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Fight the power, but time your battles wisely

Police officers are only human, just as infallible as the rest of us.

They also possess a lot of power, which the bad cops — a relatively small minority — abuse on a daily basis. The rest are just doing their job, which is not an easy one.

Just as I did as a public defender, officers interact with troubled, drug-addicted and mentally disturbed people day in and day out. Like many defenders, after a while they burn out, their patience levels decrease and they become easily aggravated. That's why when I encounter a police officer, I get nervous. I make no sudden movements, speak politely and do as I'm asked.

That's also why I cannot, for the life of me, understand Professor Henry Louis Gates's reaction after he was approached by Police Sgt. James Crowley. Crowley was responding to a 911 call from a concerned neighbor regarding an apparent break in, and Gates admitted he had forced open the front door to the house he was renting.

Any reasonable person who had just engaged in the suspicious act of breaking in to their own home would have quietly and quickly provided the officer with proof that they lived there. Granted, Gates probably did not look like your "average" burglar, given his age, demeanor and dress; however, it was entirely within the realm of possibility that he was, for example, an angry husband breaking in to his former home in violation of a restraining order. Alternatively, he could have been the victim of a home invasion, with his attackers wielding guns in the background. The officer had an obligation to investigate the situation.

I was in a similar situation a few years ago, when I was teaching my eldest child about 911. She inadvertently dialed 911 and I quickly hung up the phone. A few minutes later, two Monroe County Sheriff's Deputies appeared at my door. I assured them everything was fine and that we had dialed 911

accidentally, but I could tell one of the deputies wasn't quite convinced. I understood his hesitation. It was entirely possible we were being held captive in our home.

As much as I despise police contact and, in spite of my initial gut reaction to refuse law enforcement officers entry into my home — my most sacred zone of privacy — I invited him in to look around. I understood the reason for his concerns.

His intrusion was minimal. He glanced into the family room and saw my kids quietly, calmly watching television. Then he asked where the garage was, approached it stealthily, opened the door and looked around. After observing our demeanor and surroundings, he seemed satisfied everything was fine. He politely thanked me and they left.

As a result of that interaction, I felt safer. The deputies simply were doing their job, and I appreciated their efforts.

I strongly suspect the encounter between Professor Gates and Sgt. Crowley could have ended in much the same fashion had it been handled differently.

There's a time and a place for just about everything. And the time to express your angst as to how you're being treated by a police officer generally is after the encounter has ended.

As Colin Powell explained adeptly when discussing Gates's arrest on "Larry King Live": "When you're faced with an officer trying to do his job and get to the bottom of something, this is not the time to get in an argument with him."

Nicole Black is of counsel to Fiandach and Fiandach and is the founder of lawtechTalk.com, which offers legal technology consulting services, and publishes four legal blogs, one of which is Practicing Law in the 21st Century (<http://21stcenturylaw.wordpress.com>). She may be reached at nblack@nicole-blackesq.com.



By **NICOLE BLACK**

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