

Reconnecting with the Family

Emanuel Ansah - Episode 002

*What is it like to be faced with extreme moral dilemmas? And what is the impact on the individual?
With Emanuel Ansah, Medic, British Army.*

Michael: Manny, what was childhood like?

Manny: My childhood was busy and fun. I was born in Ghana, West Africa. Just like any other African child, you would go to school and help out with whatever your parents were doing. I come from a relatively large family. I'm one of 36 children. Actually, I'm the 18th born. So, growing up was busy because you have half-brothers to visit. You have work to do. We grew up going to fetch water. And church was a major part of my upbringing. Most kids who grew up in the '80s in Ghana went to Sunday school. So that was how I was raised.

Then from primary school, I went to secondary school. It was a mission school, owned by the Methodist and the Presbyterian churches. In the morning, you go to church before you start class. Christianity is drummed into you from a very tender age and you grow up knowing about God and believing in God.

Then after secondary school, I went to the University of Ghana where I studied computer science information systems. And whilst in the university I was actively involved in Christian programmes and stuff. But the most interesting part of my upbringing has to do with my family because we are a large number. It's a lot of visiting, a lot of people talking to, like a community in itself. Because if you have that many half-brothers and sisters, trust me, it gets to a point you seem to feel like you've created your own community.

Michael: Did you all look after each other, Manny?

Manny: We actually did, to be honest. The politics between our mothers did not affect us in any way. The common ground was our father, who was interested in us anyway.

So, every Christmas we'd all go out to where he lives. Sometimes accommodation became a problem because there were so many of us. Some went to stay with aunties in the same area. My father was really well to do, so he could afford it. But if I said to you that he had a 13-bedroom house, you'd probably be thinking, "That's absurd." But yes, he had a 13-bedroom house and he couldn't even accommodate all of us. He was a bit busy with the women. I call it community support. And because of that, so many of us were born. I wonder how he was able to name all of us, to be honest. Anyway, it was more family-oriented than here in the UK.

For instance, in the UK, people have a very small family; mother, father, two brothers and sisters, that kind of thing. Mine was not like that.

After school, I came to this country. I came to the UK and I worked with Mill Solution as a print programmer. Then I stayed there I think, for about a year or so, and then eventually I joined the military.

Michael: Before that, was the military ever on the cards growing up?

Manny: No, no. Actually, I'll tell you a joke though. The day I passed out from the military, I called my mom and said, "Oh, I'm now a soldier." She said to me, "Is it full of women?" Because her son is not soldier material. I mean, if you look at me in those days, I was really skinny and I didn't have any flesh on me at all. She was just wondering what kind of military it was. We all laugh about it now. But yes, it wasn't on the cards because I never saw myself as someone who could ever wear a uniform. It was not part of my dream at all.

Michael: So why did you join?

Manny: That's a good question. Now one day, after work, I was passing through the town centre and the army recruiters were there. They were talking about the military, how great it was and the places you could go to and the kind of jobs that were available. Actually, what interested me was the fact that I could become a medic and treat a lot of people, save lives. I thought about it in the sense that, "Okay, war is about killing people but I get a chance to save life." I mean, it wouldn't be a bad thing to have on your record. So, I thought, "Okay, fine, maybe this is for me." I joined up, did the basic training and then went to the Defence Medical School, Keogh Barracks, to train as a medic.

I think training as a medic was the greatest thing I've ever done, because it was quite challenging. I mean, you see a lot of blood during training (simulations and stuff) and you're thinking, "Does this happen in real life?" Actually, it does. It really does.

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Michael: You became a medic when Afghanistan was at its height and you deployed there. Did you put into practise what you'd learned then?

Manny: Yes. In my case, I think I only rested for three days. As soon as I got to Afghan, I was attached to a battle group. They were helping the Afghan soldiers. I think three days into my call, I got busy till the end. It was one incident after the other: a police station incident, my boss getting shot, multiple IEDs going off here and there. So, I went into it, from training straight into doing what I'd been taught. And it makes sense when you are in the field. However, the part about the medical job is decisions you make in the heat of the battle. That is where the actual test is.

Michael: Tell us about the police station and the decisions you had to make there.

Manny: Yes. During the tour there was an inside job. An Afghan policeman, for some strange reason, decided to attack the British soldiers that were in the compound. He went around shooting soldiers who were unarmed. It was a really, really nasty sight. It wasn't nice at all. He didn't just shoot ... he just massacred people. And we were tasked to go help them out.

There were so many people injured that you didn't even know which one to deal with first. And everybody was screaming for attention. It was so loud, and at the same time, we were under attack and we were so few. I think we had about 8 to 10 men when we went into the compound. And it was my boss and I who had to look at each casualty. So, in my case, I just picked the first casualty right in front of me. He held my leg and said, "Help me."

As soon as I dropped my medical bag and I started examining his airway and stuff, my boss said, "Manny, I know you want to treat this guy straight away. However, could you check everybody so we know how to prioritise who to take care of first?"

So, at this point, I had to look at the guy who could barely speak and say, "I will be back." And I went upstairs and there were other people who had been shot also lying, and I had to quickly prioritise them. Normally you write a T2, T3, T1. So, I just put as I saw fit. If the person could move an arm and walk or stand, then I put a T3 and then those that were not talking, unconscious, I put a T1. I did it so fast and then went downstairs and saw, to my horror, the very person that I had left had died. At this point, you begin to think, "Okay, what's the next thing?" You can't dwell on it because you have another person calling for help. So, you just jump to the next person and then triage that one too.

The problem with the triage in such a circumstance is, you may not know all the facts. You just have to go with what you see and use your instinct – knowing that you're doing the best you can for them.

I don't know how many times I have gone through the triage I did, asking myself if there was something I missed, something I could change. You feel, okay, what if I had triaged it this way? What if I had done this person first? But they're all calling for attention. They're equally injured, everybody's injured. But the question to ask is, who actually needs the medical assistance the most? That is the problem with our situation as a medic, especially in Afghan, deciding who to treat is the problem.

Michael: Manny, thinking about the person who died, did that play on your mind? Did it challenge your ethical code, your moral code?

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Manny: It did. I have dealt with it for 10 years now. Every day you go over it. This is a guy who could barely breathe and managed to say, "Help me." And you could hear other people too screaming and you're the only medic in the compound. At the same time, you're being shot at. Manpower, we had few people to fight back. You're thinking, "Okay, leaving him, did I kill him? Oh, what would his family think if they were standing by and I'd left their boy who just asked for help?" But at the same time there's another family whose son or boy is upstairs hoping that I'll come and attend to him.

So the question is, let's assume these two families were actually watching, which family will you go for? So morally you feel, okay, did I kill him? If I had stayed with him, would he have lived? If I had stayed with him, what about the other guy that I would forego? It's like an opportunity cost. If I go see the other guy, he's going to die and if I see him, the other guy is going to die. So, every day it plays on your mind and it produces guilt. The questions actually produce this intense guilt that you feel maybe if I'd stayed with him, he would have lived. Did I kill him? You keep asking yourself that question.

You feel bad every single day. But at the end of the day, the way I see it is, what is morally correct, comes down to the fact: you believe that you did the best you could given the circumstance.

To be honest with you, not a single day passes that I don't think about that one soldier. But if you look at the grand scheme of things, one person died but a lot of people are alive today because of him. If I had stayed with him, they would have died. And if I had left them, maybe that soldier wouldn't even have made it. So what if I'd lost him and lost the others as well?

Michael: Is that how you get over it, thinking like that?

Manny: Yes. I go over this every single day. Specifically, I go over my treatment. Did I check his airway? Did I check his breathing? You keep going over and over and over, because you're trying to justify your decision, whether it was the best, given the circumstance.

Michael: How do you deal with that? In the last 10 years, have you sought therapy or have you done it through your religion? How have you actually found peace in this?

Manny: One way is talking about it with my boss, Captain Wiseman. He kind of took the blame in the sense that he feels, okay, if I had not instructed you to check the others, you wouldn't have to go through this guilt. Secondly, he makes me look at it from another perspective. He says, okay, given his circumstance, given his injuries, what were his chances? Would he have made it? I look at it that way as well. But the point is that because I'm a Christian, and I believe in miracles, it makes it worse for me because I feel even within a split second, something tiny could have changed the circumstance. And that is me pushing the bar too high. But as a Christian that's how you look at it. You feel, okay, I believe in miracles, anything can happen. So, if I had dealt with it this way, maybe I would have gotten a miracle that day.

But sometimes, you analyse things based on facts and your belief, you have to tone it down a bit. Not give it up totally, but you need to look at what is real and what is your personal beliefs. Then you try and come to terms. You get a middle ground. The middle ground is that I did the best I could for him. And every day when I'm feeling guilty, I tell myself I did the best I could for him.

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Michael: We talked about family and community helping you through this, specifically Captain David Wiseman. And you've got family in this country, you've got nieces and nephews. Did they play a big role too?

Manny: Yes, they do. After Afghan ... I have almost 65 to 70 nephews and nieces around the world. And sometimes when you go to visit some of them, they make mistakes. They do something so foolish and you can tell the guilt and the weight of it on them. Sometimes they get so frustrated, they don't even want to eat. They don't want to talk to anybody. I don't know, strangely I feel for them because I know how it feels to be in a circumstance where you feel, "oh, what have I done?" So I go up to them and tell them, "Yeah, I understand what you've done." And sometimes you get them saying, "No, no, I shouldn't have done that."

You try to make them understand that even we, as adults, make mistakes and our mistakes are not there to judge us. If anything at all, they are there to caution us that, okay, the last time you did this, it didn't turn out great. So, make sure you don't go there. And if you do go there again, try and learn something from it. And in no time you see them laughing again, that someone understands them. I think with time my siblings too have adopted that and it's helping them raise their children very well.

Michael: So actually the negative and positive experiences you've had really helped you develop as an uncle, as a human being as well.

Manny: Yes, as a human being. It changes your perspective on things. Even at work, you try to be understanding. Regardless of how rude somebody is, you try to understand where they're coming from. What is actually making them take that stance. I wasn't like that before Afghan. Before Afghan, I was just a normal bloke. But after Afghan, I seem to feel for people and understand them because I have been in that situation for almost 10 years. I have to deal with mistakes I have made. But somebody might look at it and say, "Do you know what, Manny? You did the best you could." And that is how I see people now. When they make mistakes and they come up to me or they say stuff that I don't agree with, I just try to look at it from their perspective and see, why would anybody even do this? That is what Afghan has given me, to be honest.

Michael: Empathy and a change of world view can really come from trauma. Manny, thank you so much and we will leave it there.