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# IMPORTANCE OF OBSERVATION IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

Raymond A. Dahl

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Law enforcement could not function if it were not for observation. Its whole structure is built on observation. Violations of the law are observed. Violators of the law are observed.

Investigations are conducted solely by the power of observation. Development of this power must be a policeman's prime consideration. Police observation is necessary both on and off duty. Many arrests are made off duty by observation. Scenes, actions of individuals which would go unnoticed, instantly arouse an officer who has developed his power of observation.

## WHY OBSERVE

The necessity for police observation:

1. Noting suspicious persons
2. Preventing crimes
3. Saving lives
4. Controlling emergencies
5. Securing evidence
6. Reports to superiors
7. Recovering stolen property
8. Detecting criminals

When an officer has properly developed his power of observation, he automatically responds to *noises*, *sights*, and *smells* that are not part of the everyday tenor of his surroundings.

## HOW TO DEVELOP—MAKE A GAME OUT OF OBSERVATION

A store window and its contents make an excellent study in recalling a scene. Test yourself and see how, by practicing, you improve your memory regarding details and describing articles.

The trained observer, when he looks at an intersection, sees much more than the diagonal streets. Such things as the location of light

posts, traffic signs, mail boxes, shrubbery, etc., are of great importance to the investigator.

*Repetition is Secret of Observation.* Constant repetition is the only way to perfection. Children learn words by repeating them hundreds of times. Athletes practice day in and day out. Most of the Big League baseball stars who practice and play baseball nine months every year follow some athletic hobby in their three idle months that keeps them in trim. The expert marksman or bowler shoots or rolls every week. The police officer's training is far more important than that of any athlete, for his quick thinking and spontaneous actions oftentimes snatches a life from death's ever-outstretched hand.

Observation pays off in the prevention of crime. Recently, in our city, a young patrolman while patrolling his beat, observed a man who had been drinking standing in front of a store at a streetcar stop. The officer engaged this man in conversation, and learned that he knew where he was going and that he seemed to be able to take care of himself, whereupon the officer left this man waiting for the owl streetcar.

At daybreak that same morning, this officer was called by his desk sergeant and informed that a store window had been broken and a burglary committed on his beat on the particular corner that he had observed this drunk. Listed among the missing articles were several hams, sausages, etc. The officer recalled the drunk incident and remembered the drunk's name and address. An investigation was instigated and the drunk contacted. He admitted accidentally falling against the window and breaking same sustaining a slight cut in so doing. He denied, however, taking anything.

When taken back to the scene, the investigation developed that the proprietor of the store on observing the window broken, decided to report it as a burglary and he, himself, appropriated the merchandise intending to make a claim against the insurance company.

Through observation and memory, this young patrolman prevented a crime against society.

#### HOW TO OBSERVE

*Improve Your Ability to Observe.* Everyone sees a street differently. An engineer looks at its construction. An automobile salesman looks at the cars. A sailor looks for the girls. A fireman looks for fire plugs, fire escapes, fire hazards, etc. A law enforcement man must look for many things.

Far too many officers spend their time on patrol day-dreaming or being interested in something aside from police work. To do the best

job an officer must develop certain habits in observation that will aid him. Some of these habits are easy to develop, some are difficult; but, once they become automatic, they will always be there and save a great deal of effort in checking while on patrol duty or at any investigation.

Every time you make a good arrest, ask yourself the question, "What tipped me off that something was wrong—what attracted my attention?" You will generally find that it was some seemingly insignificant act or piece of evidence that first attracted you. Remember what these clues are, and in the future look for similar situations on the street and about you. Experience as a law enforcement officer will be of value only if you continually try to improve your own ability.

*Familiarization of Beat.* Know your area. Knowledge of the area in which you patrol might pay large dividends at sometime. In a recent case in our town, a crazed individual shot and wounded a police officer. The wounded officer's partner, immediately took up the pursuit of this gunman who fled down a dark street and into an alley.

This policeman immediately recalled that this was a dead end alley and that the gunman would have to come out around a building and a private driveway. This knowledge of the area enabled him to assume an advantageous position and shoot it out successfully with this would-be killer.

Too much emphasis on being familiar with the topography of your beat cannot be stressed.

*Look Up When You Patrol.* One good habit to develop is to look up. Observe above the first floor. In one case, two burglars repeatedly burglarized the same building and escaped by climbing down from a third story window with their loot to the roof of a one story building. They could have been observed at any time. They made this one story climb between eleven and twelve o'clock at night. There was still considerable traffic on the street. The adjoining corner was a streetcar and bus transfer point; a large movie was just around the corner and lights from a filling station illuminated the wall they climbed down; yet, no one saw them make this climb, although they did it at least a dozen times. Try to recall what the second floor of any of the buildings in your territory looks like, or ask your friends to describe it.

A second good habit is to look at the floors in stores. Most burglars work fast. They will throw merchandise or papers they are not interested in on the floors. Often when a light is shown in a store, they will simply duck, perhaps, lie on the floor, so look for them there. Make it a habit to look at every window to see if it is tightly closed. Learn to

look *at* the glass, not through it. Often if a window is broken out cleanly, it is not noticeable unless you have learned to observe for reflections in it. Look for disorder in display windows. A side glass, not easily seen, may have been broken.

*Look Closely at Doors and Windows.* Certain types of breaks in windows or door glass are particularly significant. One common method of gaining entrance is to break the glass near the lock and then reach through and open the lock. Therefore, in the ordinary type of window, a break immediately above the lock should demand prompt attention. Many industrial windows are constructed of a number of small panes set in steel frames. As a general rule, the center section of this type of window is hinged so that it may be opened. The lock may be in any of several positions around this center section, so watch for breaks in that area. Be particularly careful to observe if an entire pane is broken out. This may have been done so that no jagged edges remain to attract attention, or it may have been done to allow someone to enter directly through the break. It is always good practice for officers to study the many different types of windows and window locks used in industrial buildings. They should learn the weaknesses of each type of window and lock and the points to look for in a rapid check to determine whether or not the window has been used as a means of entrance.

There are a number of other marks that might be left in a break. If a jimmy is used in opening an ordinary residence window, the marks will usually be found between the sill and the lower sash at about center. The reason for this is that the burglar is attempting to apply enough pressure to either break the window lock or pull out the screws holding it. To do this without breaking the window, it is necessary that he apply his pressure so that the force is equal on each side of the frame of the sash. Jimmy marks on the door will ordinarily be found near the lock as force is best exerted at this point. However, there are a number of other methods of opening a door: (1) Remove the pins and hinges, (2) Padlocked doors—put a bar through the hasp and pry it off, and (3) Cylinder type locks—examine carefully for tool marks.

#### WHOM TO OBSERVE

*Observe Individuals.* Modern police officers are losing the art of identifying individuals from descriptions or mug photos. Part of this ability to pick up criminals by sight is inborn, but much of it is learned. Any police officer can improve his own ability if he makes an effort. It is unfortunate that there is so little written on this important subject,

but an alert police officer can work out his own method. He will soon learn that the ear is the single best feature to use for identification. There are more variations in the ears of individuals than in any other single feature and study will soon develop the ability to see and recognize these differences. Other facial characteristics often overlooked are the hairline, type of nose, profile, and spacing and condition of teeth.

Practice describing people in your own mind at a glance. Learn to estimate weight, height, and age. Practice looking for points that make one person different from another. In any town there are probably hundreds of men 5' 9", 165, dark hair, medium complexion, grey hat and dark suit. Look for such things as glasses, peculiarities in walking, objects being carried. Condition of clothing is always important, but seldom mentioned. For instance, a man described as above could be dressed conservatively or dressed like a tramp with clothes worn and dirty.

*Suspicious Persons.* Certain officers are very successful in apprehending criminals on the street. They seem to have a special sense that tells them "that man is wrong." Many of these officers believe they have a special endowment, while others, equally successful, who have analyzed their ability, find that they have learned to look for certain points that often distinguish a criminal. They have learned to observe details of dress, action, and appearance—details often so minor that they have no meaning in themselves, but only when observed in connection with other points.

It is difficult to set rules to follow in developing this ability and hard to list the points to observe. Much will depend upon the intelligence of the officer and his careful and thoughtful application to his job. However, to an able law enforcement officer, briefly mentioning the techniques and points to observe used by certain officers will suggest ways of improving his own ability.

The basic rule is: *Look for the Differences*—the unusual acts, methods of dress, or ways of doing things that may set a criminal apart from the ordinary citizen. For example, a person who pays too much attention to you, watches your every move, notices which way you turn, might bear watching. On the other hand, a person who seems to avoid you, acts as though you were not there, is indifferent to an extreme, has set himself apart. Of course, this alone does not mean the man has just broken jail, but it is an indication. As an example, an employee of a certain company who was unusually friendly to police, going out of his

way to greet them very cordially, was discovered in the theft of a large number of valuable cameras.

There are other points. In observing traffic, notice drivers who are not familiar with the operation of the car, have difficulty shifting, skid the wheels suddenly when making a routine stop, or stall the motor. If the driver is a woman, this does not indicate a great deal; it is too routine. However, if the driver is a man, particularly a young man, you have a good prospect as an auto thief. Watch him for awhile. Some officers even let a suspicious person in a car know he is being followed, then watch to see what he does. He may be using the rear view mirror constantly to observe you; he may stall along to see if you will pass him; he may turn off. It is good practice, if you believe the car is stolen because the driver is watching you so carefully, or seeking to avoid you, to drive up beside him suddenly as though you were going to stop him and see what he does. He may jump out and run, he may try to out-run you in the car. If he does neither, you can drop back. You will not have lost anything. An honest citizen will rarely notice you, but you can be sure a car thief will.

Always note persons who are loitering. There are certain areas where people normally congregate, on corners, or in front of stores for example, visiting and observing passers-by. There are many more areas where this does not occur, as there is little of interest; where few stores are open and persons usually walk as though they had a definite destination in mind. Here again a person or persons strolling along set themselves apart and should be noticed. The greater part of the time, this activity will mean nothing unusual; on the other hand, it will occasionally. Thus, it is well worth police interest. Again, two or more persons slowly walking through an area where there is apparently little of interest and who are not talking to each other is unusual. Watch them, see what they are looking at, how long they remain in the area, how much notice they take of you, whether or not they select a route that brings them past the same point several times. All of these facts may be significant.

#### WHERE TO OBSERVE

Remember in patrolling, that certain areas are particularly appropriate for certain types of crime; so in those areas concentrate your observation on the indications of the type of offense peculiar to the area. For example, around bus and railroad depots look for persons with luggage that is obviously of too good quality for them to carry.

Watch for travellers being accosted by persons whom they do not appear to know; many of the best confidence games operate around depots. Look for boys and girls who appear to be unfamiliar with the town; they might be run-aways. Certain areas, generally residential, are often set-ups for purse snatchers, particularly if the streets are not well-lighted. Watch for boys or younger active men who do not appear to have a definite destination. In similar areas, burglars may be active, so hit the alleys. Look for cars parked in front of vacant lots or in locations not conveniently accessible to a house. In short, study where crimes are occurring in the area you patrol, then look for that type of crime in the area where it is most likely to be found.

#### GENERALITIES IN OBSERVATION

*Study Voices.* Learn the pitches of voices which denote varied emotions. Several people when gathered in congenial conversation talk in moderate voices, laugh happily and, perhaps, become a trifle noisy. But, there is always the even tenor of emotion. When two or more persons are quarreling, their voices as a rule, automatically become loud, harsh, and grating. You can not ignore the tone of anger any more than you can the tone of fear. Fear will spontaneously evoke a shrill, full cry which vibrates and pierces. These various tone expressions which you should recognize at once, can be found by listening to any group of children as they play. Go to a playground, not in uniform, and listen for a half hour.

*Being Calm Under Stress.* What does all this training observation do for you? It conditions you to the point where you function smoothly and automatically in crises. Instead of bumbling around at the scene of an accident, barking out loud orders to cover your own confusion, you take in the whole situation at a glance and get right to the point in a few seconds. You have all admired the quick-thinking ball player who accomplished a double-play or the quarter-back who while rushed, calmly moves to locate the open receiver. Constant practice made his movements under stress, automatic. So will your actions become when you have practiced observing every day for 6 months.

In a recent burglarly investigation in our city, the detectives interviewing the proprietor at the scene noted a very inquisitive employee who hovered around trying to overhear the conversation. They noted as they moved about making their investigation, that this inquisitive individual wore a squeaky pair of shoes.

As is customary in all burglary investigation, a survey was made of

all men who patrolled that area before and during the time of the offense to ascertain any observations that might have been made in the vicinity. In this case, a young patrolman recalled that as he checked in the vicinity, a drunk walked by, and that as he observed this drunk, he also noted this particular man was wearing squeaky shoes. The investigating detective immediately recalled the squeaky shoes of the curious employee, and played a hunch which payed off in that the little incident of the man with the squeaky shoes was both, the drunk and the burglar.

*Impressions—Mental, Physical, and Conscious.* People make impressions on us through three channels: mental, physical, and conscious. The first, mental is that which a person's strong personality makes without any effort on his part. We all have met people whose forceful characters have been indelibly impressed on us at first meeting. Those are the persons whose names and faces we never forget; whom we could meet ten years hence and recognize instantly. The second, physical, is the impression left with you because of a person's physique, whether it be big and powerful, or fat and small. We have all, in the course of casual conversation, heard a person's name brought up only to have someone say, "OH! he's the man who is built like a prize fighter" or "He's the one who looks like a bean pole." The third, conscious, is the impression of a person will make on us by virtue of his apparent intellect or reputation for being just a little above the average. The fact that such a person is engaged in some profession or has a good business reputation will make the impression stand out.

*Remember Inconspicuous Persons.* What we want to do though, is school ourselves to remember those people who do not have easily identifiable characteristics. The John Does and Richard Roes, any one of whom at any moment may commit an outrage against society, are the ones we want to remember and be able to identify.

*Observation of Individuals and Groups.* A description must have more than routine height, weight, age, etc.—PECULIARITIES are what count.

1. *The Individual*
  - a. Facial expression
  - b. Complexion
  - c. Scars
  - d. Physique—carriage
  - e. Gait

- f. Actions
- g. Manner of dress
- h. Tone of voice
- i. Physical deformities and eccentricities
- j. Occupation

## 2. *The Group*

- a. Character of the gathering
- b. Manner of the gathering
- c. Individual members of group
- d. Locale of gathering
- e. Time of day or night

*"Draw Out" Information regarding Outstanding Characteristics and Peculiarities.* The officer, who through practice, has developed his power of description will be able to bring out peculiarities and outstanding characteristics of a fugitive or suspect whom he has never seen by intelligent questioning of a complainant or victim of a crime. In attempting to obtain an intelligent description from a complainant or victim, the officer would ask whether the fugitive had a sallow complexion, prominent forehead, large ears, peculiar eyebrows, or eyes, scars, unusual speech, or physical disability. Then you will have a worthwhile description to put on the air.

*Speech Mannerisms Sometimes May Give Type of Work Done.* People unconsciously disclose their trade or profession during the course of their conversation. An officer seated near two or three persons can tell in what occupation they are engaged after he has overheard their first few remarks. Underworld characters have a language all their own and so do most craftsmen, tradesmen, and professional people.

*Trades Leave Physical Marks.* A great many trades will leave a distinguishing physical mark on the persons following it. For instance, violin players, if they are right-handed, will have calluses on the tips of the four fingers of the left hand and the inner side of the nail of the right thumb will be worn. Because burglars often carry their tools in violin cases it will pay the alert policeman to stick-up all persons carrying musical instruments along the streets at night. The index fingers of shoemakers are callused from pulling the waxed thread and the palms of their hands are callused from pushing the awl. Workers in metals and paints generally show some foreign substance which will be identified with their trade on their hands or under their fingernails. Carpenters and mechanics often have crushed fingers. Dressmakers

and seamstresses will usually show needle punctures on their left index finger. It is an easy and interesting task for an officer to catalog in his mind the physical impressions all trades leave on the men and women who follow them. Knowledge such as this greatly adds to a policeman's ability.

*Classes Who Need Watching.* Specific observations by police:

1. With criminal records
2. On probation or parole
3. Acting suspiciously
4. Associating with criminals or suspicious persons
5. Living in idleness
6. Hanging around pool halls, dance halls, cabarets, clubs, etc.
7. Without any visible means of support
8. Loitering in hallways, entering or leaving buildings, ringing bells, etc.
9. Loitering in the vicinity of banks, jewelry stores, railroad stations, near trucks carrying valuable merchandise
10. Entering or leaving pawn shops, junk shops, second hand stores, etc.
11. Showing an inclination to engage policeman in conversation, especially around warehouse districts.

*Undesirable or Defective Observations.* Might be those combined with:

1. *Haste.* Combine deliberation with observation. Proceed methodically; omit no details. Remember, patch work is useless.
2. *Prejudice.* See all things equally. Avoid personal and biased points of view which destroy real observations.
3. *Absent-Mindedness.* Avoid day-dreaming. No one is on duty while his observational faculties, the senses, are off duty.
4. *Carelessness.* Failure to observe and note persons, places, and things and incidents, results in fewer arrests, fewer convictions, and an increase in crime.
5. *Exaggeration.* See a thing as it is without enlarging its importance.
6. *Emotion.* The reaction of hope, fear, love, hate, or other strong feelings results in a loss of intelligent thinking, power to observe, and sense of proportion.

RESPONSIBILITY OF A POLICE OFFICER IN MATTER OF  
POLICE OBSERVATION

1. To improve his observational faculties by constantly exercising them. Fix details in mind.
2. Associate his observations with police line of duty. The main objects of police observation are to save time and effort, solve crimes more efficiently, and prepare effective evidence for presentation in court.
  - a. Associate a certain kind of scar with a certain kind of weapon; a certain kind of gait and mannerism with the drug addict, etc.

REMEMBER

1. A guilty person will try to act over-naturally, but in many instances will make a wrong move that will cause his arrest.
2. Those who are about to commit a crime usually look about. Sometimes they will walk into hallways and then walk out boldly.
3. Reward for careful observation is good arrests and pickups.

Review and remember your observation. The finest kind of observation is a waste of time if at the moment of need, the faculty to remember fails.