

Tomo

Midwest Leather and Kink Alliance Keynote

My Values in Martial Arts and Leather

October 6, 2024

Good morning and thank you to Midwest Kink Alliance for asking me to speak to you today and to you for spending this time with me. It's important for me to begin as I do with every speech I give and every class I teach, with a land and labor acknowledgment.

People often ask me – “why do you say these things”. For me, it is all about the quote by Maya Angelou “when we know better, we do better.” I know that I can't actually fix anything, but what I can do is drop a pebble into the pond also known as our leather community and hope the ripples from my words open minds and hearts among us, myself included, to encourage us to embrace and uplift.

I am speaking to you from the land of the Kaw, Kickapoo, Osage, Otoe, and Očhéthi Šakówiŋ people. I live on the land of the Miwok and Nisenen people on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada mountains – the area where gold was first “discovered”, fueling the theft and colonization of this unceded land from its ancestral stewards. I grieve this atrocity, as well as the ongoing systematic harm to all the Indigenous cultures of what we now call North America, who still work to protect the ecosystem of their ancient homes, care for their tribal members, and ensure the preservation of their cultures.

I also recognize that much the infrastructure and economy of the United States was built at the expense of stolen and forcefully enslaved Black people, and that much of what we identify as “American culture” stems from generations who endured the horror of slavery followed by dehumanization of segregation which brings us to the racist waters that we all swim in today.

Land and Labor Acknowledgements are often seen as performative, and if you only say the words, they are. Please take the time to learn more from, and about, marginalized members of our community, their histories

and their cultures; and how you can share your resources in support and solidarity in the fight for equity. Find opportunities to work with and uplift BIPOC and other diverse leaders; and proactively seek out opportunities to listen when they speak. Don't just say the words, please join me in doing the work together. Thank you.

I have often spoken about my overlapping history in the martial arts community and the leather community in conversation, speeches and classes that I have taught. Being immersed in Japanese culture for two thirds of my life has had a profound effect on who I am as a human and as a leather person. My thoughts about this impact are what I will share with you today.

40 years ago, I decided to try a martial arts class, and I was immediately hooked. The school I wandered into happened to be a Japanese Jujutsu school. Founded by a Japanese man, this style of Jujutsu is deeply rooted in Japanese culture. I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to train in Japan and with several Japanese Masters over the years.

Though our system has many tools to defend oneself, our style is not primarily about fighting. It is about grounding, centering, and moving in your world with compassion, generosity, and firmness. A saying in our art is "No Challenge, No Resistance, No Injury" which means we should not cause harm or the least amount of harm, even when defending ourselves. We use our words first rather than fists. Rather than a confrontive physical response, we consider parrying the attack, whether physical or emotional.

About ten years into my training in Jujutsu, I started training in the art of Japanese Sword, Iaido. The focus of this art is betterment of oneself, cutting through conflict, fear, and hesitation – not cutting another human.

About ten years after that, I began in the art of Hojojutsu, which is a very old obscure art of tying a prisoner with rope. Not the sexy, comfy, let's fuck kind of rope, it is rope that is used to bind a non-compliant prisoner once you have taken them down and controlled them.

Rather than just take the techniques from these Japanese arts, which I believe would be appropriation that I often see in American Martial Arts Schools, I study Japanese culture, live in it and share it with my students. Language plays a large role in culture, and though I am not fluent in Japanese, I try to learn and use the

language as best as I am able, knowing that it is very difficult for me to learn languages. I celebrate and honor this culture that has had such a tremendous influence on me.

I have often brought the physical skills from the martial arts to the leather and kink community. In the early years, I taught about takedowns, choking, punching, rope, pressure points, the hands-on techniques that I brought from the martial arts and modified for rough play in our dungeons.

Over the years, as I got older and hopefully gained wisdom (no guarantees there) my martial arts changed and so did what I brought to the community. Today I share concepts like peaceful conflict resolution, hands that heal, and remaining centered in authority exchange. These topics with roots in my martial arts training have applications we can apply to our lives and our relationships.

Old-style Japanese arts are known as Samurai arts or Bushido, which means warrior way. Bushido comes with a code of living. This code has formed who I am and how I strive to live my life. As I thought about this concept more deeply, I wondered how my immersion in Bushido has affected me as a leather person, as a leader, as a Dominant and as a slave.

The motto in my dojo is “Train with a pure heart, a clear mind and a devout soul.” While I chose those words long before I found myself to be a leather person, there is no clearer description of who I am and how I move in community. I am all in. I bring my heart fully and openly, sometimes too open honestly. I bring clarity of thought and mindfulness to my engagements, and I am deeply devoted to everything I do.

I couldn't leave that story there without sharing a funny piece of this history. My wife Mel brought me out as a leather person, and she is also a martial artist. When we got together, she moved to New York and joined me in running our dojo for 17 years. Early on, we were out at a Chinese restaurant with our students in the middle of a big seminar weekend. After dinner, everyone was having tea and opening their fortune cookies and Mel exclaimed “oh my god, look at this – my fortune cookie says, “you have a pure heart, a clear mind and a devout soul.” I laughed and casually said “well yeah – that’s where I first found that quote”. Hilarity ensued and decades later I still hear about Mel’s disbelief that I created my dojo’s motto after something I read in a fortune cookie.

There are various lists of values or virtues spoken about in the Japanese martial arts. I chose a few of them to share with you today and relate how my upbringing in the Japanese Martial Arts culture of Bushido impacts me as a leather person.

Is this a list of how amazing Tomo is? Absolutely not. I come to you, with my own faults, shortcomings, and plenty of room for growth. I'll share a few of my values with you, how these beliefs shape my actions and invite you to think about your own values and actions in the leather community. This is about doing the work, my work and what you might reflect upon that your work might be as a leather person.

Justice

Justice, as a core value to me as a person, as a martial artist and a leader, is to have a constant reflection of fairness and accountability. It means to make the mindful choice of doing the right thing, not the easy thing. As a leader and specifically in my work at South Plains, it has meant to build a table that has a seat for everyone. This is not about just welcoming; it is about embracing all people who wish to call South Plains home.

There is a popular quote by Vernā Myers:

*"Diversity is being invited to the party;
Inclusion is being asked to dance"*

and another quote by Arthur Chan:

*"Diversity is a fact.
Equity is a choice.
Inclusion is an action.
Belonging is an outcome".*

I am driven by these thoughts as I work to build community space. This is what justice means to me.

Have I always done this well? No. At an event that I produced in the past, I tried to do the work of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion – and I failed. It would take far too many words for this keynote to go into details about the how and why, however, continuing to listen, continuing to learn, continuing to push myself to be open and sit in my discomfort when I don't understand - this is the work that I believe I need to do and that we all need to do to grow justice in our community.

As a Dominant, justice means to respect and treat the people who belong to me with patience and compassion. We all as humans struggle and it is certainly not always easy to surrender. I so deeply value the gift that somebody would trust me to lock a chain around their neck. In bringing justice to the authority exchange, I offer my gratitude for this gift and my ongoing compassion.

Courage

My work in the leather community is simply not possible without courage. Courage is often misunderstood as meaning lack of fear. Not true. Courage is about doing what is right, regardless of your fear.

Courage in the martial arts was throwing one more punch at the end of my black belt test when I felt like I would collapse.

Courage in the leather community is wearing this back patch.

I make many decisions at South Plains and with those decisions, there are some who agree with me and some who do not. Courage is my steadfastness to make the decision that I believe to be ethical, fair, and the best for the event. Is that easy? NO. I take hits for it. This back patch is a target. This work does indeed require courage.

As a slave I am often challenged in a moment of resistance to find courage to keep doing what I signed up for. To obey when I don't want to. To work to find alignment when I don't understand or don't agree. To breathe through my feelings and fears and stay close to my Dominant rather than run away. To transparently share my

struggle with her and offer that in surrender rather than allow my fears to cause inappropriate action. This is my work in having courage as a slave.

Compassion

When we hit a hard spot with another person, what we don't know is the depth of their history, their feelings, and the life circumstances that they bring to us in that moment.

It is not easy to find compassion when this happens. I strive to offer compassion in my work in the leather community, however I get frustrated just like everyone else. Sometimes people come at me in a harsh way with their frustration. In those moments, I take a breath and try not to take on the attack personally but instead offer how I might help communicated with grace. I am not perfect and never will be, but I work at this every day.

Compassion is the ability to have patience with yourself and others and try to see the issues from differing perspectives. Mindfulness, thought, and calmness in the storm is paramount for a leader and I work to offer this. I hope for our leather community that we can all pause for a moment before we pound on the keyboard on Facebook, which you might have noticed I don't do. While I am always doing the work, I DO NOT engage in conflict on Facebook. Please offer just a little more compassion to others, embracing the other person for their whole self, including what we don't know about them that may be feeding their actions.

As a Dominant, I want my world the way I want it to be. This does not always happen! When I am dissatisfied, I first ask my people what happened. I assume good intentions and that the failure was due to a misunderstanding or circumstances beyond our control. Offering compassion to my people builds trust so that they can feel safe in failure. We all fail. How we manage failure is much more important than the failure itself.

Respect

I lead with respect for all people in everything I do. A core value in the martial arts and a core value in the leather community, respect begins with yourself. From there, you can offer courtesy and politeness to others. In the culture of Bushido, respect is required even toward your enemy.

Respect costs nothing. Kindness costs nothing. I am reminded of an example of respect in the face of the fire that has impacted me deeply - Barack and Michele Obama's famous quote "when they go low, we go high". This inspires me. Regardless of the attack, I try to move with respect, ethics, and as the saying goes – take the high road.

In authority exchange, respect goes in both directions. Both sides of the slash deserve respect. Slaves and submissives are not less than. The leader is not better than the follower, they are different jobs in the relationship. I deeply respect those who kneel before me as well as the one who I kneel before.

Integrity

Every day I lead with integrity in all aspects of my life. For me, this means being honest and always making choices that align with my principles. I am authentic, truthful, straightforward and sincere. I hope that by my behavior in my personal relationships I build layers of trust with people. This does not mean that I don't make mistakes – I make plenty. However, when I get it wrong, the mistake was made with intention rooted in integrity.

As a slave, my integrity is demonstrated with truthfulness and transparency. I am reminded of a recent story about my Dominant and I. I love ginger chews. When it gets close to South Plains time and I get stressed, I just about eat them like chain smoking. I shared this story with my Dominant and she said "hand me the bag of ginger chews." She reached into the bag and handed me 4, one for each day until I would see her again. Then she kept the bag! The four candies sat on my desk and I ate one each day. My Dominant was not with me at my home. I could have eaten all 4, or frankly gone into another bag of ginger chews that I have in the pantry and she'd never know. If I did that, what would we have. Nothing. If we don't bring integrity to what we do, we have nothing.

Loyalty

Well, I am a Leo. I am fiercely loyal. I will stand in front, behind, or to the side of my people as needed. Loyalty does not just relate to people, it is also the unrelenting steadfastness to stay on my path, no matter

what the challenges are. When a warrior gives their word whether it is to a person or a cause, this must not be abandoned even under difficult circumstances.

I am a Leo, I am a leader and I am a warrior. My word is my bond.

Self-control

I am so tired of seeing Facebook fires. It exhausts me. I have often mentored leaders in the leather community to please pause; take time to think; be mindful; investigate the conflict; listen more than you speak; and please do not react. I know it's hard. It has happened more than once that my Majordomo Levi has said to me "Sir did you want to step away from the computer for a bit." I get it. I understand that we are drawn to react and defend. And, I believe as leaders – if we want to be ethical leaders - we have a responsibility to think before we act. Please speak to people directly rather than convict them on the jury of social media.

This call-out behavior on social media harms us as humans and as a community. I ask my community to do better. Do the work of conflict resolution. Please stop assuming malintent. Please communicate with each other to resolve and heal, rather than burn down.

We say in the art of Iaido that a Samurai never draws their sword unless they are ready to take a life. I use this philosophy applied to how I live. I often stand and observe a conflict, sometimes with my sword prepared to draw, however I use many other approaches, tactics and tools extensively prior to deciding to remove my sword from its sheath and cut.

Honor

Living my life with core values of Justice, Courage, Compassion, Respect, Integrity, Loyalty and Self-control and doing this work every day of my life is what defines my honor. Honor is deeply important to me. Frankly, my honor is all I have. My actions, my words, and my choices create and form who I am and how I move in the world.

Having honor means knowing what I am not good at and doing my own work to do better. As a leader, as a Dominant and as a slave, I do the work. I believe this to be my responsibility.

The Japanese word *Shugyo* in our martial art means deep or intensive training. Having a steadfast commitment to do my own personal work is how I apply the martial arts concept of *Shugyo* to my life. As I led with in my opening thoughts, this keynote is not about all the things that I do well – it is about the work that I do, the challenges in doing it, why I do it, and my devotion to continue.

This is my work.

Sometimes it's very hard. But it brings me joy and fulfillment. Being a leader in the leather community is one of the greatest joys of my life and on some days, very painful. I will continue to build spaces for all of us, to create representation for us, to continue to wear this back patch, and most important of all – to live my life with happiness and gratitude in service to my community.

Is it your work? I don't know. Only you can determine what your values are, what your work is and what the meaning of *Shugyo* is for you. As always, I can just tell you my stories and hope that perhaps something in my words speaks to you, inspires you, makes you laugh, or offers points to consider in your own life.

It has been a pleasure to speak to you today and I thank you for spending this time with me.