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The Ultimate Tradition

by Race Bannon on September 3, 2011

I delivered this speech on September 2, 2011 as the keynote address at the 2011 Master/slave Conference held in Washington, DC. It was originally written to be delivered on the weekend's Traditions night, but was moved to the keynote position due to changes in the program.

Good evening. I would like to thank the Master/slave Conference organization for asking me to be here this weekend. I consider it an honor that I promise to try and do justice to during the next 30 minutes or so. Thank you also for honoring me with your presence tonight to listen to what I have to say.

As you may or may not know, the person who was originally scheduled to speak to you this evening was Guy Baldwin. Due to transportation difficulties beyond anyone's control, Guy was unable to attend.

The speech you're about to hear was originally written to be delivered as part of tomorrow night's program dedicated to traditions and history. Having been asked to take over this keynote speaking spot, you'll now be hearing that speech tonight instead.

When I asked the conference organizers for guidance about what it is I am supposed to focus on in my speech, all they said was that the evening, meaning tomorrow night, is devoted to leather and Master/slave traditions. They kindly and generously gave me free reign to say to you whatever it is I wanted to say. So I will, in the hopes you find it even remotely useful.

Also, when I use the words Master and slave, please know I am including everyone of every gender or role identity for which this form of erotic bond resonates.

Over the course of my nearly 40 years in kink, I have owned 5 remarkable men, one of them being the man who was supposed to be speaking to you right now. 6 if you include the man who is currently collared to me, but we both tend to prefer to refer to him as my boy rather than slave for various reasons. Those experiences, combined with extensive involvement with people in all walks of this scene, and what I have tried to accomplish in my writings and other sexuality work, has hopefully led me to a point in my life where I feel confident I can impart some wisdom when it comes to Master/slave dynamics and to its traditions in particular.

When one thinks of traditions, the tendency is to think of milestones in our history, our subculture's mores, rituals we've developed, protocols, and so on.

Now I'm someone who continually attempts to stand back from life's happenings and tries to deduce what I see, hear, feel or experience to its most basic components. Being that type of person I take pride in what I believe is my ability to look at those dissected components and arrive at some useful overarching principles. I see such general principles as mental linchpins upon which I hang the more complex specifics. So, I try to do this with leather and kink traditions as well.

I've asked myself... What are the common elements across the traditions? What is the purpose of the traditions? What are people trying to achieve through the various traditions? I think about this stuff a lot. Perhaps too much. It's a bit of an obsession.

You might think that what I came up with after all this thought was a very complicated set of principles. But I value simplicity. I value conciseness. So what I've come up with isn't really all that complicated.

Let's do a thought exercise. Close your eyes for just a moment and imagine yourself in a time long long ago. That time before the internet. Let's go back further to a time before we had kinky publications catering to our kind. Back further to before we had clubs and organizations within which we could gather. Open your eyes.

Take note that in the grand scheme of the modern timeline, where you just went is not so far back in history. The first gay motorcycle club that served to foster the modern iconography of the gay men's leather scene was founded in 1954. That was the Satyrs. In 1971, The Eulenspiegel Society was founded in New York as North America's first SM organization catering to all orientations. In 1974, the Chicago Hellfire Club was formed and I believe it was the first such club to organize gay men around BDSM play itself. In 1978, Samois formed in San Francisco as the first lesbian BDSM organization.

So when you do this thought exercise and go back far enough, eventually you reach a time in the not too distant past where there were no organized leather or kink communities. Everyone was essentially a soloist, an individual sexual maverick desperately trying to get their kinky needs met in whatever way they could, essentially seeking out people, experiences and knowledge on their own. Thus, there really were no traditions, per se, such as the ones we now look to when we refer to leather, kink or Master/slave traditions. But I contend there was one tradition in place then, one I deem the ultimate tradition and it's a tradition I also contend is the ultimate tradition even today. In fact, it's the tradition to which all other traditions must, I believe, be subservient to.

So what is this tradition? Happiness. Ultimately, everyone in this room, and everyone in our scene, is doing what it is we do for one ultimate purpose...to be happy. At least I hope that's the case. If we get honest about why we do all the things we do...sex, kink, power dynamics, it's to be happier human beings as a result of doing them.

Some might identify why we do what we do as seeking fulfillment, finding erotic meaning in our lives, or some other objectives. But I contend that this all falls under the banner of seeking happiness. As human beings, and as kinky human beings, our ultimate objective is to be happy.

So yes, there might be other objectives. We might be seeking to strengthen our character. We might be seeking to improve our level of commitment. We might be attempting to add elements to an existing relationship in the hopes of making it better. But, the final destination is hopefully individual happiness. Happiness is the ultimate tradition.

We lose sight of this tradition far too often. We get wrapped up in extensive sets of rules, guidelines and protocols. We become mired in ever increasing complexity and nuance when it comes to configuring our Master/slave and other role-based relationships. At times, inflated egos belonging to charismatic figures prevail in groups, both large and small, to imprint their own perspective of what being a Master or slave is supposed to look like. In fact, that phenomenon happens throughout the entire leather and kink world far too often.

Sometimes these various rules, guidelines, protocols and other subcultural structures are great intellectual exercises, but unless they are aimed directly at the target of happiness as the end result, they are, in my opinion, misguided.

So if happiness is, as I'm suggesting, the ultimate tradition, then what brings about happiness.

At first thought, many of us believe we know what makes us happy. Even I, if asked, would probably rattle off a series of things that I believe will make me happy. But the abundance of unhappy people in the world, and by my estimation the number of unhappy people in our scene, lead me to believe that many of us do not know what makes us happy. And if we don't know what makes us happy, how can we configure our Master/slave relationships and other erotic choices to help bring about the happiness we rightfully deserve? Because I believe happiness is not only the ultimate tradition, but also the ultimate civil right of every human being who walks the face of the Earth.

I find the topic of happiness personally fascinating. I've read a great deal about it, including works founded upon some serious research on happiness. If anyone wants to look at some of this research, the World Database of Happiness website managed by Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands is a good place to start.

Is all of the research on happiness definitely conclusive? I think the jury is still out on that. But the good news is that there does appear to be very solid, replicated research that suggests solutions to the question of what satisfies our deepest needs and makes us happy.

Based on what I've read, there appears to be a consensus among social psychologists that humans have three primary psychological needs. I'm going to use what's become known as the self-determination theory as the model for achieving happiness for the purposes of this speech because I like its simplicity and completeness. The self-determination theory is a model devised by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan and has been elaborated upon and refined by many scholars and researchers from around the world. The self-determination theory proposes that every human

being needs three things – autonomy, competence and relatedness – in order to achieve optimal happiness.

Autonomy can be a tricky need when it comes to Master/slave relationships and I'll talk more about that in a moment. Autonomy means we must feel as if we're making free choices uncontrolled by others. This seems to be, in some ways, the polar opposite of our way of life as Masters and slaves, at least for slaves, but also for Masters too since sometimes Masters feel unduly constrained in their actions because of their dominant position in the relationship.

Competence piggybacks on top of autonomy and can also be tricky for folks like us. You can be quite competent at something, but you don't always have a true sense of being good at something if you're doing it for reasons not of your own making.

Relatedness means meaningful interactions with people. We need to feel connected to, bonded with and cared for by other people. The degree to which we satisfy this need is a thoroughly validated predictor of personal well-being.

Before I go any further, about a day ago I showed this speech to a friend of mine, a Master that I respect highly, and he made some comments I decided to insert here.

He loved the speech, but said he wasn't sure that he agreed with the self-determination model. His take was that autonomy, competence and relatedness are necessary but not sufficient prerequisites to happiness. He admitted that the inclusion of one of the other principles I'm about to talk about in a moment helped allay some of his reservations. But he felt that without the quest to understand, and to accept, himself, he would not have found his own happiness.

He added that the paradox of Master/slave relationships is that you cannot rely on any received wisdom, protocols or rules. You must be willing to locate your own foundation, who you specifically, and you only, are, separately and together, Master and slave, and start building your relationship from there. He believed that only then can someone know what established or found information they'll be able to use in the construction of their relationships.

I think he makes some great points, particularly his point that you really can't rely on anyone else's wisdom, protocols or rules when configuring your own Master/slave pairing. The model I've presented here is by no means perfect. One must necessarily accept that no model by which we examine life is perfect. Still, the self-determination model of autonomy, competence and relatedness, along with the two principles I'm about to talk about added into the mix, is the best model I've found.

So let me come back to these three needs for happiness in a moment and let me briefly mention two other principles I think need to also be considered in order to have the best Master/slave relationships, indeed just about any type of relationship. These two considerations, principles if you will, are individuality and simplicity and I think they, combined with the three needs mentioned already, form some solid guidance on how we can best manage our Master/slave relationships and make them the best they can be, and for Masters and slaves to achieve the highest level of happiness.

Individuality means honoring the uniqueness in each of us. As the poet E.E. Cummings wrote, “To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else – means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight.” And also pertinent, I’d like to offer my favorite quote of all time from the beloved Dr. Seuss, “Today you are You, that is truer than true. There is no one alive who is Youer than You.”

Remaining truly ourselves, and allowing others to truly be themselves, should be, in my opinion, a guiding principle in our scene right alongside Safe, Sane and Consensual, Risk-Aware Consensual Kink, or any of the other mantras we repeatedly mention. We must embrace diversity, honor uniqueness, and that goes for us who seek Master/slave dynamics in our lives as well.

Adding to our uniqueness is that we change as people over time. We have to realize that a person’s uniqueness is an ever evolving thing. It’s just the way it is. We change professional interests. Social interests. Circles of friends. Topics we like to study. Hobbies. Over time as we grow as human beings, we change. If we’re not changing, we’re stagnating.

So when we enter into Master/slave partnerships, at any level, we are doing so at a specific point in time at which two (or more) people are exactly who they are for but a brief moment. The Master and the slave will wake up tomorrow not being exactly the same people they were the day before, not being the same Master and slave they were the day before.

We must honor diversity, respect individuality.

The last principle I want to highlight before I offer a few unsolicited bits of advice on how to use what I’ve mentioned as guidance within Master/slave dynamics, is simplicity.

My favorite book is Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. I’ve read it countless times and in that great work Thoreau puts forth the contention that the simple life is the good life. He writes “Our life is frittered away by detail.... Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!” In this complex, fast, ever-changing world of ours today, this advice is more relevant than ever. I believe it’s important for every aspect of our lives, including Master/slave relationships.

The need for simplicity in our scene was driven home to me recently when a Master explained that he had an 18-page, single-spaced document that listed everything expected of his slaves. 18 single-spaced pages! If you know anything about research on how much we retain of what we learn or are exposed to, you’ll understand the potential problem here. There’s strong research to support that our brains can’t adequately support more than five bullet points in a slide presentation let alone multi-page, complex documents.

So, I’ve mentioned five specific things that I think go into making us happier. Five things that allow us to properly honor what I consider to be the ultimate tradition in our scene, happiness. The three elements of the self-determination theory – autonomy, competence and relatedness – and the concepts of individuality and simplicity.

How do these relate specifically to Master/slave relationships? How can we arrive at practical applications of these principles to improve our Master/slave relationships? Let me offer some personal advice based on these five things. You can judge for yourself if any of this might make you happier as a Master or slave.

When it comes to autonomy, as I've mentioned, fulfilling this need can be a tricky proposition. Essentially this means maximizing freedom, and it's resolving this supposed contradiction that's at the heart of creating meaningful and fulfilling Master/slave experiences when it comes to this core need.

Some see the entire Master/slave arrangement as the intentional relinquishing of autonomy by the slave. Perhaps this is so in the idealized and, in my opinion, overly romanticized version of this style of erotic relationship, but is that truly what plays out in our daily lives? I don't think so in most cases, perhaps never. It might be that way for discrete time periods, like the length of a single scene or a short contractual period, but for long-term, ongoing relationships, not so much.

Instead, I think the best Master/slave relationships confront directly the reality of these diametrically opposed concepts of autonomy and slavery, freedom and control. They negotiate their relationships, both at their inception and on an ongoing basis, from an intellectually aware place of accepting these opposing concepts. They figure out, in ways that match their individualities and in the simplest manner possible, how to arrive at a mutually agreeable and liveable approach to their Mastery and slavery that meets somewhere between the two, landing in a place they can both find optimal happiness together.

And there's a slider on that scale between autonomy and total submission that will need to move somewhat throughout the lifecycle of a Master/slave relationship as parties on either side of the power dynamic change as people or have practical or emotional needs and considerations to attend to.

Translation? Contrary to popular lore, the level of control and submission in a Master/slave relationship is not set in stone, at least not in what I consider the healthiest of relationships.

The tree that bends and adapts when it confronts strong winds of change lives and thrives. The tree that remains rigid and intractable in the face of such winds snaps and dies. Thus it is with Master/slave relationships.

When it comes to fostering competence, I think we see clear evidence here today that many in our scene do seek out competence. That is in large part what this conference is all about. How can a Master or slave come to the conclusion that they are competent if they stop learning? Through this conference as well as social media sites, local clubs and organizations, books and publications, other events, and so on, the best of us continually seek out knowledge, wisdom, skills and other's experiences to be the best Master or slave we can be. Think of it as our more informal way of earning continuing education credits.

Conferences and events like this also offer other benefits besides competence. How can a Master or slave feel most comfortable making decisions about their relationship unless they have shared

their thoughts and experiences with others and honed their relationships through those interactions? How can a Master or slave experience relatedness optimally unless they have strong relationships with many others, including others who are entrenched in the Master/slave lifestyle? Happenings like this conference offer that opportunity.

Masters and slaves need to foster increasing competence in each other in their daily lives also. This means we must allow for mistakes. This means we must encourage dialogue, not squelch it. This means we must acknowledge that there is no perfect Master and there is no perfect slave.

Remember that Master and slave are but words, and words are always at best an approximation of what it is they are trying to describe. They are inexact representations. Allow for the imperfections. Allow for the variations. Share each other's imperfections in order to learn more about each other and strengthen the Master/slave bond. There is nothing worse than a person who believes they know it all and are never wrong, be they Master or slave. Let's use this conference and every event and interaction we have with others of our kind to learn, grow and become more competent.

And that is a natural segue into the third component of happiness, relatedness. We live in a kinky world that now allows us to relate to and interact with each other in numerous ways. This was not always the case. But we live in exciting times when we can, with the click of a mouse, connect directly to individuals who share our interests. With the scan of a profile we are given the gift of insight into other people's erotic psyches so that they may serve as springboards to energizing and maximizing our own erotic perspectives.

I've also noticed a phenomenon that is taking place when it comes to online versus offline interactions. The pendulum is swinging, like it always does for new trends, to the middle. While the pendulum swung for a while to the extreme of online interactions, more and more people, kinky and otherwise, are seeking out more offline interactions to counter what's seen by many as an over-reliance on online experiences. I think this is a good thing. This conference is one great example of that.

My guess is that everyone in this room has an online presence, online friends, online erotic counterparts, and uses online resources to connect and socialize. But you're here today. You're offline (although perhaps many of you are logged on right now through your smartphones). You have paid money, set aside time and expended some effort to be here because you rightly value the offline experience. We must continue to encourage more and varied ways for us to meet and interact offline in order to arrive at a balanced level of relatedness in our lives. Kudos to you for being here today and doing that.

As for individuality, we often give lip service to honoring it. We say we're all unique. We say we're all individuals. But then turn right around and tell folks there are only certain ways to act, certain ways to dress, certain ways to play, certain ways to be a Master or slave. We in the kinky scene, and the Master/slave scene in particular, are guilty of this a lot.

In 1989, the man who supposed to be in front of you right now, Guy Baldwin, was the featured speaker at the International Mr. Drummer contest in San Francisco. In that speech he pointed to

nature and how everything in nature was unique. Flowers, mountains, trees and snowflakes. All completely unique with no two alike.

Since all human beings are part of nature, and since kinky folks are a subset of the larger global population, Guy contended that people must also be 100% unique. Guy made a call to embrace the diversity among us and I am doing the same here today.

There is the human tendency to want to be right, to want to belong, to want to feel special, and we sometimes, consciously or unconsciously, belittle others, or judge others, or try to control others to make ourselves feel superior. In mainstream society, we see this when people staunchly put forth their religious views, political views, education credentials, wealth, social position, and so on. But such self-righteousness occurs in our scene also, far too often, and sometimes within the Master/slave scene in particular. Perhaps this is natural since Master/slave dynamics can be so intense and emotionally charged. But we must resist the tendency we all have to march towards conformity. It's not a recipe for happiness.

Masters, remember that slaves come to us not as blank canvases upon which a Master paints the picture he or she wants to see, but rather slaves come to us as already beautiful works of art that a Master is charged with attempting to make even more beautiful in a collaborative exercise of erotic and character self-improvement and joy.

slaves, remember that Masters come to us not as blank canvases either upon which a slave paints the fantasy picture he or she wants to see as their idealized Master. Masters also come to slaves as already beautiful works of art that slaves are charged with attempting to make even more beautiful in the same collaborative exercise.

When my boy read the first draft of this speech, he offered me one of his favorite quotes by Edgar Degas. "Art is not what you see, but what you make others see." As Masters and slaves, let's make each other see the best art in ourselves and in others.

Lastly, let's keep things simple. One of the great appeals of things like Safe, Sane and Consensual and Risk-Aware Consensual Kink is that they provide simple, easy to understand high-level structures upon which we can hang the more voluminous details each word represents. If you've ever been exposed to instructional design or learning theory, this same idea of simple, high-level concepts being used as the primary, recurring teaching mechanisms is well known. Thus it is in our scene as well.

Can people in Master/slave relationships arrive at a few core principles around which their relationship revolves? If you utilize things like slavery or service contracts or agreements, can the more lengthy document be summarized in a few bullet points for easier comprehension and recall? When we teach or mentor others, can we present our knowledge, skills and experiences in concise terms and concepts to make them easier to understand and act upon? Can we resist the tendency to over-nuance everything and simply accept that everything in life, including Master/slave relationships, is situational?

So I offer to you these unsolicited bits of advice. Honor the ultimate tradition. Make the happiness of everyone involved in a relationship, tightly entwined or casually familiar, always the prime directive. Foster, to the greatest extent possible, autonomy, competence and relatedness while always remembering that every human being on the face of the Earth is unique. Keep things as simple as possible so everyone can be on the same page consistently.

Since no two people are alike, there is no one right way to do anything, including Master/slave relationships. There is just your way. And your way, so long as it never has the intention of harm behind it and you are always open to growing and learning, is probably the right way. Honor that and it will guide you to great Master/slave experiences.

Thank you for listening to me. Enjoy the rest of your evening and weekend.

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