From Vice Cop to Sociology Prof.: A Long Journey to a Familiar Place

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I was home visiting family and friends during summer break and I was somewhat oblivious to the stares from my siblings because of—as I later found out—my rather shabby appearance. My hair had grown longer and I had not shaved for a few days, which was truly out of character for me. You see, I had spent the majority of my “professional” life well-groomed and either wearing a uniform or a suit. I had served four years in the U.S. Navy and then nearly twenty years in law enforcement, the past five years with the FBI.

It was my mom who first said out loud what I later learned everyone else was thinking. “You look like you are back in the vice squad,” she said, referring to the period of about five years in the 1980s when I was working in an undercover special investigations unit. Another family member echoed the same observation when he entered the house about an hour later. As my first year as a sociology professor was winding down, I, too, had begun to notice strong similarities in the way I was feeling (and looking) reminiscent of my days in the vice squad. For more than a decade, I had worked hard and made many sacrifices to prepare for this “second” career. I thought of my transition as a journey. I was on the road to a new and different place which seemed to be millions of miles away. Yet, now, instead of feeling that I had arrived at a new place, I felt more like I had returned a familiar one.

The Vice Squad

For six years, beginning in late 1983 when the “war on drugs” was approaching its peak, I was a vice cop in an mid-sized east coast city. The unit to which I was assigned was officially called “Drugs, Organized Crime, and Vice,” but was known throughout the department simply as the vice squad. Like most people in law enforcement at that time, I wholeheartedly believed that we were engaged in a war of good against evil. The drug dealers, prostitutes, and

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pimps were the enemy of the people, and we—the police—were out to apprehend them. The vice squad, as I saw it, was the front line in this war.

My investigations took me deep into the world of drug dealers, small-time organized crime networks, gamblers, and prostitutes. Using a variety of methods, we conducted “research” on deviant individuals and groups with the aim of arresting them and putting them in jail. The vice squad was very busy in those years. The unit conducted approximately 350 investigations annually, most of which resulted in the arrest of multiple individuals involved in crimes of a conspiratorial nature.

Undercover drug investigations were in vogue at that time. “Miami Vice” was the hot show on television and everyone from politicians and pundits to local bakers and barbers were talking about the War on Drugs. The resources that were available to us—and to most law enforcement agencies at that time—were incredible. We drove expensive undercover cars, most of which had been seized from drug dealers or couriers. We had unlimited funds to pay officers to work overtime and to pay informants handsomely for their work. We also had plenty of money (mostly from federal enforcement agencies like the DEA, ATF, and FBI) to make expensive undercover drug buys from the bigger dealers and to purchase expensive electronic surveillance equipment. During this time, I passionately pursued my work. I loved the challenges presented by the nature of the investigations, and I loved delving into new and different criminal networks.

The investigations were sometimes long and tedious, but they were always extremely interesting. I learned a lot about the people and the subcultures that were considered deviant by “the mainstream.” I learned how clandestine networks formed and sustained themselves, how the participants communicated and operated to avoid detection, how they recruited and paid employees, and much more. For example, one summer a young waitress was found dead at the trendy West Side nightclub where she worked. When an autopsy revealed she had died from a cocaine overdose, the vice squad initiated an investigation to try to determine where she had obtained the drug. Employing court-authorized telephone wiretaps, we uncovered a multinational cocaine conspiracy and were able to trace the flow of cocaine from its source in Columbia to this specific restaurant in the United States, and then to individual drug users, including the deceased waitress. The U.S. connection was an Israeli national who was living legally in the United States. One of the drug “users” was a high-ranking military officer who lost his commission (and pension) as a result of his eventual arrest. This smuggling and distribution arrangement had gone on for years and involved a complex web of people who had established their own routines, norms, code of ethics, and patterns of communications that facilitated the transportation and distribution of cocaine. The investigation resulted in the arrest of more than thirty people in the United States, many of whom were professionals such as teachers, bankers, and business owners who were simply using cocaine themselves or were supplying it to a close network of friends and associates.

Likewise, in another investigation using telephone wiretaps, we uncovered a drug smuggling operation at a maximum security state prison. The investigation began when allegations were made that prisoners had been recruiting and “hiring” prison guards as drug couriers. The illicit organization that developed to carry out this operation was very sophisticated. The inmates developed