

Tomo

Concepts From My Non-Binary World

SW Ms Contest Weekend Keynote

July 16, 2023

Good morning and thank you, Master Trent and slave Kelly, for asking me to speak here today. I am thrilled to be here at the first Southwest Master slave Contest Weekend in Colorado, to see the birth of this new iteration of the SW Master slave regional contest. My thanks and congratulations to you both for such a successful weekend. Also, my thanks to all of you. I have felt so welcomed and loved this weekend. It has been a while since I have been in this Colorado community with you – Thunder in the Mountains #2 to be exact! It's been a minute! I have felt so loved and welcomed by all of you, thank you for that and every penny of it!

It is important for me to begin with a land acknowledgment, to name and contextualize the longstanding history that brought me to reside the beloved land that I steward, as a gesture of respect and reparation toward the Indigenous residents of the colonized land that I now call home.

I currently live on land of the Miwok and Nisenen people on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada mountains, about halfway between what is known today as Sacramento and South Lake Tahoe, California. As we heard from Master Beast last night, there were many indigenous tribes who stewarded the land that we call Colorado today. Here locally, I speak to you as a guest on the land of the Cheyenne, Ute, and Apache people.

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

I honor the first nation 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 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. There is a website you can begin with native-land.ca that contains a map that you can use to look up your location. Other action items can be to invite and compensate Indigenous leaders in the leather community to offer land acknowledgements at your events, or to share your resources to create space on your stages to welcome Indigenous Leather and support their visibility, or make a donation to support the indigenous people in your area.

When I am asked to keynote, I consider what thoughts are in the forefront of my mind at the moment, what am I learning, what I am struggling with and working on and what questions might I be pondering.

As a leader, I also consider the current issues in our community, how they affect my life and the life of those around me. And lastly, I wonder what all of you - the folx enjoying their pancakes (THANK YOU PEARLS!) as we wind down the weekend together - might find interesting because even though it is Sunday, I am not here to preach, I am here to offer some thoughts and stories from my life that will hopefully entertain you! Though disclaimer – if you have heard me keynote before, they are typically not full of humor but thought provoking. I am much funnier as an emcee!

The idea that was loud and clear in my mind today was to speak about the many ways my life is non-binary though I live, along with all of you, in a primarily binary world. I was inspired to share my thoughts with you about non-binary as a way of living, which has been at the forefront of my personal work in recent years.

There are so many examples of assumed binary thinking and binary as the default in the world around us. For example, night and day, good vs bad. Any of us who have studied computers and technology remember the beginning with zeros and ones, on vs. off, true vs false.

In my life, I try to focus on all that exists in between night and day. As a metaphor for life, I try to see the changing streams of daylight as the sun begins to rise and the many shades of dimming during twilight as it sets at night, instead of just the height of the sun in the mid-day sky or the darkness of the middle of the night.

In other words, I try to live as if my life is not a light switch with either on or off, but more like a dimmer switch with unlimited settings between the points of on and off.

GENDER

When we hear the word non-binary, we often refer to gender so you may have already had thoughts that the topic of my speech will be about gender. Fair enough. That is actually where I

am going to start. However, I'm also going to offer you other thoughts about living a non-binary life that goes beyond gender.

From a young age, long before we had the language of non-binary, gender non-conforming, gender queer and other supportive words that I am grateful are now available to us, I saw my gender not as one or the other of two points, but a moving point along a very long line of infinite stopping places between male and female.

I've never been comfortable saying he or she and for those of you who have known me for decades in the leather community, you've might have noticed that my pronouns have changed a few times.

When I came out in leather 29 years ago, learning who I was as a Dominant was easy - I was a Sir. I figured that out quickly and without difficulty at the time.

As someone who surrenders though, I felt that I had to pick between "boy" and "girl." I knew I didn't feel like a girl, so I chose boy. I certainly didn't choose "submissive" because if you know me at all, you know I cannot even spell the word!

Choosnig "boy" didn't go so well for me. I frequently had people pat me on the head and say "when you grow up boy" to which my response accompanied by a glare was "I am already pretty fucking grown up."

Not to say I don't have a playful boyish side that few people ever see, but it is not the leading part of my personality. Whenever I am with submissives, I don't get playful. Instead, I want to fuck them, hurt them, and then put them to work!

Though I initially chose boy, I didn't feel "male" and at the time, there were far fewer options with gender language. At least this was my level of understanding, learning, and was my

experience. It was all very confusing for me. Fast forward about ten years into my life as a leather person, I found myself to be a slave. With regard to gender, it was actually freeing. Slave is a gender-neutral term, and I no longer had to pick boy or girl. For this reason and many other reasons, which will be shared in other keynotes and classes, finding myself as a slave was incredibly transformative and freeing for me.

In May, I had top surgery. This choice was not led by gender affirmation, but for various reasons as a post-cancer choice to mitigate risk and symptoms I still had from treatment in 2020. I was fortunate to find a surgeon who was a breast cancer surgeon and a plastic reconstruction surgeon who could provide me with the cancer benefit I wanted and... gender affirming surgery. During the consult, I showed her pictures of a friend's chest who had top surgery and said "make me look like this" and... she did! The friend was 20 years younger and I didn't get that benefit, but she did her best with this 59-year-old body.

When I look in the mirror today with a shirt on, I see the chest I saw in my mind my entire life. I am so grateful to see my body in the way I have always wished it looked like. It is just incredible.

At first after surgery, I thought... why didn't I do this 30 years ago. That brought me right back to thinking about the binary and non-binary. 20 and 30 years ago, it was unusual for a butch dyke to have top surgery. This was long before "Trans" was a more compassionate term surrounding a spectrum of gender non-conforming existence. My understanding at the time was Trans was only a yes or no. Binary. You were transitioning from one gender point to another or you weren't.

It never occurred to me 30 years ago that I could have top surgery and not consider myself trans. As somebody that leads with deep respect, it felt disrespectful to trans people for me to do so. And now... I stand here as a gender queer butch leatherdyke, who won't choose male or female, who won't choose he or she and instead I chose to be here just exactly as I am, wherever on the gender spectrum that happens to be – and with my fabulous new chest.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Another area of my life where non-binary thought has had significant movement and growth is in communication and conflict resolution. I used to be a very binary thinker. I used to entrench in conflict. I had to be right and you had to be wrong. Because if you were right, I was wrong. Either/or. Either you OR me.

I realized that this was another way in my life where I was living and thinking as binary. It was a part of me that I didn't like and I worked hard over the years to change it. This work has been to learn that when I am in conflict, I open my world to knowing that the other person's perspective, feelings and experience exists - as well as mine. It doesn't have to be one or the other. You can have your perspective and I can acknowledge it and still have mine. We can both be right, we can both win. The relationship wins. Doing the work to see this, and to change my approach to a non-binary view in conflict resolution and communication has brought me peace.

Recently, as an elder in the martial arts community, I was approached and asked for mentorship from a leader who was using binary thinking and deeply entrenched in her approach to conflict within the organization they are the president of.

I explained to them that I see my job as a leader to not to just listen to the people who agree with me. The higher priority actually, as I see it, is to listen to the people that don't agree and even more importantly bring all the people to the table to see, hear, and respect each other. This is the work of a leader and while not easy, something I believe to be imperative. I strive to do this work well every day. Using an approach of listening, seeing and considering all sides lets us see the possibilities between two points of a conflict, even on a large organizational scale.

Sometimes, there are hard decisions that may not end up in a 100% win for anyone and instead are resolved with some other shared percentage. I believe strongly that I don't get to NOT represent people whose views are different than mine. This is the exhaustion, the uncertainty and the vulnerability in leadership, however essential to offer ourselves and others grace.

I am not standing here saying this is easy or I am perfect. I am far from it. However, I am learning and doing the work to apply this non-binary concept as I move in my world: in intimate partnerships, in community work, in my entire life. This allows me to be open to seeing all points of information, feelings, thoughts, and emotions from my grounded center with harmony - which offers my most generous, compassionate self.

I wonder if in our community, we can pause and take a breath in those moments we want to pound on the keyboard to add our words to a Facebook thread or grab the phone to confront with our harsh opinion. In this pause, perhaps we can allow the other sides of the issue to exist. Not to necessarily agree, not to relinquish our core values, and certainly not to fold the boundaries we set for our own self-care, but to extend our viewpoints with compassion and generosity with each other. Having open discussions, working with each other, rather than burning each other down.

AUTHORITY EXCHANGE

Master and slave – another representation of binary.

From the moment I came out in leather, I knew two things...

- (1) I needed authority exchange and
- (2) I was a Dominant and also needed to surrender

I am not a switch and never have felt like a switch. Again, an on/off binary concept that doesn't fit me. Every day, every moment - I am always a Dominant and I am always a slave. These two things live in me simultaneously and fully.

This concept came to me with ease early in Leather. I believe it came from my martial arts background which precedes leather in my life. In the very traditional Japanese martial arts that I study and teach, I am always both the student and the teacher. When my teacher spoke, I would kneel. When I speak, my class of 100 students kneel. This can take place in the very

same class. It has always felt comfortable for me to be both a Leader and a follower at the same time and at all times.

A funny story around the mix of martial arts and authority exchange happened a long time ago with Ms Rhonda. We were very new in our authority exchange relationship and Ms Rhonda had a protocol that I did not eat until she ate. We are out with all of my students for lunch in the middle of a big martial arts seminar where I was teaching. My students don't begin eating until I begin eating. That day, Ms Rhonda didn't feel well and when her food came, she didn't start eating. So, therefore I didn't eat. So therefore, my 20 students down the long table we were sitting at.... Didn't eat. It is funny now but at the time, it was quite awkward to be both the Leader and Follower in a mix of M/s and martial arts hierarchy!

Our community has many examples of people similar to me: the role of majordomo, alpha pups, hierarchical families, middles, switches, and others, yet I believe we still have work to do as a community to create space and acceptance as to what non-binary leather identification can look like.

After 27 years in the leather community, my Daddy, Sir David Labriola covered me as a Dominant and a Leatherdyke. 27 years. Let me pause on that for a moment and ask you to think about who you know who identifies as a Top, Master or Dominant who has been covered in 1 year, 2 years, 5 years, 10 years?

...27 years.

When invitations went out, I was approached by many members of our community and questioned about how this could even be possible.

Why is a slave being covered, they asked? Statements were made to me such as "you are dishonoring Masters" and then others said "you are dishonoring slaves". I used these moments to educate publicly while I also shared my hurt and frustration privately with my family.

Binary. Why do we need to choose? Why can we not see our community members with spaciousness to support them in being ALL that they are. We endlessly hear people in our community speaking about authenticity and living an authentic life. Is this just a personal goal or when we speak those words, can it mean supporting others in being and living their authentic selves?

In our community, while I have been given many accolades as slave, I have felt far less seen as a Dominant. When I spoke to my Majordomo, Levi about this... who has been in the leather community for 23 years, entering at 24 years old with one of his first leadership roles as Director of Operations of the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom. Add to his list of leadership positions Producer of International Ms Leather, International Ms Bootblack, being an educator, and currently Majordomo of SPLF. Yet, when we talk about this, he tells me he feels that even today, he is only seen as “a boy.”

I ask myself and our community, why are slaves, pups, boys, girls, submissives not seen as leaders as quickly and easily as Masters and Dominants - and how can we do better? Are we able to see leaders in a non-binary view where slaves can be recognized as the leaders they are?

I will continue to stand on stages to ask my community to consider that question. I am speaking to you today as the owner of South Plains Leatherfest, the owner of the International Master slave contest, the owner of the International Person of Leather Contest, as a Dominant **and as a slave** - wearing my cover and my International slave 2016 backpatch as an illustration of this concept and an invitation to my community to expand our vision.

SUMMARY

As I've been describing this morning, I know in my life, I have benefited from trying to see and trying to experience all the points in between any two points of reference. Whether it is gender, conflict, or being both a Dominant and a slave - I don't need to make binary choices. I accept who I am and seek the place in the middle somewhere between the binary.

I wonder as a community if we can imagine for a moment seeing our world and engagement with each other through a non-binary lens. What might that offer us in seeing gender, in managing conflict, in leadership and in supporting each other as our authentic selves leather people and in authority exchange?

When we look beyond 2 fixed points and release ourselves from being limited by the binary, we might start to see the points in the middle which may be less prominent, however are no less real or valid.

Perhaps we can explore with a more fluid reality. A fluid reality that I suspect is already there - it is our lens that needs to change to enable us to see it.

I hope my stories and thoughts today may have helped one of you sitting in this audience, with validation, perhaps new concepts to consider, offering a different way to see the world, or at least

... a few laughs while you enjoyed your pancakes!

Thank you for listening to me today.