

Chapter 4A, Trapper Dave

After my first long weekend, although somewhat abbreviated with the aforementioned funeral and memorial service, and upon returning for a full week of midnights, I was assigned a new training officer. His name was Dave Huetger. He was a U. S. military veteran, a guy in his mid-30s, had blondish hair, and was in good overall physical. His nickname by most who knew him was “Trapper.” At first, I didn’t understand why he was called that. I initially thought it had something to do with the popular ‘70s movie and later TV show *M*A*S*H* and the character “Trapper John.” I didn’t inquire of Dave why he was called that, but I found out why in just a few days.

Not too long into our first midnight tour together that first night, we made the now relatively routine visit to the 7-11 store. As we pulled into the parking lot, Dave casually asked me what I wanted in my coffee. I explained, yet again but for the first time to him, that I wasn’t a coffee drinker, and requested he get me a hot chocolate instead. Before exiting the car, he stared at me for a few seconds and in the form of a prediction he stated, “Kid, I notice you don’t smoke, you don’t curse, and you don’t drink coffee. Let me tell you, after one year on this job, you’ll be doing all three.”

Dave was wrong. Well, he was at least two-thirds wrong. I never did pick up the coffee habit, and I certainly didn’t start smoking at that stage of my life. But, I found I could curse every once in a while when the situation and emotions so dictated.

Dealing with people in less than friendly situations, being involved in car chases, foot chases, wrestling drunken wife-beaters and/or just regular drunks to the ground, could each

exacerbate the adrenalin-driven use of profane language from me that I would otherwise not be so predisposed to do.

I did my best to never curse around children or innocent bystanders. However, sometimes guys who were in a combative mood of their own, usually as they were being forcefully arrested by me and/or my colleagues, got the same sent back their way if they were so inclined to offer some of their own profanities in my direction. I would slowly learn doing it (but not overdoing it) correctly was a skill, an art, and it actually gained the arrestees' respect and helped, at least sometimes, to control a situation at times if it was done "right."

When in that relatively rare profanity-for-effect mode, when deemed necessary, I found I preferred profane adjectives to nouns or verbs. They seemed to work better, at least for me, as a police officer entering what was usually an already volatile situation. For example, at a domestic assault call, upon hearing a guy from outside the front door of his residence, or even up close once inside, already spewing a steady stream of obscenities, when the right time would present itself, I may have strongly and emphatically suggested to him when initiating the arrest scenario, "You're under arrest! Put your f***in' hands behind you NOW!"

Believe it or not, when said in the proper tone, pitch, and volume, with the concordant non-verbals such as a rock-steady stare and my hand on my night stick, flashlight, or even holstered gun, it would generally result in the desired outcome. That is, he would, in fact, shut the f**k up, calm the f**k down, and allow me to slap the f**kin' cuffs on him. I found, in those situations, it's all in the adjectival phrase and how it's expressed.

By way of contrast, I would never say something like, "You're under arrest, you dumb f**k!" Or even, "Hands up, s**t-for-brains!" These type noun phrases just didn't pack the same contextual punch, I discovered, as the soon-to-be arrested individual may take these intellect-

challenging insults personally and react accordingly with non-contextual, actual punches of his own.

I didn't curse on those infrequent occasions to demean or belittle the non-compliant arrestee, but instead it was done in an attempt to control the otherwise potentially escalating situation developing in front of me. So, yes, sometimes fighting fire with fire, or in these cases cursing with cursing, can work, if applied judiciously.

Such carefully chosen invectives, with the right syntactic placement, would generally translate into the erstwhile combatant putting his fists (or weapons) down and agreeing to be handcuffed. This was an early lesson in arrest language discourse analysis for me.

The formal version of this type analysis would come years later in my Georgetown University linguistic studies. Rarely, however, were these precise language features discussed or measured in my future graduate classes. I'm not sure how I would have explained this discourse phenomenon to my professors or fellow grad students in the program, none of whom had ever tried to arrest an overwrought and possibly overweight drunken man looking to fight anyone who comes near him. I left that possible research initiative to others.

Back to being that rookie cop on patrol with my new training officer, Dave Huetger... One night well into that first full week of midnight shift, probably around 4AM or so, after a few hot beverages for each of us and an uncountable number of cigarettes on his part, Dave drove us down a long dirt road behind an industrial park. I wasn't even sure how he found this service road which ran adjacent to some railroad tracks, but he did, and he seemed to know exactly where he was going on it.

I learned that at some point in the early morning hours of each midnight shift, Dave got quiet, introspective, and wouldn't say much. I respected his desire for solitude. As such, I didn't initially ask him where we were going on this barely passable dirt road. I just left the driving to him. I was okay with his silence as we were monitoring the police radio and also listening to the sounds of the outside world around us in an attempt to determine if there were possibly any crimes being committed anywhere within hearing distance of us.

All cops are, or certainly should be, responsive to the usual calls from dispatch. They pretty much have to roll on those calls and handle them accordingly or they're not going to keep their jobs for very long. That's the minimum effort an officer will expend during the course of his or her shift. However, thanks to Dave and his well-honed patrol habits, I too developed very early in my career into a proactively-oriented police officer. That is, an officer who does not only respond to those official calls put out over the radio, but one who also has his eyes AND ears open to the world around him at all times for possible wrongdoings or dangerous situations afoot.

It's not only visually scanning that which was in my immediate environment from the inside of my patrol car, but I also learned to listen carefully to that same environment. What my eyes saw and what my ears heard would prove to be equally important I would learn as I aggressively patrolled my sector. Even in the colder weather (which it was when I first started my police career), I learned to drive with my windows down a few inches, just to be able to hear what was going on around me.

I soon realized that a dog barking, someone screaming, a window breaking, tires screeching, an alarm going off, were all potential (if not obvious) indicators of something

nefarious going down somewhere not too far away from wherever I was. I wanted to get there, to whatever it was that was happening, possibly before the radio call ever came in to me. In that case, I may be the one to actually call it in over my police radio to dispatch, instead of the other way around, as is usual. That's the difference between a police officer who merely responds to his or her calls and nothing more, that is, being reactive, and the one who is highly motivated to find his or her own crimes-in-progress, that is, being proactive. I definitely fell into the latter category throughout my entire LEO career.

Back to this particular night...I didn't hear or see a thing other than the tires crunching the stones and pebbles beneath us and the leafless branches breaking alongside of us as Dave drove the patrol car even further down this seemingly endless and very dark road. I could only imagine at this point what it was he was visually and audibly searching for. He would occasionally strain his neck to see something or other while manipulating the driver's side outside searchlight beam. Looking for what though, I did not know.

Could it be a clandestine drug lab, a stolen car drop-off point, people ripping off some boxcars, a gang hangout, or something equally as sinister? What did Dave's years of experience teach him about this place that brought him back here this time of night?

I was soon to find out the answers to these queries as at one point along the road, Dave saw something. It caught his eye and he hit the brakes hard. He focused the outside light to his immediate left, and down an embankment.

Without even looking at me, Dave quickly said, "Stay here, Kid. I'll be right back."

Officer Huetger bounded out of the car with his portable flashlight in hand. Before I could say anything he hopped, skipped, and jumped down the slight embankment, out of my sight except for the very top of his fur lined non-regulation hat.

So...what do I do here? Stay in the car? Go out and assist him?

He did say, "Stay here," after all. What if it's something he can't handle on his own?

What if I lose sight of him? His hat? How long do I give him? I assume he would call my name, right? Or get on his portable radio?

After about a minute, Dave walked back up the gently sloping hill to the car and re-entered it. He was seemingly fine. Without saying a word, he took off his hat, lit up a cigarette, and was about to shift the transmission into drive and take off.

But before his foot hit the gas pedal, I matter-of-factly said and then asked, "Dave, you gotta tell me. What was this all about? What goes on back here that you so diligently patrol this area and check it out as carefully as you just did? I mean...what were you looking for?"

Dave took his right hand off of the steering column shifter, put it back on the steering wheel, turned his head in my direction, looked me straight in the eyes while taking a drag of his cigarette, and calmly said one word.

"Muskrats!"

"Muskrats?" I responded quizzically in return.

"Muskrats," he responded casually in return.

I then half-said, half-thought, "What do you mean? Are they a gang? Is it their nickname? Is this their hideout? Their stash drop? What is it?"

Tell me something! Anything!

Dave took his time and after a few more drags of his cigarette told me it was nothing like any of those things. Instead, he said, it's the four-legged mammal which lives around these parts. Yes, the actual small, furry wild animal. He continued that he lays metal traps for them before he starts his shifts, and he collects them afterwards, but he likes to check on them while at work, on patrol.

Why? I asked him as we were now again moving on the long and windy road.

Dave explained to me that he catches a few critters a week, kills them, extracts their oil from them and sells it to, well, whoever it is who buys muskrat oil. I learned then that it is used in perfumes and colognes, and that this was a nice extra source of income for him while also working as a Bensalem police officer.

Dave's rationale is that he was still checking the area for crime, criminals, for abandoned property, and the like, but if these checks also happened to be near where his muskrat traps were set, well, why not look into both of them at the same time? In the past, I was told, Dave did come across some criminal activity or the artifacts of same while back here or in other areas of Bensalem where he set his traps. No big deal, he insisted.

Well...I guess he's right. And who was I to suggest otherwise to my training officer?

Now it made complete sense why Dave's nickname was "Trapper." Duh!

I suppose I should have made the connection earlier while traversing the dirt road seemingly without end, but this city-raised boy never thought that as a cop I'd be assisting my partner check for his wild animal traps. But, that's what trappers do, I learned. Certainly to include this one, who was also a Bensalem cop, and my training officer for the month.

And...thanks to Trapper Dave, BPD, I never looked at a bottle of cologne the same way again.