The Boxes We Live In… Or Don't

Flair Conference Keynote

November 22, 2026

Greetings all and thank you for joining us at Flair Forbidden this year. I am grateful to the conference leadership for asking me to speak today and to all of you for taking the time to listen.

It's important to me to begin, as I do every class and every speech I offer, with a land and labor acknowledgment, to name and contextualize the history of this country and this land as a gesture of respect and reparation.

I live on the land of the Nisenen people on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada mountains, about halfway between what is now called Sacramento and Lake Tahoe, California. This is the area where gold was first "discovered," fueling the theft and colonization of unceded land from its ancestral stewards.

The original tribal families have yet to recover from the near genocide of their people. Their history continues to be excluded while contemporary Indigenous communities work to protect their ancestral lands, care for their people, and preserve their cultures.

I also recognize that much of the infrastructure and economy of the United States was built through the forced labor of enslaved Black people and the exploitation

of Latinx, Asian, and other immigrant workers, many of whose communities continue to be targeted and terrorized today.

It is important for us to realize that much of what we identify as “United States 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 together today.

Land and labor acknowledgments are sometimes criticized as performative, and if we only say the words, they are. Please take the time to learn from marginalized communities, understand their histories, and find opportunities to support, uplift, and work alongside their leaders. Don't just say the words. Please join me in doing the work.

People sometimes ask why I offer these acknowledgments. I explain that there was a day when I didn't know what a land acknowledgment or labor acknowledgement was. Perhaps some of you are hearing them for the first time. In the words of Maya Angelou, “When we know better, we do better.”

The topic I was asked to speak about and the theme of this year’s conference is *Diversity as a choice. Freedom as a journey. Express yourself without apology.* This sounded like three or more 90-minute classes; however, I’ll try to sum it all up for us with some humor, personal stories and perhaps a bit of inspiration in the next 15 minutes!

Diversity and freedom are enormous words that we use all the time. We put them in mission statements and on websites and yet sometimes we forget to ask ourselves what these words actually require of us.

Express Yourself Without Apology are words of empowerment and it is important to know that at the same time, they are words that can cause anxiety and fear. Showing up as ourselves without apologizing is not something that is always easy.

The Self

Let's begin by looking at ourselves and with a question. What would it actually mean for each of us personally to live with diversity, in freedom and without apology?

Perhaps it begins right here. In a Zoom room filled with people who work to understand us. A community where we can wear the clothes that make us feel powerful, and here on zoom only need to from the waist up. This is a place where we can express our authentic selves, and know that we belong.

And even here, in what may be the very best of our world, living without apology can be scary. It takes courage to let ourselves be seen, even among people who support us. But this is a wonderful place to begin and to practice. A place to build our confidence among people who will celebrate us rather than judge us.

But, what does it mean to take that courage with us when we close our laptops and walk back into the rest of our lives? That, I think, is where the journey to freedom really begins.

I have spent much of my life living in the middle. I am genderqueer, non-binary and a leatherdyke. I am a Dominant, I am also a slave, and no, those two things do not cancel each other out. I have been married to my wife Mel for more than thirty years, have accepted the surrender of my beloved Levi for 20 and offer devotion, service and surrender to my Mistress Nyna. I am polyamorous. I have practiced martial arts for 2/3rds of my life and live by Japanese Martial Arts principles. I am deeply rooted in Leather traditions, while believing those traditions must continue to grow if they are going to remain alive.

Depending upon which room I walk into, there is probably something about me that doesn't quite fit. It took me a long time to understand that perhaps the problem wasn't me. Perhaps the problem was the boxes society demands we fit into.

We learn about these binary boxes early. Male/Female. Gay/Straight. Strong/Vulnerable. Leader/Follower. I see it watching my seven grandchildren grow up, and sometimes it's painful to witness. We learn the boundaries before we're old enough to question them, and some of us spend the rest of our lives discovering we're considerably bigger than the boxes we were given. But discovering who you are and giving yourself permission to be that person are two

different things. That second part can take a lifetime. At 63, I'm still working on it every day.

Finding myself over the course of a lifetime reminds me of learning to speak Italian. About 10 years ago, I went to Italy for the first time. Being of Italian ancestry, I felt at home there upon arrival. People were yelling at each other and gesturing with huge passion and when the conversation was translated for me, I learned that it was over the price of the fish that day. I thought to myself *I HAVE FOUND MY PEOPLE*!

Prior to my second trip I decided to learn Italian so I could speak to the people in the land of my ancestors. I studied online and in classes for 8 months and when I got off the plane, I was certain I would be able to speak to everyone.

I could speak to no one.

I was shocked and being a Type A driven perfectionist, I was devastated. My mistake was thinking of language as an on/off switch. I either spoke Italian or I didn't. And since I couldn't speak it fluently, I had failed. Which, years later, I recognize was a ludicrous expectation. I'm still learning Italian, adding words, phrases, and those damn verb tenses a little at a time.

I've come to understand that becoming our authentic selves works much the same way. It's not all or nothing. We discover ourselves in layers, gradually finding

the courage to move beyond other people's expectations and, perhaps even harder, our own expectations. Piano Piano… little by little.

Diversity

Another part of the conference theme is diversity. I think we sometimes talk about diversity as though it's something other people bring into a room. We say we need different voices, bodies, races, genders, sexualities, and so on. And I agree. Representation matters.

But diversity isn't simply about inviting different people into the room. It's about what happens when they get there. We can send invites and create an incredibly diverse room and then communicate, sometimes in a subtle way and sometimes not so subtle: You are welcome here... as long as you look and behave like ME. We can be very accepting of diversity right up until somebody is diverse in a way we weren't expecting or don't understand.

Notice I use the word WE, not YOU. I've produced events, led organizations, taught classes about diversity and inclusion, and I've gotten things wrong. Sometimes painfully. Good intentions aren't enough. We can say we value diversity, put it in our program books, or better yet, put it on Facebook because then we know it must be true, but all of that is not enough. The real work isn't designing the invitation. It's creating an experience where people are genuinely welcomed and embraced.

When people ask me how to make their events more diverse, my first question is: Are you friends with people in the communities you'd like to include, or are you just sending an email? Sometimes the first step toward creating a more diverse community is looking in the mirror.

Diversity is a choice. But it isn't a choice someone else makes by being different. It's a choice we make when we encounter difference. We must ask ourselves are we curious or judgmental? Do we quietly communicate: You can belong here, but only if you don't take up much space and become a little more like me.

One morning at an event recently, I started my day having coffee, working on this keynote and then joined my friends Master Sabrina and Daddi Cole for breakfast. We were talking about how people misperceive and judge, and Daddi Cole and I were explaining how we are both misunderstood introverts who hold power. I spoke about myself being comfortable on stage with a microphone in front of 500 people but terrified at a party of 20. Daddi Cole and I commiserated that people mistake our quiet recoil as standoffish when in reality it is a self-protection strategy to help hold our discomfort.

Master Sabrina listened and then shared her beautiful wisdom when she said "it is really unfortunate how incurious people are and that all it takes is to ask a question or two and then all of what you thought knew can be set aside for what you now know actually is."

Inclusion requires curiosity, asking questions and actually listening to the answers, even when they make us uncomfortable. It also requires looking around the room and asking who is missing. And then asking the harder question: What have we created that might be keeping them away? That's work we must keep doing as a community.

But there's another kind of diversity I want to talk about, and that's the diversity inside ourselves. We humans are wonderfully inconsistent creatures. I am strong and tender. I hold authority and I offer surrender. I can be fierce at noon and need to be held at midnight.

None of those things cancel each other out. They make me human. One of the great gifts Leather has given me is permission to explore those contradictions. I can kneel without becoming less powerful and I can hold authority without pretending that I'm never vulnerable.

Authenticity isn't about finding the correct box to fit into. It's about becoming less afraid of everything inside ourselves that doesn't fit, and eventually, putting whatever the hell we want into the damn box.

Without Apology

Let’s go back to the part of the theme of this year’s Flair Conference, “express yourself without apology”. “Be unapologetically yourself” is a phrase I often hear. Sounds great and would make a good t-shirt. Like most of the shirts in my drawer, please put the saying on a black t-shirt.

I think we need to be careful about what *without apology* means. It does not mean: My authenticity excuses me from accountability. That's not freedom, that's entitlement.

Let's consider that living without apology might mean that we do not apologize for our existence. We don't apologize for our gender, culture, sexuality, how we live in a loving authority exchange, or that we look different than you.

But we absolutely must apologize when we don't get it right or when harm is caused. In fact, I believe one of the greatest expressions of freedom is being secure enough in ourselves to say: I was wrong. I'm sorry. I understand my impact. I will do better and here's how.

There is no contradiction between living a life without apologizing for who we are and apologizing for when we get it wrong. One is shame. The other is accountability. I believe in our community we need far less of one and more of the other.

Authenticity

Throughout my life, I've been told, directly and indirectly, that some part of me is too much. Too queer. Too butch. Too many spreadsheets.

Some of you know that list and have your own version. Maybe you learned to shrink yourself, change your clothes, your voice, your pronouns or your kink.

Maybe you became very good at reading a room and calculating how much of yourself was safe to reveal. Sometimes that was survival, and we should honor that. But an old survival skill can become a cage.

And sometimes our communities help keep that cage locked by failing to see, welcome, or make room for people who are different. Can we create communities where people have greater freedom to be themselves? I believe we can. But it takes work.

Living authentically begins with feeling safe enough to do so. And when we feel safe and show ourselves, something remarkable happens. We create possibilities for someone else. We get to see the Dominant who doesn't look like the Dominants we were taught to expect and the slave who doesn't behave like the stereotype.

When Ms Rhonda and I served as International Master and slave 2016, we did so with intention. We wanted to show the community examples of a quiet Femme Master's leadership and a loud dominant slave's surrender. You would be shocked to learn about the number of times we walked into a room and people assumed I was the Master. Each time was a teaching opportunity. We wanted to create a place for people to see themselves and to know they are real and they belong, even if they don't fit in the box of what the community expects to see. With representation, something happens and a person who has doubted themselves starts to think, maybe there is room for me too. That is the extraordinary power of

diverse expression. We don't simply free ourselves, we widen the path and invite others to walk with us.

Freedom

This is freedom. The freedom to move beyond defending who we are and actually live it, joyfully, responsibly, ethically. Loudly when we choose, quietly when we choose, and in our stilettos, boots, and leather.

Freedom is the ability to say: This is me. Not because everyone understands or approves, but because I have stopped requiring permission.

As we wrap up this fabulous weekend at Flair Forbidden, I leave you with two thoughts.

First, choose diversity. Not just as an idea but as a practice. When someone expresses themselves differently from you, get curious. When somebody tells you the room you thought was welcoming doesn't feel welcoming to them, resist the urge to explain why they're wrong and instead, listen.

And second, continue your own journey toward freedom. The multiple layers of this year's conference theme are deeply connected. When we welcome differences rather than fear them, we make room for others to express themselves authentically, and in doing so, we actually create more room for ourselves.

Diversity requires action, freedom is a journey, generosity makes both possible, and authentic expression is the path that connects them.

I leave us with the hope that we can take up space while making room for others. That we can be accountable, curious, and keep becoming.

And when you discover another piece of yourself that doesn't quite fit into the box, or someone tells you that you don't fit into the preconceived box they've created for you...

Break the fucking box.

Thank you.