

OUR CHOSEN FAMILY

**Keynote Address
Master/slave Conference
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Thank you, Sir, for that very kind introduction. It is truly an honor and a privilege to once again be tasked with delivering the M/sC keynote.

That said, when Master Taino called me more than a year ago and extended the invitation, my initial thought was to turn him down—respectfully, of course. The fact is that over the last few years I’ve been slowly winding down my public presence in the leather/fetish/BDSM community, and someday in the not-too-distant future you will no longer see me speaking at kink conferences and events, at least not on a regular basis. But when Master Taino told me that the theme of this year’s M/sC would be “Our Chosen Family” and that he wanted the keynote to focus on that theme, he had me hooked. The concept of “family” is near and dear to my heart, and something that I’ve been publicly exploring for more than a decade. Indeed, during the past 12 years I’ve spoken on what makes a family, what it means to be a family, and whether or not a selective group of people possesses the essential qualities of a family, at three other conferences, and we’re going to revisit some of those themes tonight. Yes Laura Antinou, I’m likely going to quote myself again. But since then I’ve observed something taking place in some of our chosen families that troubles me and that, if nothing else, needs to be brought to our collective attention. And so we will be examining that situation as well.

Now it’s fair to say the word “family” gets rather overused when characterizing the bonds within our various kink communities. Indeed, a quick search on the Internet will turn up literally thousands of references to “leather family.” For example, some of you are no doubt familiar with Mama Sandy Reinhardt’s expansive leather family and the good works they do in San Francisco and around the world. How many members of Mama’s family are here in the room tonight? Then there’s the Southwest Leather Conference, an annual event I used to co-produce that bills itself as “the leather family gathering.” Even the theme of this conference—“Our Chosen Family”—implies that many of us equate our close community relationships with family. But for those of us who have or ever had a fractious relationship with any of our blood relatives, the concept of community as family might feel a bit shaky. In my case, while I had a wonderfully loving relationship with each of my parents, both as a child and as an adult, the same cannot be said of the relationship I had with my brother, my one and only sibling. For virtually all of his adult life, ever since I came out first as a gay man and then, later, as a leatherman, I received almost nothing but condemnation, contempt and disdain from him. For years he demonized me within our biological family, and after the death of our father he widened the circle to include a fair number of family friends as well. Sadly, his actions led to some of my extended family members shunning me. With ceaseless invective he

threatened and harassed me to such a degree that I was ultimately forced to take out a restraining order...something that to this day still pains me. His assaults reached their zenith when he sent out a mass email urging the thirty or so recipients to literally pray for my death. The ferocity of his attacks, and the rage and hatred that fueled them, is virtually indescribable. Suffice it to say that from his emotionally disturbed perspective I was a “three strikes” offender: I was a faggot, a pervert and, worst of all, a Hollywood liberal.

I think it's experiences like mine that lead many of us to create families of choice, and I'm happy to have a member of my own chosen family here with me this weekend. (*Point him out in the audience.*) Richard Ira Levine: the love, devotion and support that you have given me over the past 18 years is incalculable. Thank you, my slave. I love you, and I'm so very proud of who are and how you show up in the world.

“Alright,” I can hear you thinking, “that’s all well and good, but the question before us is are we who have gathered here this weekend a family, and, if so, what is it that makes us a family?” Well, in order to answer that question we must first define our terms, and then determine whether or not that definition applies to us. Now, if you’re like me, you’ve heard or read many different definitions for the word “family,” and there are a few in particular that I especially like. But the one we’re going to use for our purpose here this evening, the second best definition for “family” that I’ve ever heard, was part of the eulogy for a beautiful and talented man named Victor Valentine who, at the time of his death 25 years ago next month, had been my sole lover and life partner for nearly fifteen years. In that eulogy one of Victor’s closest friends declared that “a family is any group that can agree on what’s funny, what’s sacred and who or what the enemy is.”

What’s funny, what’s sacred and who or what the enemy is. Agreeing on what’s funny should be pretty easy. Let’s take a quick survey: by a show of hands, who here has ever been pregnant with my love child? Now for the TNG and the rest of you who didn’t raise your hands and who therefore may be at a loss as to why the others laughed, let’s just say that many years ago a certain former International Master with a limited vocabulary (“WOOF!”) successfully persuaded dozens of otherwise respectable individuals—men and women, friends and strangers, leather and vanilla alike—to come up to me in a wide variety of public places and make that absurd allegation. That’s funny, and I want to thank Thich Minh Tinh a/k/a Thay Kozen a/k/a Master Steve Sampson who, with his playful antics, has been a source of great fun and laughter in my life.

Incongruous images are funny, whether it’s a gay man accused of siring enough love children to populate a small island nation, or a well-respected Fetish Diva—you know who I mean—presenting a serious BDSM workshop while dressed in a full-on fuzzy bunny costume, head and all. (I was there—it happened), or a piece of SM gear that looks like it’s straight out of a Looney Tunes cartoon. Like this flogger, for example, (*hold up the pink rabbit fur flogger*) that was publicly presented to me several years ago in the middle of a crowded vendor fair by a lovely female slave who, upon orders from that same monk-cum-Master I mentioned earlier, announced for all of the world to hear that

“it perfectly matches your style.” Matches my style? Look at this thing! If I were to flog anyone with this I’d look like a screamingly gay cheerleader!

Then there’s the humor to be found in the occasionally contradictory nature of this thing we do, as in the story about the dutiful family man who, upon returning home from work at the end of a long and tiring day, is met at the front door by his obviously upset wife. “Look at what I found under little Johnny’s mattress!” she exclaims, as she thrusts the latest edition of *The Leather Journal* into his hands. The weary man puts down his briefcase, takes the newspaper and begins to slowly page through it, occasionally glancing up at his wife but never saying a word. He finally gets to the end of the paper, silently hands it back, picks up his briefcase and walks past his wife into the house. “Wait!” she says, “what are we going to do about this?” “Well,” the man sighs, “I don’t think we should spank him.”

Clearly we agree on what’s funny.

I’m certain that we can likewise reach consensus on what’s sacred. Of course many of the things that mainstream people find sacred we likely also find sacred: the birth of a baby; the death of a loved one; the pledge to “love, honor and cherish”. But there are also things specific to us as Masters and slaves that we consider equally sacred: a slave’s collar; a Master’s cover; the profound trust that underlies the D/s dynamic of our relationships. And there are several “Old Guard” traditions that, while likely only a myth, still nevertheless invoke a sense of sacredness within us. One of the more well known of these traditions is that of earning your leathers which, whether true or not, speaks to many of us in a very deep way. And the same can be said for the more credible tradition of passing down leather. For example, when Master Steve retook his vows as a Buddhist monk and left his life as a leathersman behind, he passed down much of his leather and gear to several of his friends. I myself was the recipient of a number of items, and one that I especially revere is this belt (*bring out the belt and display it*), with its heavy eagle buckle and the word “Butchmanns” spelled out across its back in tiny metal studs. While Master Steve had more than a dozen pairs of leather boots, this was the only leather belt I ever recall him wearing, and because of that, and because of how the fruits of his vision have touched the lives of thousands of men and women...none more so than mine...this belt holds deep meaning for me. And I know that I’m not alone when it comes to Master Steve. For example, I know that Master Taino considers Master Steve his mentor, and it’s not at all a stretch to say that without that mentoring this Master/slave Conference, now in its fourteenth year, would likely never have been birthed. And so, Master Taino, my friend, as one who also considers Master Steve a mentor of sorts, it would please me very much if you would now take possession of his belt. May it fuse his heart and spirit with yours as strongly as it has with mine.

Before we move on from identifying what’s sacred to our Master/slave community, I think it’s important that we take a moment to call ourselves out on how we sometimes miss the mark when it comes to recognizing the sacredness of “family” itself. As I impudently said in another address I made a few years ago, “polyamory is not a competitive sport.” Nevertheless, some of us rashly rush in and create leather families

without fully understanding or appreciating the additional obligations and responsibilities that being part of such a family, let alone being the head of the family, entails. There is a world of difference between simply engaging in multiple relationships and mindfully creating a family of choice...something that I'm only now, 20+ years in, really beginning to understand. Mastering multiple slaves, or assembling or otherwise acquiring an assortment of kinky concubines, does not necessarily mean that the collective is a family, if for no other reason than, according to another good definition I've heard, a family accepts you for who you are, loves you no matter what, and when you knock on the door they have to let you in. So if that's the case, then the problem as I see it is that when an M/s or D/s relationship comes to an end, more often than not the former slave or submissive is suddenly no longer part of the family. And then the very same emotional wounding that may have taken place in the slave's biological family and led him or her to become part of a chosen family is once again played out. Familial abandonment, and the lasting fear, shame and sense of worthlessness that it provokes, is one of the most profoundly painful experiences we human beings can have...and sadly, some of us here tonight know the truth of that all too well. So why on earth are we perpetuating such violence?

I'm on the fence as to the possibility that there might be a natural shelf life to Master/slave relationships (and that's another address for another time), but if there is then that's all the more reason for those of us who master multiple slaves to be significantly more sensitive when it comes to incorporating family dynamics into our M/s relationships. The fact is that all relationships change. Leatherboys and girls grow up, puppies eventually become their own handler, and if the Master is doing his or her job right, the peak experience for a slave is freedom—freedom in its most profound sense. Recognizing that, perhaps not every new relationship we enter into need be made a member of the family, at least not right away. And when a relationship comes to an end, or more accurately, when the D/s dynamic of that relationship comes to an end, then perhaps the individual's participation in the family need not end as well. Candor compels me to confess that I've personally made some mistakes in that regard, both with respect to how and when I've introduced new slaves into my family, and also by potentially reopening some hurtful abandonment issues when I brought at least one relationship to an end. Fortunately, over time, I've become more conscious—and more conscientious—regarding family dynamics, and I encourage you to do the same. If, as the saying goes, family is the cornerstone of society, then it could be argued that our leather families are the foundation for our Master/slave community. In any case, I trust we can all agree that our chosen families are intrinsically sacred.

I suspect, however, that coming to an agreement about who or what the enemy is will be far more challenging. I'm sure I don't need to tell you that we are living in exceedingly divisive times, and I'm not so naïve as to believe that simply because we're all into BDSM it means we're also in one accord with respect to what's taking place on the national and world stages. If social media is any indication, when it comes to determining the current heroes and villains, even those of us in this room are likely more divided than united. The bleak reality is that the U.S. is presently engaged in an ideological civil war every bit as damaging as the one fought with guns and bullets a

century and a half ago. Like a cancer, the country's divisiveness has spread to our leather, fetish and kink communities. Or perhaps it simply stoked the fires of discord that were already burning, I don't know, but I do know that I am not inclined to exacerbate the rancor. It would therefore be understandable if I were to avoid the elephant in the room and instead propose that the religious extremists who for years have been attacking the LGBT community, and who have now begun to target our kink events as well, are the enemy. But to declare them the enemy would start us down a very slippery slope, because if we view any individual or group of individuals as the enemy it means that we perceive them as being inherently different from us, and perhaps even less than us, and as Buddha, Abraham, Jesus, Mohammad, and Mr. Rogers have all taught us, the greatest barrier to peace in this world is the illusion of the "other," the false perception that what we identify as "me" is superiorly or inferiorly separate and apart from the totality of creation. This illusion of "me" and "you," of "us" and "them," is the underlying cause of every war that's ever taken place on this planet and is the very core of our personal suffering.

The ironic fact is that those who many of us might perceive as the enemy are in reality our allies. Think about it: if it were not for their aggression against us we would not be nearly so driven to live out our lives according to the dictates of our hearts. And whether they know it or not, they desperately want us to succeed. They don't hate us because we don't follow society's rules; they're envious, and so they hate us because they feel trapped by those rules. At great risk we've learned that following our bliss, even when contrary to social mores, leads us to lives that are immensely more satisfying, more joyful and, dare I say, a heck of a lot more fun than those that come from a blind adherence to spiritually-restrictive norms or soul-stifling expectations. Simply by gathering here this weekend, openly and without shame, we give lie to their hateful beliefs about us. We're modeling something they long for but don't believe is possible, and so they're unconsciously testing us to see if what we say is true really is true. They know, deep in their hearts, that if it's true for us it can be true for them, too. That's why they unknowingly want us to succeed. But make no mistake: changing their beliefs about us, even when those beliefs cause them and those around them to suffer, feels like a life-and-death struggle. They're afraid, but not of us; they're afraid of what that struggle might cost. Because of our own struggles to live authentically we know how they feel, and so we also know that the enemy is not fundamentalist Christians, radical Muslims or science-demanding skeptics; the enemy is not, as hard as this is for me to say, Donald Trump, Kim Jong-Un or Vladimir Putin; and the enemy is not neo-Nazis, white supremacists or the Black Lives Matter movement. The enemy is not you, and God forgive me for ever thinking that some of you were, and the enemy is not me. The enemy is not even...was not even...my brother. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, the enemy is ignorance and fear.

So, are we a family? Based on our selective criteria, I believe that we are. But fortunately, even if we don't all agree on what's funny, what's sacred and who or what the enemy is, as I said at the outset that's the second best definition for "family" I've heard. The best definition I've heard is one that was put forth many, many years ago by a Master who, while gathered with those who were in service to him, received a message

that his mother and brothers were waiting outside. In response the Master inquired, “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?”, then turned to the others and said, “Anyone who answers the call of the Spirit is my mother and my father, my sister and my brother.” Friends, by staying true to the calling of our M/s hearts we are that family of which the Master spoke. So take a look around, cousin. Look into the faces of our Daddies and Mommies; offer a smile to our boys and our girls. Give a nod of respect to our Masters and Mistresses, and also to our slave brothers and sisters as well. And please, please, whatever you do, remember to leave the light on for the black leather sheep of our family. And when you do, take note, now and forever, that while blood may be thicker than water, leather is thicker than blood.

Have a great conference!