



# Our flock of young seagulls

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In their proposed theme for the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police (CACCP) Executive Global Studies Program, program co-moderators Davey and Taylor (2022) raised three crucial concerns related to the future of policing. Each concern is framed as a question, in the context of embracing a new generation, both inside and outside of police organizations. First, they asked “How do we remain a sustainable profession?” Second, “How do we respond to and best serve the needs of the people who have always, statistically, defined our primary market?” Third, “What do we do now in the face of broken trust?” I will address each of these questions in turn, but first, something completely different.

John is a retired violin teacher. He studied music at Ithaca College, which then housed one of the most prestigious schools of music and music education in the nation. *Everyone* smoked, humans were preparing to employ World War II technology to send humans to walk on the moon. There was a bar in the dormitory. After college, he was drafted for service during the Vietnam War. In 1989, John’s son attended that very same college, complete with a picture of John as a junior hanging on the wall opposite his dorm. HIV was on everyone’s mind, as was the fall of the Berlin Wall. In 2024, John’s grandchild will seek admission to college—the college where John’s son works today—amid a resurgence of fascism, continued warfare, economic uncertainty, and the very real possibility of climate catastrophe.

John, as superlative fathers are wont to do, introduced his son to a book. It is a children’s book, really, but it has a grace sufficient to justify John’s son assigning it for an undergraduate culminating seminar at the college where he works. *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* is about, well, a seagull. Readers witness a seagull being and becoming decidedly un-seagull-like, but in so doing, being and becoming the truest seagull. Jonathan, you see, liked to fly. Others of the flock, though, flew merely to get to the trawlers offshore or to beaches in order to have scraps hurled at them by beachgoers. Jonathan, outcast from the flock for his foolish flying, eventually ascended to higher planes of existence. Eventually, he became a great teacher of transcendent truth. In Jonathan, we might discern imprints of both Shakyamuni and Jesus; we might also witness the bastardization of their messages by those who seem to seek them.

What are we to learn about policing in 2023 from a short children’s book about beach birds? I’d say there are at least two things we can learn from a fictional seagull about what’s broken in policing in both Canada and the United States.

Sure, Jonathan was special. He learned things quickly; he was the Great Realizer, really in two senses: he had profound insights into his nature, but he also put those insights into practice. He *realized* what he *realized*. Special, yeah, but Jonathan was just like every other gull on the beach. He did works that seemed magical, divine, but he was just a bird. He was a bird who understood freedom (not to be confused with *gonna-do-what-I-wanna-ness*), but he was just like you and me. Ahem... I mean, he was like every other gull.

When Jonathan, his student Fletcher Lynd Seagull, or any of their students transcended their states the way Jonathan and Fletcher had done, a couple of things were true, though. First, the gulls had been *hungry* to learn. They had felt a question, some kind of massive, mouth-sized insight that moved fetus-like under their flesh and at the same time out in the haze offshore. It was a truth they could not resolve fully, but it was there, unmistakably.

Second, in their search for that truth through standard means, they had failed and so eventually ceased trying. When their... despair... collided with their unbowed hunger to learn, a kind of fearlessness, a nakedness, arose in them. In the ceasing of the trying, the thing they sought overtook them like a thief, and captured them.

Third, the gulls that successfully transcended the beach strewn with feathers, broken glass, and bird shit all lived their insights. They lived through their freedom like light through a prism. They didn’t carry their realization cloistered in the vault of the heart. Thus lived, the insights compounded and deepened, revealing even grander and simpler insights: “Let’s begin with Level Flight” because my wingtip isn’t the same thing as the moon. In the living itself, a greater learning happened. Although it isn’t a precise fit, the best work I can think of for what is revealed here is praxis.

Fourth, and despite what many of the throngs of gulls portrayed in the book seem to think, *all* of the capacity to be *just like* Jonathan is already present in each member of the throng. Witnessing the becoming of Jonathan and Fletcher, it becomes clear that the being and the becoming are blurred to the point where the distinction is no longer useful. Each gull held all of the keys to his or her own shackles; each gull possessed all of the tools needed for their own freedom.

Fifth, and perhaps most crucially, at the very core of the core of the insights that moved the gulls to higher, brighter states was the practice of love. All of the majesty, all of the might, all of the profundity at work in this simple story is

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wrapped around the Maypole of love, and none of it is possible without love. Love, we see, is the path and the end, the capacity and the reality. I define love as “the art-like, individualized, unconditional, aware and end-less praxis whereby a human or organization mindfully, assertively and continuously labors for the actualization of another human being as an end in herself, without thought of return, without reliance upon authority, without fear, or possibility of cessation” (DeValve, 2015, 103), and I think such a definition is fully consonant with what we learn from *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. I also think it has the potential to confound all prior and prevailing precepts about leadership.

Let us return now to the three terrifying and beautiful questions of the beginning.

**“How do we remain a sustainable profession?”** This question assumes that policing is in fact a sustainable profession, and I am rather far from convinced of this idea. If I am honest, in fact, I tend to think that it isn’t sustainable, at least not as it exists currently. No, I don’t mean to invoke the recent defunding conversation, much of which is powered by raw rage. Rage is not sound straw for policy brickmaking, but that insight is hardly news. What may be news is that policing, and justice and human services more generally, can be fully sustainable, although the fixes may be rather radical.

Sustainability is, at its heart of hearts, about power. The UN’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2023) make this plain: ends to poverty, hunger, inequality; access to health care, education, clean water, economic opportunity; clean and affordable energy, responsible consumption, and the rest all boil down to the having and the sharing of capacity. The lesson we learn about power from sustainability studies, though, is that power itself must be reimagined. In an article some time ago (DeValve, 2017), I observed that power as leveraged for justice practice is grand, hierarchical, micro-controlling, rough. This is a gross misunderstanding of power. True power is shared, networked, life-affirming and life-giving.

Force use in policing is inevitable. The use of force, though, even of the most modest force, should be understood as more than a regrettable necessity; force use must be understood as a failure of all other modalities of connection. It will be necessary, but its use should be a thing that saddens everyone, most of all the officer using it. Instead of understanding police organizations as being defined in terms of their corner on the market of state-condoned force, if policing seeks to be a sustainable endeavour (and it should), the power it must harness must be of the sustainable kind.

**“How do we respond to and best serve the needs of the people who have always, statistically, defined our primary market?”** I began our contemplations together here with an introduction. My dad is one of the three or four most remarkable humans I have met in my 52 rather rich years. Yeah, he’s my hero. When he was in college, his focal concerns (or ultimate concerns as theologian Paul Tillich would say) were his senior recital, getting a job, not getting involved in that blasted war in Vietnam. During his student teaching, he was approached by a whip-smart, knock-out brunette English teacher. Her mom was not at all pleased that her elder daughter had fallen for a musician, and so to close the deal with that brilliant, smoking hot brunette, Dad had to woo her mother, too.

Somewhat later, and even more as a classical musician, John probably thought little of his own son’s love of rock-and-

roll: *Stone in Love* and Frankie Say Relax made little sense to him as objects of admiration and emulation. John’s grandchild will be 17 in a matter of weeks. He uses pronouns that did not exist when John’s son was taking grammar classes. His focal concerns are, like any teenager, dating and algebra, but social media has made for him a radically different landscape for both than the one traversed in the 1980s by John’s son. He follows “influencers.” He himself has “followers.” I can get the fear of being drafted that Dad had, but I can never know what it was like to get that letter. I can understand wanting to be respected, but I can’t get my head around counting clicks or thrilling over the likes of the influencers my own child follows. The thing is, just like Dad the musician, I don’t have to.

Understanding another doesn’t mean agreeing with them or sharing a perspective. It means caring, listening well, listening authentically, learning fearlessly, and not trying to be “hip,” “slapping” or whatever the kids say. I don’t get it, and the key is that I get that I don’t get it. Let it all be a mystery but let the thing you give be you. Do not *try* to serve communities. Be with them without guile or agenda, and the service will arise. Policing done properly is a radical gift of love, and the essence of that gift isn’t some “best practice.” It is you. *You* are the best practice. If such a praxis as this is achieved and sustained, it no longer matters which community is the current focus of service; serving needs becomes natural, authentic, sustainable, transparent, real.

**“What do we do now in the face of broken trust?”** The wisdom of the seagull is clear:

- **Face the reality of the broken trust without defense or agenda.** A song by the band Simple Minds, “*Don’t You (Forget about Me)*,” was the number one song in the land when the Philadelphia Police Department *bombed a residence* from a helicopter, killing 11 people. The MOVE bombing of the Osage neighborhood in May of 1985 happened in living memory but is rarely discussed in relation to police legitimacy. This and many other instances require public redress. No, your agency may not have bombed a neighborhood. Maybe it happened in a different country, even. That’s truly wonderful news, and true enough. Nevertheless, and whether you like it or not, every police officer and police executive own a tiny shard of that moment. Like it or not, every officer knelt on a neck in Minneapolis. Every officer owns a portion of Keenan Anderson’s death. It is far better to reconcile with that reality than it is to try to deny it. Forgetting is, in this context, a brand of cruelty. Remembering, painful though it may be, has healing in its wings.
- **Clarify commitments.** When we marry, as some do, often we offer vows to each other. Those vows can be scripted or extemporaneous, but they represent a concrete commitment to abide by a set of principles. We make vows once but live them daily. Except when we don’t. Sometimes, then, it makes sense to return to the vowing process, to dust off what was given so freely early on, and to make fresh the commitments we once made. Renewing vows doesn’t presuppose breach of the vows, of course, but in the marriage between police and community, there is more than ample reason to refresh our commitments.
- **Do not seek trust.** If you *pursue* legitimacy, you will never achieve it. Simply be worthy of trust. If you’re living those

commitments above, the rest will come in time, but be sure never to act towards commitments with an intention towards another end. Be end-less. Just be.

- **Listen authentically, learn fearlessly, and realize what you realize.** Part of the basic equipment police officers of all positions and portfolios need is a fearlessness of learning. Criminologically, we have confronted the “nothing works” moment and then had to get up the next day to keep trying. Criminologically, that fertile despair mentioned earlier has given rise to verdant new thinking about harm and healing. That verdancy springs not necessarily from the criminological ideas themselves, but from that courageous learning that comes from failure, and the authentic application of new insights.
- **Be vulnerable.** Jonathan was insatiable. He was aflame. He *wanted* to fly: faster, higher, trickier. One might even say he had given himself over to flight without anything kept back for himself. My advice to you that are serving, and to you who may yet step forward to serve, is to get comfortable being naked.

It is entirely unfair of me, an ivory-tower academic, to insist on learning fearlessly, and all police executives should

feel fully free to ignore this message. Then again, we are in a place of... despair...

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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