

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE M/s COMMUNITY
(A Cautionary Observation)

Keynote Address to the
2008 Master/slave Conference

(Copyright © 2008 by Skip Chasey. All rights reserved.)

Thank you, Sir, for that very kind introduction.

As I know some you can attest, the opportunity to give a keynote address, particularly to one's peers, is a rare privilege, and that's certainly the case for me tonight. It's usually a pleasure as well; however when Master Taino and the M/sC Executive Committee extended their invitation to me, my blood ran cold. I knew instantly what my subject matter would be, and I feared that giving this particular address would likely prove to be more nerve-wracking than pleasurable.

I say that because I have a disability, one that's particularly unfortunate for someone who identifies as a Master: I'm egoically attached to having people like me. I want to be seen as someone who is upbeat, who has a positive, perhaps even inspirational, message, and my concern is that, after tonight, you'll view me as an alarmist, a real downer, and you'll dismiss my observations as unfounded or apocalyptic. Worse, some of what I have to say is in direct opposition to that which others who have stood behind this podium have expressed, and I fear that such public contrariness on my part will annoy or offend some of you, including those whom I consider friends. I'm fully aware that being inflammatory or divisive is not the best way to kickoff what's supposed to be a fun weekend, and rest assured that's not my intention, nor is it my intention to stand up here as the "community scold." Nevertheless, I also know that as a Priest in Black Leather I've been called not only to comfort the afflicted but, at times, to afflict the comfortable. I therefore beg your indulgence if this comes across as so much sermonizing. Believe me, I'm as guilty as the next when it comes to the issues I'm going to address, so please know that the preacher is first and foremost preaching to himself.

The title of my address is "The Rise and Fall of the M/s Community: A Cautionary Observation," and my premise is this: there is a cancer growing within the Master/slave community that poses a serious threat to its sustained health and well-being. We must root it out now, before it becomes an entrenched part of the community's dynamic, lest we soon find ourselves dysfunctional, demoralized, irredeemably stagnant, and, as individuals, deriving little value from our participation in the community. "And just what is this purported threat?" you ask. In a word, incivility, and during the next several minutes we're going to examine this condition in some depth, as well as the impact that it's having on our community. But before we do, I want to share with you the context from which I'll be speaking so that you'll understand and appreciate the passion that informs my opinions.

For all intents and purposes, "the Master/slave Community" as we know it today came into being in 1999 at Southeast LeatherFest in Atlanta, Georgia. That event, conceived by Guy Baldwin and produced by Guy, SELF and Masters And slaves Together, was the first large-scale leather conference devoted almost entirely to the topic of M/s and D/s relationships. Prior to MAsT '99,

which is how many of us reverentially refer to it, the subject of M/s and D/s relationships usually warranted no more than a single workshop or two at a weekend conference, if even that. At MAsT '99, hundreds of men and women who were actively engaged or otherwise interested in primary relationships based on consensual dominance and submission came together for the first time ever to socialize, give and receive support, and share experiential knowledge and information with other like-minded individuals. Words simply cannot describe the sense of homecoming and possibility that permeated that weekend. The significance of MAsT '99 for those of us who engage in M/s and D/s relationships and the positive impact it's had on our lives, whether one was actually there or not, cannot be overstated. It's fair to say, and I'm sure that Master Taino will back me up on this, this conference would not be taking place this weekend had it not been for MAsT '99.

Since that fateful event and my involvement in the national M/s community it birthed, I feel as if I've discovered the Garden of Eden, Shangri-la and Camelot all rolled into one...and I know I'm not alone in that regard. I love this community, and I'm not ashamed to admit that I experience an enhanced sense of wholeness from being a part of it. The possibility that it could unintentionally self-destruct, and in such short order, provokes both anxiety and tremendous sadness within me. If at all possible I'd like for that not to happen, and if you're still listening then I assume the same can be said for you as well.

Okay, with that as a preamble, let's take a look at the problems being caused by the unchecked incivility that's occurring in our community. Now, I'm using the rather genteel word "incivility" as a catchall for a whole host of hurtful and hateful behaviors that I've personally experienced or witnessed, or about which I've heard reliable reports: aggression; arrogance; backstabbing; bickering; bullying; cattiness; coercion; condescension; contemptuousness; cruelty (the bad kind); discourteousness; discrimination; disrespect; a sorry lack of empathy; an appalling sense of entitlement; exploitation; feuding; gossip; ingratitude; insensitivity; judgmentalness; libel; maliciousness; manipulation; meanness; persecution; power grabs and power struggles; rampant rumormongering; rudeness; scapegoating; schadenfreude (which means "taking delight in the misfortune of others"), selfishness; slander; tribalism (meaning clique politics); unkindness; victimization; vilification; and every kind of fill-in-the-blank-phobia you can shake a fist at.

In short, some of us are behaving in ways that are downright deplorable, and that behavior is causing the relatively new foundation of our community to crack. The question is, why is this behavior occurring, and what can we as a community do about it?

This is a complex topic, and as I began putting my thoughts down on paper a few months ago I frankly didn't know where to begin. Synchronistically, I received an email shortly thereafter from a friend in Canada that contained a terrific essay entitled "Civility and Incivility in the Scene." It was written by Chris M of Black Rose and Lady Medora of the New Orleans Power Exchange, and if this issue is of any interest to you then I encourage you to track down a copy of their essay and read it, as their thoughts undoubtedly influenced the crystallization of my own. And if either Chris or Medora is here with us this weekend, please introduce yourself to me later so I can personally thank you not only for your insightful analysis of this issue, but also for your courage in sharing it with a community that often disparages its prophets.

In their essay, Chris and Medora offer a searing indictment of those they feel are most guilty of the incivility that's taken hold in the larger kink community, and I believe their insights hold true to our smaller Master/slave community as well. They charge, and I'm only slightly paraphrasing here, that "the worst of this behavior comes not from the novices among us, but rather from people who've been in the community for years. Beginners are usually eager to make friends and fit in, so they typically deport themselves well. It's the people with extensive lifestyle experience, the people with established community contacts, the people already engaged in long-term M/s or D/s relationships, who are often the most judgmental, the least generous and the most prone to slander others." Chris and Medora go on to opine that "incivility may play a role in the community's curious lack of people of color, who knowing hostility and discrimination when they see it, feel unwelcome. Incivility demolishes friendships, breaks the spirit of our volunteers, cripples our social groups, and weakens our claim that this thing that we do is practiced by emotionally healthy, well-adjusted people."

Sobering, isn't it?

The problem with incivility is twofold: it induces hurt feelings, discouragement, disillusionment, and cynicism within the individual; and it creates havoc, desolation and devastation within the community. Incivility has become so pervasive that, like urban noise, we've become desensitized to it and don't notice the toll that it's taking on our well-being until it's too late. With regard to the damage it causes to our community, Chris and Medora have identified an interesting phenomenon they call "The Imperial / Imperious Confusion," which suggests that some of us, in an effort to appear imperial, meaning "as befitting a supreme ruler," conduct ourselves in a manner that is in actuality imperious, which is to say "arrogantly overbearing," "haughty" and "disdainful." They further note that this confusion typically sets in when an individual, having been involved in the community for a few years, first begins to assume a position of leadership, believing that such behavior demonstrates expertise or intelligence or importance. To add insult to injury, those new to the community observe this behavior and endeavor to emulate it, believing that it's proper and expected, and that it signifies high status. As a result, the community's standards of conduct are further diminished and the social environment continues to erode.

I'm sure that each of us has our own personal horror stories regarding the incivility we've experienced—I know that I do. And if we're really honest, each of us can likely recall instances where we've been guilty of incivility ourselves. It was originally my intention to offer some specific, real-world examples of the incivility that's occurring in our community, but not wanting to turn this into a bully pulpit, discretion won out and I'm not going to do so. I will say, however, that two of the primary causes of chronic incivility are narcissism and poor self-esteem, and one of the dirty little secrets of our community may be the proportionally higher number of individuals—Masters and slaves alike—who suffer from at least one of those disorders. Rather than deal with their issues, these individuals use their involvement in M/s or D/s to cover up their low self-esteem or to rationalize their self-centeredness, and in so doing they make those around them suffer as well. And by the way, for those who mask their incivility under the guise of "helpfulness," I'm here to tell you that unasked-for advice rarely fools anyone. It's almost always recognized as the criticism in sheep's clothing that it really is.

Uncivil behavior invites retaliation. I dare say that there's not a group represented here among us tonight that hasn't experienced the negative impact that results from the infighting that is often incited by the incivility of its members. That said, I'm sure it will come as no surprise when I tell you that incivility is not endemic to the Master/slave community. It permeates throughout all of society, even its most cherished institutions.

"Well then," you might be thinking, "what's the big deal? Other groups seem to be able to weather the storm. What do they have that we don't have?" Well, for starters, longevity, mutuality and a solid foundation. By that I mean they've been able to survive in spite of their own incivility and infighting because they have a strong underlying value system that's able to sustain them during periods of disharmony, because they have an interdependent, mutually supportive relationship with at least one other community that shares similar interests and values, and simply because they've been around for a much longer time, and have therefore gained a fair amount of wisdom and an enviable ability to roll with the punches that we still lack.

By contrast, it's been a mere nine years since MAsT '99, and while our community's branches are many as a result of MAsT's expansion, conferences like this one, and the unprecedented ability for finding and connecting with each other that's been afforded to us by the Internet, our roots are still very, very shallow. That can and hopefully will change over time, but until then we simply cannot afford the luxury of infighting, because right now there's no one else, other than us, who will step in to keep us from metaphorically killing each other. No one else has a vested interest in keeping us from inadvertently destroying our community should our infighting get out of hand. Don't think for a moment that the larger kink community has got our backs. We're the outsiders among the outsiders, and the reality is that those of us whose D/s proclivities extend beyond the dungeon are more often than not considered suspect by our leather brothers and sisters, who view us as a threat to their social acceptance.

I can tell you from first-hand experience that while our legal system is sometimes willing to turn a blind eye with respect to one's SM activities in connection with family law and guardianship matters—after all, everyone knows that SM is just "kinky sex," right?—that's unfortunately not the case when it comes to evaluating the qualifications of persons who participate in Master/slave relationships. M/s is still virtually always a disqualifying taboo. Because of the heightened scrutiny we receive from the powers that be, many in the leather community would like nothing better than to sever the link between them and us. If you think I'm simply paranoid, then perhaps you're unaware that at the 1998 Leather Leadership Conference, a policy statement on the issue of "SM vs. Abuse" was drafted containing some imprecise verbiage that could be interpreted as a condemnation of the dynamic that underlies virtually every Master/slave relationship. And when a few years later that problem was brought to the attention of the kink community's leading national advocacy organization, who at the time was widely promoting that policy statement, their leadership responded by saying, and I quote, "Those people"—meaning us—"are on the fringe. We don't care about them."

We're all we've got, folks, at least for the time being, and if our community is going to survive, it's vitally important that all of us play nicely.

So how do we go about effectuating the necessary paradigm shift? Well, there are no easy solutions, but I believe that first and foremost we must recognize incivility as the threat that it truly is, and then commit ourselves to improving our own individual behavior. We must then respectfully confront incivility whenever and wherever it occurs, and hold each other accountable for our conduct and deportment. We must instill the values of courtesy and respectfulness within our community, much in the same way that “trust, honor and respect” have been instilled within the leather community. To once again paraphrase Chris and Medora, we must vigilantly “resist the urge to reward gossip with our time and attention. ... Good manners and general kindness should be the order of the day. Masters and other Doms should restrict their dominance to those who have consented to it; slaves and their submissive kin who inflict unsolicited subservience onto others should be deemed in violation of civility’s dictates. ... And those on either side of the D/s coin, who find themselves unable or unwilling to control their nasty behavior, would do well to seek out the professional help they surely and sorely need.”

Amen to that!

I’m going to speak more about values a little later, but for now let me be clear that my wanting to infuse civility throughout our community is about propagating good behavior and not about legislating feelings. Each of us is entitled to our feelings, opinions and neuroses, but we’re not entitled to act upon them in ways that are injurious to others.

Being civil does not, however, mean that we must like everyone in the community, nor does it mean that we cannot strongly disagree with those who hold opinions different from our own. We can. But we don’t have to “dis” just because we dislike or disagree. Jack Rinella insightfully addressed that very concept in one of his “Leatherviews” columns earlier this year, and his point of view is that “the human race is no stranger to discord, and since we kinksters are human, we have our share of it. ... Each and every one of us has our own inner compass with which we evaluate the various options we face daily. ... Most of the time that has no effect on others, as most of our decisions affect only our personal lives. However, it’s in our community life, where our decisions do affect others, that the pointing of our individual compasses can get confrontational. ... How do we navigate these waters? ... I really believe”—and again, this is Jack speaking—“I really believe that allowing free and uncensored speech, and respecting the fact that others have opinions that are different from mine, are the only ways to proceed. Respect, let me note, implies no amount of agreement, and it need not. ... It is [simply] a matter of live and let live. ... I may not agree with you, but I will defend your right to disagree with me. In the end, I don’t fear division and separation. Let there be thousands of voices each expressing their own heartfelt opinions. Let us debate them openly and honestly, but let there always be respect among us. Let’s agree to disagree.”

Well said, Jack. Would that every member of our community possess such maturity.

Early on I made a figurative reference to Camelot, Shangri-La and the Garden of Eden. Well, something I didn’t mention was that those stories all share the same bittersweet moral, which is that people, in their humanness, tend to sabotage their opportunities for experiencing paradise on earth.

Perhaps that's what we've been unconsciously doing in our community, I don't know, but I do know what will happen if this surge of incivility continues unabated: the "real deal" among us will grow weary of the static and quietly retreat. Indeed, that's already happening in the gay men's leather community. Many of its elders, my elders, have gone back underground, curtailing their community involvement solely to interactions with a select group of peers. It would be naïve to think that can't happen to us, and if it does our community will be merely a shell of its former, glorious self, populated primarily by newbies, wannabies and some plainly unpleasant people. At that point there will be little left to do but turn out the lights.

I'm going to go off on a tangent now and say that I do not believe the solution lies in our adopting a "communal doctrine," by which I mean standardizing and codifying the vocabulary, concepts, teachings, honorifics, and role characteristics deemed correct or acceptable for our community. Quite the contrary—I believe that establishing a communal doctrine will only add fuel to the fire by fostering a subtle and insidious form of incivility that will be even more damaging than that which is blatant and direct. Since the idea of a communal doctrine may appear at first blush to be a good thing, the problems it would create may not be readily apparent. So to help you understand where I'm coming from on this, allow me to read a few brief excerpts from the keynote address I gave at the 2005 Leather Leadership Conference. In that address I stated that "our leather clubs have more in common with churches and spiritual communities than with any other type of organization," and I gave several examples to prove my point. For instance, "both churches and leather clubs take great pains to organize, standardize and institutionalize potentially transcendent teachings and practices, usually to the detriment of their congregants," and "it's only the influx of new initiates that keeps each organization from imploding as a result of its inherent dysfunction."

I believe that comparison holds even truer for our M/s community, because unlike the "Top" and "bottom" of an SM scene, whose energies are generally centered in the physical body, the energy of a Master/slave relationship, because of its archetypal nature, is centered in the spiritual body. That being the case, then as I said to those gathered at that LLC, "when spiritual teachings and practices—and that includes SM and our M/s-D/s culture—are fashioned into a communal doctrine, a dogma, really, pollution sets in. As the community then evolves into an institution, whether by design or otherwise, the pollution increases, and the underlying intention of the community's leaders mutates from that of facilitating the awakening of the students to maintaining the institution at all costs. When that happens, the community's pursuit of freedom—freedom in its most profound sense—is pushed aside by a toxic tribal dynamic of coerced reverence, oppression of new ideas and the vilification or banishment of those who would question either the dogma or the authority of those who created it."

The fact is, there are all kinds of fundamentalists. And the problem with fundamentalism is not that the fundies are absolutely certain they know what's right for them, it's that they're equally certain they know what's right for you, too. I believe that there's no one on earth more inclined to behave uncivilly than an evangelical fundamentalist...and I'm not referring only to religion here. I fear that if we were to actually sanction a communal doctrine, as has been proposed by a handful of rather influential leaders in our community, incivility would not only increase, it would become institutionalized by the multitude of M/s fundamentalists it would most certainly breed.

A recent announcement regarding the publication of Jack Rinella's latest book, "The Dictionary of Scene-Friendly Terms," contained the following disclaimer (yes, I'm quoting Jack again): "Some people have definitions for terms that are completely different from what the rest of us understand them to be. ... This first edition is [therefore] only an initial effort. I invite you to send me additions and corrections; your help in improving the second edition is gratefully solicited." It's my understanding that this disclaimer will also be included in the book itself, and while I'm encouraged by that and heartened by Jack's good intentions, I'm nevertheless all but certain that within a month or two of the book's release, someone in our community will deem it to be a "sacred text" of sorts and, as with all other sacred texts, misuse it to marginalize and ostracize those who have a different understanding of the terms contained within. And that troubles me.

An enforced doctrine fosters an "us vs. them" mentality, and in subtle and not-so-subtle ways we've already got much too much of that going on in our community. There's ageism, racism, classism, and regionalism; hets vs. homos; gays vs. lesbians vs. bisexuals; the Old Guard vs. the avant garde; M/s vs. D/s; and Goreans vs...everyone else. My impression of Goreans is that they're kind of like our Catholics, viewing themselves as the "one true church." But there's an even bigger problem with "us vs. them" than the incivility it engenders: it reinforces the illusion of "the other." As Buddha, Abraham, Jesus, Mohammad, and Mr. Rogers have taught us, the greatest barrier to peace and spiritual enlightenment is the false perception that what we identify as "me" is separate and apart from the rest of creation. This illusion of "me" and "you," of "us" and "them," is the underlying cause of every war that's taken place on this planet and is at the core of all of our personal suffering.

From my perspective, this push for a communal doctrine simply evidences the "red velvet rope syndrome" that's presently infecting our society. At the very least it's indicative of a need to be seen as "right." And with all due respect to those in our community who are advocating for a doctrine, I believe that this need to be seen as "right" shares some common roots with incivility, namely an insecure ego and insufficient self-esteem. Because society is still for the most part exceedingly condemning of our practices and relationships, all of us have to varying degrees experienced significant negative projection. The resultant damage to our self-esteem, and the overcompensating emphasis we place on external validation, are therefore understandable. However, when you know who you really are (and that's another sermon for another time), you no longer need to be "right." And so there's no mistake, not needing to be "right" is not the same thing as being "wrong." Not needing to be "right" is about having no need to make anyone else "wrong," and I dare say that's the epitome of civility.

"So, then," I can hear you saying, "are we to have no standards?" Well, that's a legitimate, albeit difficult question, and one for which I had no answer when I first began the process of crafting this address—something else that made my blood run cold. I was so not looking forward to standing before you and saying, in essence, "I think this sucks...have a great weekend." Fortunately for me, salvation came in yet another synchronistic moment of Divine intervention that, given my regard for MAsT '99, was also wonderfully poetic. Now, while I'm very supportive of MAsT, I'm not a member of MAsT, and in all my years with the Master/slave

community I've attended only one MAsT meeting. I tell you this so you'll know that, with respect to what I'm about to share, I have no hidden agenda—I'm not a MAsT recruiter.

A couple of months ago I had the pleasure of facilitating a weekend retreat for the leadership of MAsT International, at which they drafted a new mission statement and a new core values statement for their organization. Toward the end of the retreat it dawned on me that the solution to the incivility problem in our community, as well as the fulfillment of the very valid need that lies beneath the push for a communal doctrine, will never be found in the establishment of such a doctrine, but rather in the ascertainment of our community's core values. The larger leather community's watchwords of "Safe, Sane and Consensual," and "Risk Aware Consensual Kink" are not a standardized set of rules and regulations; they're values, values that are open to reasonably broad interpretation. That makes the soul-damaging absolutism of a "leather doctrine" all but impossible, and that, I believe, may be helping to mitigate incivility in the leather community—when there's no doctrine to defend, there are fewer "right or wrong" conflicts. We would be better served, I think, if we focused our efforts on identifying our core values and then instilling them within our collective consciousness, and not on creating and implementing a communal doctrine that would most certainly only lead us to greater discord and strife.

Now, I'm not about to propose that I know what our core values are or should be, but I will suggest that in reflecting upon them we might consider at least some of those set forth in MAsT's core values statement: Personal Fulfillment; Inclusivity; Diversity; Free Association; Community Support; Mutuality; Personal Responsibility; Boundaries. Of those, I feel that Free Association is particularly important in that, while it respects the need for inclusivity and diversity, it doesn't preclude MAsT members from gathering together in smaller chapters, sub-communities if you will, that are established according to the desires and preferences of each chapter's members. In other words, in embracing the value of Free Association, the leadership of MAsT recognizes that, in building community, one size cannot fit all unless we're permitted to tailor things to our individual bodies, minds, hearts and spirits, being ever respectful of others who are likewise doing the same.

That's cause for hope, as is the fact that, even though our community possesses some "unique" qualities that tend to cultivate a culture of incivility, thus far the majority of us are interacting with each other in ways that are by and large healthy, functional and civil. So perhaps it's not too late for us to turn this ship around and chart a less dire, more propitious course. I think it's possible but, truthfully, I also think there's something to be said for those who've retired from a less-than-hospitable public scene to the warmth and camaraderie of a small circle of intimates, and I must confess that I've thought about doing that myself on more than one occasion. But if I were to do so, I know that I would greatly miss the benefits that I derive from participating in a larger, more diverse community. And so, despite my gloomy forecast, I'm not yet ready to throw in the towel. Instead, here I stand, committing to you that I'll do my part to help stem the rising tide of incivility that we're facing, sincerely hoping that you will do the same, and praying that will be enough to prove me wrong.

Some of you may remember an old Billy Joel song called "I've Loved These Days." Its melody is wistful, and its lyrics speak of longing and regret, love and loss, yielding and resistance. Most

of all they speak of inevitability and acceptance, and as I was writing the outline for this address, that song kept playing in my head. I think the pensive mood that it often invokes was mirroring my own that day but, in any case, I was suddenly struck by inspiration. In a feverish burst of creativity I scribbled out an entirely new set of lyrics, lyrics more specific to our experiences as Masters and slaves, thinking that I would end this address by actually singing the song. Fortunately, my sanity returned a few hours later, and I'll not be singing to you this evening...much to the relief of the three slaves here with me, I'm sure. I will, however, bring us to a close by reading the last verse to you. Being that it eulogizes the way we were while leaving the door open for what we might yet become, it will, I think, allow me to conclude this address on a cautiously optimistic note...and hopefully salvage my reputation.

*So, before we end, let's raise a glass
We'll drink a toast, please not our last
Here's to our lives with chain and lock
I pray we can turn back the clock
If not, there's nothing left to say
But I've loved these days*

Have a great weekend!