

2015 – PATRICK MULCAHEY | Building Bridges  
BUILDING BRIDGES  
Keynote Address to the 2015 Master/slave Conference

Thirty-five years ago, and again ten years later, I worked for a television show named Guiding Light. Now, I realize those of you who don't watch soap operas think they are all alike, but in truth, each of the shows has its own personality. We had a character who was born when the show was on the radio, and fifty years later, when I signed on, was fifty years old. Two generations of viewers grew up with him. He was a bit of Americana, albeit make-believe.

Over the course of each year we were obliged to present at least a dozen episodes that were massive production headaches: Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Veterans Day, Election Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, a made-up holiday we called Founder's Day, plus assorted parades, funerals, graduations. I once had to create a Greek wedding that took place on an open plaza around a public fountain, with dancing and a convertible and spanakopita and who remembers what else. Easy enough for Game of Thrones, with its ten shows a year at eight million dollars a pop. But when the entire episode has to be shot in one day, and the bride has to carry mums instead of roses to save money, it's a monumental and a hair-raising effort.

The show was produced in New York, not L.A., in a tiny little studio, like all New York studios. To cram these big crowded shows into it, we had to put all the sets in storage and use the entire space. That the episodes felt credible, even authentic to our audience was in great part due to our casting director. See, in Los Angeles, you can find any kind of prop. But in New York, you can find any kind of person. We got real Greeks from Astoria, real firefighters and firetrucks, real veterans from the VFW willing to put on their old uniforms and be our Memorial Day crowd.

The audience loved those overpopulated shows. And you know what? So did we. We were hardened city-dwellers who'd migrated from little burgs in flyover country. It gave us pleasure to work in nostalgic details of the communities we'd left behind. And our audience — moms home with kids, people waking up from swing shifts, seniors warehoused in care facilities, isolated urbanites like ourselves — they hungered for those same experiences, lost to them now if they ever had them at all, because Americans don't live that way anymore. Four out of five of us now grow up in metropolitan areas, and are lucky if we know even our immediate neighbors.

In my little town, for Catholic families like mine, there was a French church, an Italian church, a Polish church (next to a fantastic Polish bakery), and three Irish churches (no doubt traceable to some feud), including ours. We were in the church hall every weekend. There were corned beef suppers, Halloween parties, Christmas pageants, Easter egg hunts, talent shows, bingo (of course), bridge club and dances for the adults, and a huge temperamental projector to show movies for the kids. (Weirdly, the Marx Brothers were considered wholesome at the time. I learned the quick-and-dirty facts about sex in the basement of St Mary's church from two fellow altar boys at the annual Altar Boys' Dinner, while "Room Service" played in the background.)

The holy rollers and Jehovah's Witnesses had assembly halls just outside town and threw great clambakes and cookouts everyone was invited to. The Protestants had the Country Club. The Greeks didn't have a church, but they had hangouts at George's Delicatessen and a steakhouse practically next-door. There were about three families of Jews, whom we thought of as a particularly ancient form of Protestant; they rented a room for services in the county building across the street from the two clothing stores they ran.

We shopped for our back-to-school clothes at Shapiro's. We attended each other's church bazaars, the county fair, the endless Fourth of July parade, the all-you-can-eat spaghetti dinners at the Knights of Columbus. We had a summer population of Mexican migrant workers, whose cook introduced me to Mexican food, which beat corned beef all to hell, and they looked out for us twelve-year-olds doing weeding and hourly gruntwork on the big local farms. All of us kids who didn't belong to the Y could take swimming lessons at the Country Club, which in winter was everyone's favorite tobogganing spot, since their golf course straddled one of the only two hills in town.

I don't remember a single mayor's name. City government was an irrelevance. We operated on the shared unspoken belief that you knew people I knew, that I went to school with somebody in your family, that you knew from my face who my father was and he knew yours. When I went off to college in a sizable Northeastern city, I had to unlearn all that and replace it with the urban dweller's unspoken belief about every passerby: that person has nothing to do with me.

The first thing we must ask ourselves about "community" is the hardest to answer: what is it?

The primary definition is "a group of people living in the same place." But I think we all know that not every zip code qualifies as a community.

Then there are so-called "relational" communities, created not by geographic boundaries but by the strength of the relationships between members. Anthropologists studying the same hunter-gatherer tribe, for instance. Or a community like ours.

Most problematic is the lazy definition you hear all the time: "a group of people having some significant characteristic in common." Like-minded people. Irish people. People who knit.

Sorry. That's not a community. It's a social circle. It's more like a pack, a flock, a herd. Community happens when people of different classes, beliefs and backgrounds figure out how to function together as a whole.

And yet this pack, flock, herd, sameness idea underlies how we conceive of ourselves. Never mind that we can't even name what our "significant characteristic in common" is. We say "the kink-leather-fetish-altsex-SM-D/s-M/s community" and hope nobody yells, "Hey! What about me?" The LGBTQIA-etcetera community has exactly the same crisis. Our abbreviation is now so unabbreviated that we might as well call ourselves The Anything But Straight community.

The blame lies in false binary thinking. We keep trying to divide up the world into People Who Do The Thing versus People Who Do Not Do The Thing. The People Who Do The Thing — having a standard vanilla sex life, or being "straight" — have The Thing They Do in common. So we People Who Do Not Do The Thing must have just as much in common, right?

No. Here's a thought experiment. Let's postulate two communities: People Who Wear The Brassiere and People Who Do Not Wear The Brassiere. The Brassiered have the brassiere in common, true. But what about the Brassiere-less? To be grouped together as not having something in common is to have nothing in common. And that, I fear, is pretty much where we find ourselves.

The second hard question about community we must ask is: Why do we want it?

Let's acknowledge up front that not everyone does, and those who don't, probably outnumber us. They dip in and out, experiment, get their rocks off, go to IML or the big leather event practically in their back yard. Some will find enough reasons to keep coming back that they become one of us, as I did. Many will not, but will still unknowingly benefit from our efforts at being community: from what we've learned, who we know, our ethics of play.

Anthropologists tell us that one of the great mechanisms of health in small communities is gossip, or as they put it, "amplifying reputations." Reliable information about who can be trusted and who cannot, who will share and who won't, who's bonded with whom and what is their secret history — knowledge like this eases the uncertainty of social navigation while encouraging trust, cooperation, and belonging.

Anthropologists also tell us, however, that gossip-bonded communities have a natural cap at about 150. I'm not making this up. Research has shown that we cannot know intimately or gossip effectively about more than around 150 human beings. Think about it and you may realize that's about the size of the subcommunity you spend the most time in.

So if it's cooperation and belonging we want, then how do we achieve it for tens of thousands? By our fictions. Those are what bind us. By "fictions," I don't mean things that aren't true. I mean things that aren't real, that don't exist in what we can see and touch. Certainly there are incidentals of our story we can cause to exist in the physical world: whips, floggers, buttplugs, "dungeons." But they're just the bona fides of the greater story we're telling, about not hitting the kidneys, about sterile fields, about negotiation, consent, endorphins, subspace, what a motorcycle club is, what Tops and bottoms and Doms and subs are. Our story is not as uniform and universal as, say, the story of basketball or gin rummy, in which you can engage with almost any stranger anywhere in the world. Our story lags behind, I think, because we are still inventing it.

Ultimately, we want community because, A, it feels good. It felt good to my TV audience, it felt good to me as a kid, and I'm guessing you wouldn't be here if it didn't feel good to you too. And B, it makes things easier. We have no Council of Elders, no dictionary, no formal authority to answer to. It's community that allows us to organize and take collective action.

What collective action might we want to take? Here's the top four on my wish-list:

1. Educating the legal, medical, and social-work professions about what we do and why it should not be censured or criminalized. In other words, the work NCSF and the Woodhull Foundation are doing with only the shaggiest support from us.
2. Documenting our sex-positive subcultures. The work the Leather Archives, the Center for Sex and Culture, the Carter-Johnson Library have only begun to do, I'm sure they'd agree.
3. Demanding fact-based sex education for young people in our schools, with an emphasis on safety, health, consent, and can we even say pleasure? Basically, something we haven't even thought of doing.
4. Developing internal communication systems, to allow community-wide polling and discussion, along with mechanisms to mediate conflict. I worry that our over-reliance on social media we do not own and have no voice in has us barking up the wrong tree.

What then is the secret ingredient, the building-block that makes a community possible? Sociologists call it “social capital.” Which is basically this: the value to individuals and groups of their social relatedness.

An example. I ask if anyone in my book club can put me up for a couple of nights while my place is being painted. You volunteer. Social capital at work. It’s a resource, like monetary capital, that can be used to procure goods and services. I get a free room for a couple of nights. You build up social capital with me for some future benefit I can afford you. Maybe I’ll babysit, drive you to the doctor, help paint your house. Things you would otherwise have to pay for from your wallet.

Granted, the analogy to money is imperfect. Dollars go away when you spend them. Social capital goes away when you don’t use it. And money can be counted; you always know how much you have. Social capital, that’s hard to measure. Sociologists estimate it in two ways:

First, by voluntary engagement in the community: the sum of memberships in groups. Boy Scouts, poker clubs, PTAs, candy-stripers, boards of directors, Neighborhood Watch, you name it. “Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition, are forever forming associations,” wrote Alexis de Tocqueville in 1835. “[A] thousand different types — religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute.”

The other conventional gauge of social capital is “social trust.” The population surveyed is asked some version of the question “Can most people be trusted, or are most people out for themselves?”

In the last half-century, American social capital has taken a beating. A seminal essay called “Bowling Alone,” published in 1995 by sociologist Robert Putnam, grew out of a telltale statistic: between 1980 and 1993, the total number of bowlers in the U.S. grew by 10% — but membership in bowling leagues declined by almost half.

Putnam looked at the data and found that membership in church and school groups, unions, fraternal associations, sports teams, women’s groups, and volunteerism itself had all declined drastically since 1950.

Social trust is another casualty. In 1960, 58% of us agreed most people could be trusted. By 1993, that number had fallen to 37%. In 2014, 31% of Generation Xers and only 19% of millennials believed “Most people can be trusted.”

Well. If our social capital has drained away, can we make more of it? It turns out we can.

There are two kinds of social capital. The first, and prerequisite to the second, is called bonding capital. It derives from our closest relationships, with friends, family (chosen or biological), with others who share our background, traditions, our social identity. Homogeneity is its hallmark. My Irish church with its corned beef dinners. Motorcycle clubs and swingers’ groups. You get each other. You see each other. You see yourself in each other.

With bonding capital, too much of a good thing can create the KKK or a drug cartel or ISIS. The exclusionary impulse doesn’t have to escalate to mass murder. We sometimes hear it asked, for instance, in other language, whether our contest and titleholder networks are so self-contained and self-referential as to be a negative social burden on us generally.

To build community, bonding must pair with the second, more powerful form of social capital, called bridging capital. Bridging happens when we reach beyond our friends and the people most like us to the friends of our friends, to people and groups less like us. The Shapiros must go to the Italian church's bake sale. The Country Club must take up a collection when lightning destroys the Polish church's roof. All the imaginary townspeople on Guiding Light, the fabulously wealthy, the WASPs, the Asian- and African-American families, must come to the Greek wedding of the guy who runs the diner.

Ideally, bonding and bridging maintain an equilibrium between the two impulses each of us holds in tension: toward authenticity — the insistence on my individuality — and toward belonging, the desire to share the symbols, the ceremonies, the embrace and protection of a larger human community.

And herein lie the answers to so many of our questions about why things do not work. Why won't gay men come to our events? How do we attract more people of color? Which are both essentially the same question as: why don't Italians come to our church and eat our corned beef with us? Or, to put it baldly: Why don't you come and act like us and pretend to like what we like? It turns out that's not such a difficult invitation to decline.

Our decades of whining about the lack of diversity in the men's leather community accomplished virtually nothing. It took the genius of two men to address it, Mufasa Ali in Chicago and Leo Iriarte in Los Angeles, who had the same essential insight: namely that it's not enough to invite a Black man or a Latino man or any person of any cultural minority to join us. We have to make room for them. We have to let their identity in the door with them — and their people. Because they have to be able to see each other and be seen as they see themselves.

Despite the vast Latino population in California, there was no specifically Latino presence in leather before Leo launched the Payasos, a group of gay Latino men in clown make-up who perform at fundraisers for charity — and who identify as leathermen.

In 1995, Mufasa (recipient of the 2015 Pantheon Lifetime Achievement Award) along with four of his friends founded ONYX, the club for leathermen of color, one of the few leather clubs whose numbers and national presence are actually growing. Because of their bonding in ONYX, their bridging capital is off the charts — as their presence here attests. Thank you for being here.

So. How can we use this social-science perspective to assess our own unnamed and possibly unnameable community?

For starters, our social capital needs attention. We are uncountably greater in number than we were forty years ago, but a much smaller proportion of us belong to our clubs and other traditional associations, many of which gave up the ghost years ago. Nothing bonds us like social ostracism, and that has relaxed, albeit not to the same degree everywhere.

Our bonding capital is also under attack from within, whenever single-gender and -orientation spaces and events are opposed. Sure, we need bridges. But first we have to have something solid to anchor them in.

A related internal problem, and I want to tread softly here, is the dysfunction that ensues when people insist on aligning themselves with subcommunities they don't fit. I could wear a puppy-tail buttplug —

a very small one — and appear to be pup-identified. But pups trying to connect with me will feel thwarted if they look for a reciprocal understanding of what they like and do.

That kind of cross-adhesion is everywhere in our world. Ask ten people why they're wearing a Muir cap and you get eight different answers. So does it still have any value as a symbol, outside your own circle? I don't even know why we're all wearing leather, do you?

On the plus side, I have high hopes for the new style of non-membership groups we're seeing. In San Francisco we have the Leathermen's Discussion Group, the K-9 Unit and GearUp, all of which promote strong relationships in the men's community, volunteerism too, without dues, patches, uniforms or secret handshakes.

Community-wide, it may appear that our bridging capital is not in bad shape. The number of super-inclusive, all-gender and -orientation events has skyrocketed. Still, for effective bridging to happen, organizers need to make their invitation sound less like "Come be pansexual with us" and more like "Come and be you with us, and bring your peeps."

And when we get takers to that invitation, who do come as themselves and bring their peeps, we owe it to them to do the same: reciprocity. ONYX celebrates its 20th anniversary in two weeks. I'm very unhappy I can't be in Chicago for it — but if you can, go. ONYX parties are about the most fun you can have with your clothes on. And to court a stereotype, the music is always many many cuts above.

If we really want a community as diverse as the world we see outside these doors, then we have to take a look at our fictions too, our creation stories for instance, and recognize how inadequate they are. World War II veterans, motorcycle clubs, "dungeons," the closet. The Marquis de Sade and Venus in Furs, by that guy with the guttural hyphenated name. How Euro-centric can we get? How white-centric? How male-centric?

If we don't know how other races, genders and cultures trace their own non-standard sexual antecedents and urges, it's time to ask them. The ONYX panel this weekend about the African-American Master-slave experience is exactly what I'm talking about. Why don't all our conferences have programs like that? Or five programs like that?

Finally, we have to take a look at the measure of social capital we are most deficient in. We're all sick to death, myself included, of the endless community harping on scene names. But what that conversation is really about is our level of social trust. Do we believe most people can be trusted? Clearly we don't, if we only feel safe withholding our names from each other.

"Trust," someone said, "is the chicken soup of social life." There is no substitute for it, in our play, in our clubs, in our church basements. But here is the thing that is missing from all those frustrating debates over scene names: trust has to be a two-way street.

First, you have to trust I have good reasons for not wanting my name published on Facebook or the evening news. Second, I must trust that when I tell you about me, that won't happen. Every time those two things line up successfully, our collective trust advances a click of the dial.

And that really is the bottom line: reciprocity is the engine of building community. You trust me, I trust you. You come to my party, I go to yours. You honor my history, my symbols, I honor yours. You show up for me, I show up for you.

It's not that hard. We just have to start. Why not this weekend? Why not tonight?

Patrick Mulcahey  
Master/slave Conference  
September 4, 2015