

**Tomo**

**Leather Leadership Conference 2026 Keynote**

***Worn Leather, Steady Hand: A Devotional Path of Leadership***

**February 27, 2026**

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this year's Leather Leadership Conference. It's a pleasure and an honor to be here.

While I may stand here alone behind the podium, I never speak alone. I bring with me the voices of my elders, my teachers, my community, and my leather lineage. I bring with me years of experience, triumphs, and failures. Hopefully, you'll find a glimmer of inspiration in my words as well as validation and reassurance that as a leader, you are not alone in this work and the challenges that come with it.

It's important to me to begin, as I do every class and every speech I offer, with a Land and Labor Acknowledgment. Not as a ritual of guilt or performance, but as a gesture of sincere respect and reparation, to name and contextualize the history of this country and this land, and to remind us as leaders that leadership without awareness of harm can never be whole.

I am speaking to you today as a guest on the stolen land of the Chumash people. I live on the land of the Nisenan people, on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada mountains, about halfway between what is known today as Sacramento and Lake Tahoe, California, 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. The original tribal families have yet to recover from the near genocide of their people, and their story continues to be excluded from history. Contemporary Indigenous communities still work to protect the ecosystems of their ancient homes, care for their tribal members, and preserve their cultures.

I also acknowledge that much of the infrastructure and economy of the United States was built at the expense of stolen and enslaved Black people. There were also Latinx, Asian, and other immigrant workers who faced brutal conditions in agriculture, railroads, and industry and currently targeted and terrorized by this country.

Much of what we identify as “American culture” stems from generations who endured the horror of slavery followed by the dehumanization of segregation, which brings us to the racist waters we all swim in together today.

Land and Labor Acknowledgements are often seen as performative and if you only say the words, they are. I invite you to go deeper. Learn from and about marginalized members of our community, their histories and their cultures. Share your resources in solidarity. Support, uplift, and listen to BIPOC and other marginalized leaders. Don’t just say the words, please join me in doing the work together.

People often ask why I do this every time I speak. It’s because there was a day when I didn’t know what a land acknowledgment or a labor acknowledgment was. Perhaps some of you in this room are hearing them for the first time. Leadership in leather insists that we do better and in the words of Maya Angelou: “When we know better, we do better.”

The theme of this year’s Leather Leadership Conference: *Fortifying Our Foundation* could not be more timely. In a world that feels increasingly fractured and terrifying, the idea of slowing down to tend to our foundations, to look to the health of the **we** in addition to the **me** may seem like counterintuitive to some. It makes tremendous sense to me.

I recently gave a keynote at the Rocky Mountain Person of Leather Contest where I said: “At a time when we are under attack, we need each other more than ever. We must hold each other closer, comfort one another fiercely, and stand stronger together because the world is already trying to tear us apart. We don’t need to do that work for them.”

Togetherness is tending to foundation. Holding, sustaining and protecting each other is the work we absolutely need right now.

Foundation comes from strength and structure. From ritual. It comes from devotion. From service. From the quiet, invisible work that happens over years of showing up, getting it wrong, making it right, and staying in relationship with community anyway.

Every structure, whether a building, an organization, or a community, begins with a foundation. It's the part no one sees once the pictures are hung on the walls, but it carries the weight of everything above it. A strong foundation doesn't draw attention to itself; it simply does its job, quietly, steadily, and without fail.

I remember one of my martial arts teachers saying that solid technique all starts with a solid foundation. Your stance, your positioning, the centering of body and spirit is critical. I'll put it in a simple way that I've told thousands of students – if your feet are wrong, not much else is going to get better from there.

In architecture, the foundation is where strength meets stability. You don't rush a foundation; you cure it. You measure twice before you build once, because any flaw at the base magnifies with every story you add. Leadership is no different. When a leader's foundation is shallow, if it is built on ego, impulse, or praise, the first real pressure will crack it. But when it's grounded in values, practice and integrity it holds, even when everything else shakes.

For organizations, our foundation is based on our culture. The unseen agreements about how we speak to one another, how we handle conflict, how to serve in ways that aren't glamorous like by cleaning the rooms and stacking the chairs. You can build impressive programs, but if trust, accountability, humility and care aren't embedded the structure will fall.

And like all living things, foundations require maintenance. You can't build once and walk away. Fortifying a foundation means returning to it and checking for cracks, repairing what pressure has worn down, and asking ourselves:

- Are we still who we said we wanted to be?
- Are we building from our values?

- Do our actions back up who we say we are?
- Are we fortified to support growth and change in our future?

That's the work of leadership. Not just building something that stands but tending to something that lasts. A foundation only works if it's solid, intentional, and maintained. The same is true for leather leadership.

28 years ago, along with three other friends, I founded the Dyke Uniform Corps. About 10 years after that, we re-visited the foundation of the organization – our mission statement – and realized while our original words were still relevant, we had gotten lost and strayed from them and became something different, and not for the better.

In seeing this, we tended to our foundation by returning our practices to our original mission statement and brought our actions back into alignment which fortified who we were. Today, so many years later, we are once again examining the organization, looking at our foundation and exploring how we fit in a world of gender expansion and movement away from the binary. This is our work as leaders, constant evaluation and repair of our foundation.

## **Trust**

Let's talk about trust. As a leader, building and maintaining trust is paramount, and leaders must be able to influence, inspire, and motivate to achieve shared goals while fostering an environment for collective growth and empowerment. By collective growth, I mean a seat at the table for everyone EVERY ONE in our community not just the privileged or entitled. The truth of the matter is as leaders we must continually ask ourselves "am I doing the work?" Not just planning classes but building events that are diverse, equitable, relevant and meaningful for our community.

## **Self-Awareness and Communication**

To do this, we as leaders in the leather community must have self-awareness to understand our behavior and its impact on others. Knowing when to speak and when to

stay silent. Communicating with connection, clarity, honesty and mindfulness. We must hold space for another's truth and work to understand and find a path forward even when we disagree. Our actions every day need to build trust through consistency, integrity and flexibility. We must remain adaptable, bending like a willow tree instead of breaking like an oak.

## **Devotion**

Tending to our foundation is also built with devotion. For me, leadership in leather is a devotional path. It isn't about being in charge, it's about being in service.

It asks for endurance, for discipline, for restraint, for perseverance, for care. It asks us to kneel, not just once for show, but again and again, in humility, in heartbreak, and in the face of our own failures.

I learned that from my 40+ years in the martial arts. My Sensei taught me that power without devotion and discipline is dangerous. That one should not draw their sword unless they will use it. That true mastery doesn't look like dominance; it looks like restraint, control, and presence. In the dojo, rank is earned through repetition, through sweat, through dedication. Leather leadership is the same. You can't sustain it through attention or praise. You build it through devotion. You build it through restraint and patience. Through showing up and through service.

We live in a time that confuses speed with strength mixed with the absolute terror that many in our community are experiencing. In the digital world, the loudest voices get the most attention. But leather thrives on structure, care, and longevity. Fortifying our foundations means recommitting to those structures, not because they are perfect, but because they give us something to build from.

I've never been a "burn it down" type. I'm a "let's look at it, fix it and build it better" type. Fortification isn't about destroying and starting over. Our community doesn't need more burning. It needs more listening, more repair, and more commitment to doing better.

While I support radical revisioning, it must come with mindful planning, sustainable growth, collaboration and generosity. In this way, we build a foundation for solid and lasting change.

When I accepted the South Plains Leatherfest producer backpatch on stage at SPLF 2022, I didn't plan a speech. I took a deep breath, faced the audience and I said "I am imperfect. Come to me, share your ideas, let's build this together."

Wow. They came. And came. And came.

I listen, even when it's hard. Even when I am tired. Even when I feel beat up. I remain imperfect and I work really hard to respect a legacy while at the same time making changes that were a part of my vision as well as what I believe the community demanded.

Sometimes fortification requires risk. That work on SPLF to change was risk. The work of protecting the foundation of a legacy of over 2 decades and making needed changes brought praise and criticism that continues to be a risk and exhausting. It's the quiet work of tending to the roots, listening and choosing service over ego, again and again. Of trusting my own instincts while continuously learning from the wisdom of others. Of not giving up even when I feel used up. Of continued devotional service. I don't stop serving my Mistress when I'm tired and the same is true for my community.

### **Perfection and Self Care**

Leaders aren't perfect. I'm not perfect. I have made plenty of mistakes. Authority isn't built by perfection; it's built through repair and growth. By listening, being accountable, owning and apologizing for our mistakes.

Repair takes humility, courage, and time. Sometimes the repair you must make is with yourself, your mind, your heart, your spirit, so you can keep showing up whole. I've spent many therapy sessions doing just that to heal from community attacks on my character when people don't agree with decisions I make. I must do my own personal work so that I can continue to do my work in community well. We must take care of ourselves as leaders

and continue our personal growth and healing to be good leaders. We can't fortify our community foundation if we don't monitor and strengthen our own personal foundation. I write, I teach, I walk, I sit in silence in the sun, and I ask myself:

- Am I still aligned with my ethics?
- Am I still leading from devotion?
- Am I listening?
- Am I well?
- Am I still someone I'd want to follow?

I ask myself - what do I need to do to tend to my well-being? Is it a swim, a comforting movie, my favorite food, sometime in the kitchen making pasta, a talk with a person in my inner circle or even a therapy session? Doing this work on myself is imperative for me to serve my community.

## **Ritual**

Ritual is a beautiful part of what many of us share in leather and in authority exchange. Ritual keeps me grounded. Whether I'm kneeling to bring my Mistress Nyna her morning coffee or polishing my boots before an event, or reading the daily haiku that my Majordomo Levi sends me - ritual reminds me who I serve and what I stand for. It connects me to gratitude and love which is revitalizing for me. My wife Mel, my partners, my inner circle and my grandkids keep me honest. My grandkids (yes 7 grandkids) don't care what title I hold. They only care that I show up with love and with snacks. I simply could not do this alone and I am grateful for those who surround me, support me and love me, every day.

To fortify our foundation means to build slowly, love deeply, repair actively and recommit when it would be easier to walk away. To do what is right, not what is easy. We don't just inherit community, we build it together. One act of service, one steady leader, one worn piece of leather at a time. And if we do it well, those who come after us will have something strong to stand on.

Leadership in leather isn't easy, but it's sacred. It's a calling, a practice. A path walked in boots that have been through the muck. It's what you do when it's quiet, when it's just you and your conscience. It is choosing grace when you're angry. Asking questions when you'd rather make demands. And trusting that when we build from love and devotion, we build something that lasts.

So, I'll leave you with this:

I thank the Leather Leadership Conference for the work you do to strengthen our communities and the leaders who serve them.

As you move through this weekend, I invite you to fortify your own foundation with the tools, wisdom, and inspiration gathered here.

May you find what you need, offer what you have to give, leave stronger than you arrived and have the courage to lead with integrity, clarity, and heart.

Thank you.