in these high-stakes situations?

The information that continued to clarify the questions emerged in personal, winding and beautiful narrative form. Here are some distilled bits of information that I found particularly useful:

*The Hostage Negotiation Team’s motto is, talk to me.*

*They are the only unit within the NYPD that calls themselves a team.*
They are a hand-picked group of individuals who all have over a decade with the department, and, most important, have been chosen for their ability to recognize and use their own fallibility in a crisis situation.

The only way to make a connection with someone on the other side of the door, in the HNT’s terms, is for the negotiator to be able to connect through their own experience of failure — to be able to say “You know what, I’ve been there, I know about that, and I can talk to you about it. I can see, from my own life experience, that I could be in your shoes, but I can also see that there is another way.” Not “I know what you’re going through,” because you don’t. But rather, “I’ve been in a bad way myself, and I can tell you about it.”

The very best negotiators have access to their own real-life experience of adversity, and are able not only to share the coping strategies they have developed over the years but the humility to stand as a one-time peer to a person in a crisis situation, as someone who has faced a breaking point but who managed to find another way.

Being a selected member of the team is also a volunteer position — these officers hold full time positions in other units within the department — units in which using vulnerability is not a respected approach, much less a tactic.

As my learning deepened, also increasing were the reported number of high profile cases of police violence against people of color. Part of the response to this included demands for sensitivity training for police officers. This functioned to further clarify issues at the heart of our own collaboration. The training and policing tactics of the HNT actually do model the qualities that many people yearn for their police force to use. The fact that this training exists, and is proven and highly successful, and yet exists only in an extremely narrow portion
of our police force, causes problems not just for those without access to the training, but also for the negotiators themselves. Having to cope with a work environment that “silos” the best of policing tactics is deeply challenging and can be damaging. Our ideal-world intention for the project had emerged: Can we help to create a whole police department that operates from a place of compassion and caretaking as a first principle? And the method: Can we put my experience in socially engaged art together with Jack’s expertise in policing and police training to address this problem? To be clear, we did not think we would achieve this. But what we had done was to finally say and envision what it was that we wanted to work together toward.

The first phase included my working as an embedded artist with HNT members in trainings and on the job, drawing out stories from them that they would normally not have the opportunity to talk about in an on-the-job setting. The second phase involved formal lectures from Jack and me for police officers in continuing education. The third phase, where the expanding collaboration included a psychological study, was a voluntary series of six experiential learning sessions, for a diverse group of interested individuals, mostly involved in law enforcement in an active or prospective capacity.

The purpose of this third phase was to develop and implement a pilot program, designed to increase emotional competence in current and prospective law enforcement officers. Working with Chris Honeyman and Dr. Maria R. Volpe, Director of the Dispute Resolution Center at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY, we identified goals for the program and developed six experiential sessions for participants.

Through a combination of activities, we engaged their thinking about policing and the individuals involved in policing in new, active, and personal ways. Our toolkit included mindfulness practices, theatre-based practices including character study and scene analysis, writing and performance exercises with poets, personal and public ethnography the participants conducted in the field, and presentations of case studies from the fields of policing and emergency medicine
(to offer comparisons of ways of dealing with compassion in a crisis).

We used ambiguity and cognitive overload as pedagogical tactics. Participants in the workshop were never told what they were supposed to learn or indeed who they were supposed to learn it from. They were never told what they were being taught or where the course was headed. They came up with the key learning points *themselves* through reflection on the exercises. And although this ambiguity sometimes was frustrating to them, they kept coming back for more. And in the fifth session when they found themselves at an impasse, wondering aloud about how to traverse the gulf between an individual’s perception and socially situated perspectives — and then when, through holding long periods of silence and frustration, they articulated and expanded upon the possibility of compassion as a key to traversing this gulf, coming up with the words themselves — I felt a little win.

Our ideal-world goal in this three-year project was to create an emotionally accessible police department. Instead we ended up with a three year process of encounters, stories, shared meals, a collection of poems, an interdisciplinary curriculum, a psychological study, and more. We didn’t know where we were going to end up. We let the process guide the project. We aimed for the impossible, and we listened, we accepted, and we adapted as we went along.
Forever a Student of Life

Teniece Divya Johnson

Stuck in our ways
Leaves us trapped in a maze
of our own making
Unaware of what lies
outside the black lines
Self prescribed
and/or self defined
Colorblind to a world of possibility
Sinking in a quagmire
of gray tones and shades

No I’d rather be
Forever a student of Life
Yes, forever a student of Life

Learning for self edification
Gives self and
Communal
Liberation
Free from the bounds of misinterpretation

A need exists to serve
the diversity of people
A need for knowledge is key
unlocking the flow
Making it possible
for all of us to breathe
With peace of mind
Trust, respect
Free from the bounds of misinterpretation
A sense of ease
Yes I’d rather be
Forever a student of Life
Yes, forever a student of Life