

The Ugly Truth About Firefighting the Public Doesn't Understand

They will never feel the profound sadness that we do as a result of seeing too much

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By Michael Morse

We know what we see is real. We know how it feels. We live with the memories and know that more will come. We are tuned in to every aspect of the firefighting life. We know when a brother or sister is lost, and we mourn in our own way, no matter how far away the incident was that took them from us. We don't have to know the name of the deceased, or their story, because we are the people who make the ultimate sacrifice. Inside every one of us lives a small part of the rest, and we feel the loss more profoundly than people could imagine.

The truth is, this is not the easy life that the general public wants to think it is. This is far more than shopping for lunch, parades, Dalmatians, and Fire Prevention Week. This is life, and loss, and tragedy. This is insomnia, and injury, and depression. None of us gets through it unscathed. None of us expect to. Some of us will not get out alive, and we know all too well that the *someone* could be us.

So we protect the public from whatever misfortune comes their way, and put out their fires, and tend their wounded, and keep them as safe as we can. We pull the dead from the car wrecks, and cover the bodies at fire scenes so the news cameras won't bring the horror into the nation's living rooms. We protect our people from more than just the physical; we keep them from knowing the truth.

The truth is ugly and devastating. People will tell us that they can imagine how horrific it was for us, but they will never, in a million years, really imagine the depth of that horror. They will never have to deal with the guilt — the constant mental playback, wondering if only I were a little bit faster, a little bit better, a little more poised, a little more heroic. They will never feel the profound sadness that we do as a result of seeing too much. They will never breathe in the smell of death as it lingers on the recently deceased, before the undertaker does his work. They will never wonder how they will even make it home and get on with things after what they've witnessed.

They don't have to know about any of it. We let them imagine how bad it can be and allow them the luxury of thinking that they have imagined it right. They don't have to bear the burden of life at its most raw and powerful. They have the luxury of watching the world go by through their screens — screens that don't scream, screens that don't burn, or bleed.

We let them think that life is fair, with an occasional aberration. We allow them the luxury of the illusion of safety and fairness as life barrels along. They do not need to know how often things veer out of control. They don't have to know what we know. We remember how it felt to be innocent. We know exactly how good it feels to not see the brutal realities that linger just out of sight. We don't want them to know about any of it.

All we want is to keep the people who depend on us far away from the things we dread ... and we want to survive this career with our hope, health and sanity intact.

About the author

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