

# **Tomo**

## **Serenity Amidst Chaos**

### **Beyond Vanilla 2023 Keynote Speech**

**November 12, 2023**

Good morning. Thank you to the leaders of Beyond Vanilla for asking me to speak to you today. I've had such a wonderful weekend at Beyond Vanilla and thrilled to be back here in Dallas with this amazing community.

It's important for me to begin this speech with a land acknowledgment, to name and contextualize the longstanding history that brought us to stand on this land today and for me to reside on the land that I steward, as a gesture of respect and reparation toward the Indigenous residents of the colonized land that we all call home.

We are gathering on the land of the Jumanos people. I currently live on the land of the Miwok and Nisenen people on

the western slope of the Sierra Nevada mountains. I acknowledge the profound suffering caused by the theft and colonization of land, and grieve the ongoing systematic harm to all the Indigenous cultures of what we now call North America.

I honor Indigenous people as the ancestral stewards of the land, though they have been rendered nearly invisible and their story continues to be excluded from history. Their land was never ceded, and the original tribal families have yet to recover from the near genocide of their people.

As an occupant of stolen land, I support all indigenous campaigns to restore tribal sovereignty through federal recognition, so that all Indigenous people may thrive in their ancestral homelands. I am grateful for the contemporary communities of Indigenous people, who work to protect the ecosystem of their ancient homes, and care for their tribal members and the preservation of their cultures.

Land Acknowledgements are often seen as performative, and if you only say the words, they are. Doing the work means taking action. Please take the time to learn more about the Indigenous people whose land you reside on. Other actions can be to invite and compensate Indigenous leaders in the leather community to offer land acknowledgements at your events. Please share your resources to create space on your stages to welcome Indigenous Leather and other marginalized groups to support their visibility and raise their voices. Let's not just welcome each other, let's embrace each other.

If you've ever heard me give a keynote speech, you know to settle in and get ready, because I am not known for light keynotes and today will be no different. The title of my speech is *Serenity Amidst Chaos*. I will be sharing my observations of our leather community in recent years and offer tools that I use to find power and peace. I hope you find my thoughts inspiring and entertaining.

Forty years ago, I arrived at an airport and was on a bus taking me to the rental car center somewhere off the airport grounds. Back then, most airports did not have off-site rental car centers like they do now. I was on a work trip, arriving in the middle in the night due to a late flight. This may be hard to picture, but I was in a business suit including skirt, jacket, blouse and women's shoes, carrying my luggage and briefcase. My wife Mel suggested I might want to pause here to let ya'll process that picture for a moment.

I was all alone. The rental car bus driver was on his radio, chatting with friends, and I had no idea where he was taking me. I was scared and realized I might not be safe. It ended up being just fine, however it left me with concerns. When I returned home, I signed up at a local martial arts school where a friend of mine was training and that began my journey as a martial artist.

As a professional teacher already, I soon began assisting in classes and within about 2 years was teaching. 10 years later, I opened my own school which my wife Mel and I ran for 17 years in New York. Following my teacher's death in 2014, I became the head of his martial arts system.

I train in three arts, my primary art being traditional Japanese Jujutsu, the second, the art of Japanese sword called Iaido, and third, Hojojutsu the art of binding a prisoner with rope. I have been immersed in Japanese culture and dedicated much of my life to the Japanese martial arts by teaching, with my own personal growth as well as carrying on my teacher's legacy.

When I began training, it was all about the physical movements. I would get so excited about new techniques and as somebody who works very hard at whatever I do, I wanted to get every technique as close to perfection as I could. I was always the annoying student running up to the teacher and asking to "uke" which means to be the attacker and experience the technique.

It looks a lot like demo bottoming! What I didn't realize in my early years was that by feeling the technique, I was actually gaining insight on a much deeper level than just watching. The arts that I study all contain an internal component called center, or internal power called Ki or the blending of such power, referred to as Aiki. Ki or Chi is considered the circulating life energy that is thought to be inherent in all things. In traditional Chinese medicine the balance of energy in the body is believed to be essential for good health. In my martial arts, we focus on maintaining our center. This concept of having an awareness and connection to a powerful internal energy and the centering of that energy to bring balance in life is something I use every day and have for decades.

I've been asked many times "have you ever used your martial arts" and though I realize they usually actually asking have you ever kicked somebody's ass, my answer is "yes – I use my martial arts training everyday". However, it is not likely in the manner you might expect.

By now, you may be wondering if I'm confused and thought I was keynoting at a martial arts conference, not a leather and kink gathering. Well, let me tie it together for you by sharing how I apply these concepts from my martial arts world to my life in leather community.

There is a thought in the martial arts I teach about staying present. Not attacking, not withdrawing – just being present to the attack. I have taught this practice in the form of physical technique for a long time. As my growth in the martial arts continues, I have found applications of this concept everyday.

The world we live in has offered unique challenges to daily life and even survival across the globe in recent years. We have faced a pandemic that caused lives to be lost, many more to be threatened, people needing to shelter at home, many of which were alone, and the resulting ongoing effects on our emotional and mental wellness.

We have faced a rise of social injustice and racism with loss of life and violence against BIPOC and other marginalized people causing devastation, increased fear and loss of safety. Add to this the most divisive polarization of the people of the United States that we have seen in a very long time. The stress of our world continues with the current challenges and hardships today, even as I give this speech.

We breathe this air. We drink this water. It is the world we live in and it is filled with conflict that impacts us to our core causing anxiety and fear among other reactions. Many of us have experienced a feeling of loss of control like never before. It has been unsettling, fear inducing and created deep struggle for many of us.

As a leather community, we are not immune. Our world impacts us as individuals, how we engage with each other, as organizations and at our events. We may find ourselves less generous, bringing anger rather than compassion, attacking first

and re-thinking later. As a community member, I have witnessed this time and time again and as a Producer, experienced it first-hand.

In my training in the martial arts, I have used these centering concepts to maintain my sense of grounding when I feel stress pressing in on me. Let me be clear – I am not perfect nor am I an expert. However, it is my life's work to mindfully reflect on how I can do better as a partner, as a community member and as a leader and this work has made a tremendous impact for me.

My world in the last three years has been incredibly difficult. As many of you know I was diagnosed with a very aggressive form of breast cancer in 2020. I have had three surgeries, went through Chemo, Radiation and still on a treatment that has thrown me into a second menopause. Talk about RUDE. For the record, I am healthy and cancer free today...and shout out

to those of you who were part of Tomo's Leather Army because you helped get me here.

Cancer during covid was brutal. I was literally sequestered away from everyone because if I got Covid, they would discontinue cancer treatment. When I had to have surgery, I was dropped off at the curb and spent the day at the hospital all alone until I was picked up at the curb post-surgery.

We called it Cancer-Chemo-Covid. It was rough. Add to that, while fighting for my life and enduring cancer, I ended up in an abusive relationship that caused me deep harm. The slave in me who surrendered was gutted. I left that relationship broken. Moving through the trauma of the last three years has been the most challenging to my physical, emotional, and mental health of my entire life.

And yet, here I am.

I survived.

I am sure many of you didn't know that about me and probably only see me as Tomo the Producer or Tomo the Educator. Why do I share such personal information? For several reasons. First, to speak to the challenges I have had in recent years to remain in my center even in facing a life threatening illness and abuse. Second, to put a spotlight on the fact that abuse happens in our community and if it can happen to me, it can happen to you. And lastly, to tell you, the person listening to me right now who has suffered, that I see you and you are not alone.

The last three years have provided a vast opportunity to learn about staying grounded in my center as we speak of in my martial arts. I wanted to share this with you today because I believe if we can try to recognize our fears and seek our center and grounding, it can make a huge impact on how we manage the stresses in our world, how we relate to each other in community and certainly how we are leaders.

This concept of staying calm in the presence of a threat comes from the moment you are attacked and how you respond. It is said in my art that the safest place is under the blade of the sword. That's the moment to challenge your inner self to not react in fear to the glint of steel above your head, but instead to calmly move to the side and allow the attack to cut through just missing you.

I use these thoughts as a leader when I manage conflict. And believe me, as the Producer of South Plains, issues come up! I start by listening. You might notice, while I post many photos of walks in the woods, I don't jump into Facebook dumpster fires.

I remember a few years ago, an issue was escalating in the Master slave Community and people came to me and said "Tomo you have to say something." My response was no, not yet. I need to listen right now. I need to hear and understand the pain and conflict on all sides of the issue before I will add my voice.

I believe staying in my center and not reacting is my responsibility as a leader. My goal is usually to help find peace between disagreeing parties rather than throw fuel on the fire.

When we think about our reactions to conflict, we can generally categorize our response to one of four actions: Fight, Flight, Freeze or Fawn.

I would like to offer a 5<sup>th</sup> response which is to just “be in it”. To seek quiet and stillness. Rather than react, rather than pounding on the keyboard to add our anger to the Facebook comments, to walk away from the keyboard, take a breath, think and hit pause.

When I say to consider a pause, I don't mean to never take action. I don't mean silence. I don't mean to not hold people accountable. I am asking for us as community members and leaders to take a moment to consider rather than an immediate reactive response.

It is important for me to acknowledge and put voice to the fact that pause is a privilege given to me by my white skin. I understand that People of Color who have lived with oppression and other marginalized people whose voices are silenced do not have the time nor the desire for patience, pause, silence or stillness. I stand with you and offer that in your anger, in your lack of safety, in that moment of attack – grounding with your core will bring you power in your fight.

A quote from meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg: “Meditation does not replace action. Both are necessary, they strengthen each other, and ‘pause’ is not an excuse for inaction when action is necessary.”

I was sharing these thoughts with my Majordomo Levi and he told me about something his Dharma teacher said “find your center in “what is” in the strongest way that you personally can, not to condone that which oppresses you, but because

firm boots on the ground would help you fight for the future that you want. “

The internet has created a global community. As humans, we are social creatures and while the internet brings us incredible opportunities for extended geographic connections, living in this world also means we are one message away from being burned down or burning somebody down. I ask us to consider before responding “Am I working to resolve conflict in our community or to escalate it”?

I wonder if when we react immediately, it is from the roots of the classic trauma-based responses of fight, flight, freeze or fawn instead of a centered constructive response. I wonder if a temporary halt might help us to make the choice of calling people IN rather than calling people OUT.

There is a philosophy from the Japanese Martial Arts that I have embraced for many years called “Fudoshin”. It has helped me

to find peace in my life. It is so important to me that I wear it around my neck and on my wrist every day. Fudoshin literally means “Immovable Mind.” An example of Fudoshin is a mountain that remains steadfast in the midst of a raging storm.

Fudoshin has helped me stay steadfast amidst the chaos of our world. I try to not be shaken by praise or blame. I receive many thanks and accolades for the work I do in community. I accept them with humility, because while I am grateful to be seen, I don't do the work for recognition. The work that I do is led by my passion and joy and to hopefully impact my beloved Leather Community in meaningful and positive ways.

I struggle with people's anger. I'll be honest, the folk who are mean and rude to me about South Plains get to me. It hurts sometimes. When I struggle, I work hard at the concept of Fudoshin to not be shaken by discourtesy, entitlement or insolence.

Am I great at this! NO! This is the mindful labor that I do to live a more peaceful and happy life.

How do we this tangibly? The first step I think is stop and be still in body and mind. Pause, take a breath, a deep breath and then another. Feel the tension in your body and acknowledge it, however don't let it control your actions. Manage your feelings even when they are big using whatever tools might work for you. Do the work to find patience with self and with community.

I believe doing this work enables us to take more responsibility for our actions, make better decisions, feel more confidence in the face of challenge, brings us increased happiness, and helps us to be community members with grace.

My passion is to build. Rather than burn down, I am drawn to make things better. I don't want to use my energy to attack, to complain, or to tear apart. I also recognize that while I prefer to

call people IN, if a person or organization is doing harm and is not willing to be accountable, they must to be called OUT and if necessary, burned down. Calling to accountability from your own steadfast and powerful place, even when it's hard, can enable greater strategy, solidarity and impact.

I take a lot of deep breaths, hours of mindful reflection and contemplation. When I feel fear, anger, frustration, I sit in it and try to feel the ground beneath my feet or feel the warmth of the sun on my body. Often, I go for a walk in the woods with Mel and our dogs. I recognize the conflict of the moment, I feel it, see it, and seek to remain strong and grounded even in the winds of the storm.

I hope to be a leader who takes action from clarity not panic, who acts, not reacts. Living this way with a focus on gratitude and generosity has brought me peace. I wish this feeling of peace for all of us as members of the leather community and it

is my hope that the more we can develop this in ourselves, the greater capacity we will have to offer it to others.

My message today speaks to hope, patience, resilience, compassion and generosity. Please hear that I see you, I see our collective struggle in recent years and yet here we are, healing together, gathering in leather community together, doing our best to support each other, engaging with each other, and I am hoping as we all continue to recover and do our own personal work, we are able to be together with compassion and generosity.

I'll leave you with a quote from Michelle Obama:

*“There’s power in allowing yourself to be known and heard, in owning your unique story, in using your authentic voice. And there’s grace in being willing to know and hear others.”*

Thank you.