

2016 – JUSTIN TANIS / Being Authentic
“Being Authentic”
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“I am who I am. I am not ashamed of who I am — not one bit.”

In 2002, over the Thanksgiving weekend, a reporter for Washington Post outed Jack McGeorge, one of the leaders of the M/s and kink communities, and, at the time, a United Nations weapons inspector in Iraq. This reporter—he who shall not be named in our household—somehow felt that being kinky was one of a number of reasons to call his qualifications in the fields of chemistry and biology into question.

Mr. McGeorge’s job entailed things like emptying an entire dumpster at a weapons facility and checking to see if any of the discarded parts could have been assembled to make a bomb. No whips involved.

But after he was outed, there were headlines in global newspapers gleefully talking about sex-rings and naughty goings-on, distracting from the much more important global events unfolding around Saddam Hussein’s rule of tyranny and human rights’ violations.

And in response to being outed, in an interview, Mr. McGeorge said simply, “I am who I am. I am not ashamed of who I am — not one bit.” Because, of course, the point of outing someone is to make them feel ashamed and to attempt to harm them for who they are. By refusing to play along with that, to declare, “I am who I am and I am not ashamed,” is an act of noble defiance in the name of sexual liberation and freedom.

This weekend we gather to consider the theme of the conference, “Being Authentic.” Tonight, let us consider what that means, what does it mean to say, “I am who I am.” To be our authentic selves.

“I am who I am,” is a phrase with so many wildly different associations.

In 1933, Popeye the Sailor Man burst onto the popular scene. In his very first cartoon, he is standing on the prow of a rowboat, with Mr. Wimpy sitting in the back busily eating fish. Between them, Olive Oyl provides service at the oars, propelling them over the waves and eventually over the sand. Popeye sings out, “I yam what I yam and that’s all what I yam!” He is a sailor man.

Robert Redford also uttered the phrase, this time in response to rumors that he had had plastic surgery, “I’m not a facelift person. I am what I am.” What you see is what you get.

Two weeks ago, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump said in an interview on a Wisconsin television program, “I am who I am. It’s me. I don’t want to change. Everyone talks about, ‘Oh, well you’re going to pivot.’ I don’t want to pivot,” “I mean, you have to be you. If you start pivoting, you’re not being honest with people.” And while I do not like what I see of Trump—his racism, sexism and xenophobia to start with—I do appreciate that he isn’t putting up a false front. He is who is, whether we like it or not.

And, in a different vein, there is the song “I am who I am” from *La Cage aux Folles* and the glorious disco version by Gloria Gaynor, which, because I am gay, is the one of these examples that we’ll discuss a little further along in this speech.

So many ways, so many things we can say with, “I am who I am.”

To say “I am who I am” is to assert our identities, to speak to that which defines our selfhood, even from these many different vantages points, both funny and serious. To be authentic is to live and to make visible who we are, to declare to the world, “I am who I am.” Sometimes that is a statement of quiet affirmation and sometimes it is a moment of pure defiance, particularly when aimed a world that wishes you were something you are not.

In a post on Fetlife, Mr. McGeorge went on to say more about his experiences. He begins,

“I do not believe that yielding to societal demands is necessary, right and normal. I am an individual and I believe in exercising choice whenever and wherever possible. In almost every circumstance we have choice as long as we are willing to pay the price for non-conformity. If a slave is committed to living in accordance with the Master’s vision of slavery there is little reason for the slave not to do so as long as both Master and slave accept that there are costs and consequences associated with living in a non-traditional manner. Lastly, I am not defined by what I do for a living; rather, I hope to be known for what I have accomplished across the spectrum of my endeavors. If owning slaves is an insurmountable bar to working as or for XYZ then I guess I’ll have to find an alternative. I know exactly what it is like to have my beliefs used as a litmus test for determining my suitability for a very sensitive position. I acted with integrity and kept my job.”

One of the most radical things in this statement, in our twentieth-century world, is his declaration that we are not solely defined by the ways we make money, “so what do you do?” but rather by how we order our relationships. And that these are not either/or propositions.

And what does it mean, in this context, to assert I am who I am? It begs the question, of course, who am I?

We fall into bad company when we don’t know who we are—like some unfortunate friendship choices I made in high school with people who seemed to be like what I thought I wanted to be ... but were really just other lost adolescents. Or, I am embarrassed to admit, a repeat of that, with poor relationship choices that I made as an adult when I wasn’t sure where I was going or who I was, and I thought someone else might have the answers to those questions. But the deeper my sense of who I am and what I need and desire, the healthier the path I walk.

One of the things that Mr. McGeorge considered most important—and that many of us think is vital—is that we take serious time to consider that question of who we are. Each of us will have different answers, of course, that change and evolve as we grow and mature. Until we know ourselves, how do we know what we can bring to the world? But the more we know ourselves, the deeper the selfhood that we have to bring to another or others, and the greater the likelihood that we will find counterparts who are best suited to live a fulfilling and meaningful life with us.

One place to start to identify ourselves is to look at what attracts our attention. Consider your fantasies—to what does your mind return over and over again? Too often, we dismiss our fantasies as something we cannot achieve. Why can’t you live the way you long to? Ask yourself if there are elements of your

fantasies that you could live, provided you dedicated yourself to achieving them. There may well be a counterpart out there who shares your desires, but hasn't yet found someone like you who is willing to pursue that dream. Unless your fantasies are overly dangerous, immoral, defy the laws of physics or take place on a different planet, consider whether you can make them reality.

Our fantasies also give us clues about what is important to us. They can be a window into our deepest desires. While, of course, we need to know the difference between fantasy and reality, we also need to take our imaginations seriously.

Discern why you are attracted to hierarchy, structure and discipline. There are healthy and unhealthy reasons why people seek hierarchy, structure and discipline. What is helpful for one person may be destructive for others. Some people want to be rescued or feel that they cannot make life decisions on their own. Some people want to organize other people's lives because they feel inadequate in their own life. It is up to you to consider why you want to live this way and whether doing so will result in a life that is stronger and healthier for you. But it is vital that we have the courage to ask ourselves why we are doing this and whether it is healthy for us.

So, we are healthy and we've arrived at a clearer sense of who we are and what we seek. Are these self-definitions unchanging? No, they are not, of course. Our desires often change with age, experience or different partners. Different stages of life may lead us to different places. The process of self-discovery and self-definition continues.

But let me suggest a couple of things that I sense are core to those of us gathered here. I believe that this conference represents people who are engaged in a radical experiment of service. And I use the word experiment not because people haven't done this before or that it is universally untested, not that kind of experiment, but because we are testing what is the impact on ourselves of devoting that self to another human being or beings or communities. Does this impact us in a way that brings us to fulfillment and joy?

Let me be clear that this is not about limited to being in a relationship; I'm talking about knowing who we each are. It can be hard to remember that in a space that is so focused on couples, triads, what have you's, which I mean in the most respectful way possible ... I want to recognize the incredible courage and integrity of those who come here alone. It isn't easy. At all.

When I lived in DC, I attended a very special yoga class, called Yoga for Bears; that is, bears meaning larger gay men, but the class was open to people of any size. The yogi used to remind us that the heaviest men in the room were doing the most work—moving their bodies into the different poses meant lifting way more weight than the skinny men—so he affirmed the large men as the strongest athletes in the room and invited others to see the world that way. When we think about what some people are lifting—physically, emotionally, spiritually—to be here, some are carrying more weight than others and may become stronger for doing so but it isn't easy. At all.

I want to acknowledge the integrity and courage of those who come here to declare, "I am who I am" while searching, learning, mourning, or any of the other reasons why they are here alone. Their service—to this event, to the community, to their own dreams, to their future counterpart, or to their own well-being—is absolutely part of what I am talking about tonight. And I honor them for it.

Service changes us—ourselves and our partners.

At my job, I have the opportunity to be around a lot of people who have devoted themselves to religious service, often in religious communities. Mostly Roman Catholic and Buddhist. There is something very different about those who have lived in service for decades. Those who have spent much of this time in judgement or narrowly following religious rules and strictures for their own sake have a hardness about them, a wall between themselves and others.

But those whose focus has been service for decades, well, there is a special glow. You want to be near them, they exude kindness and focus. Their natures, their essence, who they are, has been shaped through act after act after act of service. We see this, too, in those engaged in meaningful ways in our way of living.

It is this kind of evolving selfhood, growing through our actions, that leads to the deeper knowledge of “I am who I am,” that I am talking about, and shapes who we are.

And let me be clear, by service here, I don’t mean only the acts of taking out the trash, doing the laundry, getting the groceries, bringing home the bacon and frying it up in a pan, if you remember the old commercial. As necessary as those actions are. But here I am mean also service as the taking of responsibility for another person’s wellbeing and satisfaction in life. To serve another—in this radical counterculture experiment—is to care of the wellness and joy of another person with the same or greater love and commitment that you have to your own wellbeing. And that is an amazing and beautiful thing.

I believe we should approach that kind of service with genuine awe—wonder that we are able to give it, delight that we are able to receive it. And to lift that kind of service up with heartfelt respect and accord it the dignity it deserves. Dignity in service from taking the trash out to knowing just what hug to give in a moment of tragedy to choosing the course that leads to happiness you hadn’t even imagined. Freely chosen, freely offered, freely received.

There are many reasons why emphasizing dignity in service is so incredibly important. But in addition to the impact it has on us, we also need to consider the ways in which service, and the human beings who render it, have become so cheap. Don’t worry, this is not in any way a rant about how you can’t get good help these days.

I want to speak to you for a minute about something very serious—about something that is the opposite of what you are here to celebrate. As I was working on this speech and thinking about it last spring, I heard a report on the radio about the realities of modern slavery. At this moment in time, while the percentage of people in involuntary servitude on this planet is lower than it has ever been, the sheer numbers of enslaved people has never been higher. 45.8 million people are being forced to labor against their will, without compensation, in 167 countries, including this one, although fortunately we are among the lowest per capita. One of the reasons for this is that the cost of obtaining a slave has become very inexpensive—about \$25-100—at the point of a gun, through threats to loved ones, or by falsely advertising a paying job to those desperate for one.

Last week, when I went to pick up a prescription at the pharmacy, there was a new sign on the wall. They are very good about putting up easily visible information about things like domestic violence, urging people in danger to talk to any staff member to get help right then.

Now there is a sign saying that if you are being forced to do housework, landscaping, sexual acts, warehouse work, construction against your will, there is a new sign urging people to call this hotline or talk to our staff so someone can help you.

What does this have to do with gathering at MsC? Nothing, which is the point, ... or maybe everything. One reason it is so urgent that we define ourselves, that we know what we are saying when we say "I am who I am and this is who I am," that we know who we are saying it about, is that we make very clear that we are not engaging in the enslavement of unwilling people, especially as this problem is on the rise. We also cannot be naïve about the fact that there may be someone here in that situation—and if you are, I hope you'll talk to someone. Because that is not what this is about.

There are two critical hallmarks that show the difference between immoral and unwilling slavery and the kind of authenticity this conference is about—our value of service and those who offer it and our insistence on whole hearted, knowledgeable and on-going consent. I'm not talking about consensual non-consent here—that's a different and complex topic—I mean the original consent that starts that whole ball rolling.

It is our willingness to say yes to who we are—not what someone else defines us to be—that makes all the difference. Because those who are involuntarily enslaved are stripped of their dignity, their ability to define themselves, and the freedom to make choices for the course and shape of their lives.

We must oppose the moral evil of enslavement that takes life and liberty from others against their will. After all, the moral responsibility of a truly enslaved person is not to bring fulfillment to their Master or Mistress, but to survive and seek freedom—and sadly these may not be able to be achieved at the same time. To get away from servitude, away from that which steals life and diminishes it.

The opposite of what you are here to celebrate.

Which is why is so important to see the publication of the book *Our Lives, Our History: Consensual Master/slave relationships from ancient times to the 21st century*, which places this conference, these realities in their correct context. Hats off to Peter Tupper, the editor, to the MTTA board and to all of the authors for making this a reality. I'm so looking forward to reading it. Consensual relationships ... what it's all about.

Let me make a brief digression into philosophy ... I know, I'm an academic nerd ... but they knew that when they asked me to speak ...

Bruce Waller, the moral philosopher, argues that when someone has struggled against enslavement or subservience—someone who is unwillingly placed in that position—but after a series of punishments and rewards comes to accept their servitude and embrace it, that person becomes less free. They are now not agents of their destiny but even farther from that within themselves which desired and worked for freedom.

He gives the example of a spirited young woman raised in a religious family that requires women to be solely and completely subservient to men, seen as less capable, less worthy. She is subjected to well-meaning but harsh interventions to stop what was seen as her willfulness and desire to make her own destiny. Over time, these punishments and the consequences of bucking the rules wear her out and she comes to accept a subservient role. Eventually, she even comes to thank those who curbed, what she now considers, her sinful impulses.

Waller argues that she has moved from a place of freedom—the desire for free will and independence and her own destiny that she manifested from her early childhood—to a place where she is even less free because she doesn't even long for freedom anymore. Nor, he argues, does she have moral responsibility for her condition—it is not her fault that she no longer is free. She cannot be said to truly embrace submission because she is not free to choose it any longer. She has been worn down to accepting it because the alternative of punishments was too much. We cannot blame her.

And this speaks to a pivotal, absolutely crucial distinction between actual enslavement and what you are celebrating in this room.

When someone—by their own nature and desires—struggles not against service but for it, not against responsibility but to embrace it, craving service, craving responsibility, which is what you are talking here, freedom comes from removing the barriers to that responsibility and service. And that is the difference of consent. If you are being forced to do something that counteracts who you know yourself to be—your “I am,” that whittles away what you long for in life and replaces it with someone else’s desires for your life that are not fulfilling for you, then it is time to seek your freedom and your survival—the survival of your self.

But if you are living in a way that takes away the things in your life that prevent you from thriving, that removes the walls and barriers from around who you really are, then you will find a different kind of freedom, one that affirms and liberates your “I am who I am!”

At its best, the radical urge to accept great responsibilities for the life of another person or to serve in ways that increase mutual fulfillment brings us closer to freedom and not away from it. But for us to be certain that our actions are morally responsible, we must be sure that we are not coercing our counterparts in any way. And by coercion, I mean the withholding of that which we need for life—food, water, shelter—or the meaningful threats of removing that. I mean, doing things which force the other to accept their lot in a way that erodes their personhood or fails to provide fulfillment and meaning over time. These things are different for each of us but, as they say about pornography, we know fulfillment when we see it.

And it is through the elevation of our ideals—a deep seated respect for the gift of service, delivered in dignity and grace, and for the gift of authority and care for the wellbeing and personhood of another—that we show the difference, to ourselves and to the world. Our duty is not simply an obligation but one that honors our situation, that comes from depth of character.

“I am who I am” should be the expression of our deep selfhood, one that is evolving and growing, but one that is true for us.

Let me close on a lighter note.

Perhaps you’ve seen the movie or play of *La Cage Aux Folles*. It tells the story of a young man, Jean-Michel, who would like to bring his girlfriend, and her very conservative parents, home to meet his folks. The only problem is that his father, Georges—played by Robin Williams in the movie—runs a notorious gay bar with an over-the-top drag show, and lives with his love, Albin, the even more over-the-top headliner of the drag show. The movie goes through the various foibles of how they try to pull this off, including Albin, who is desperate to be there to meet the girlfriend’s parents, trying to butch it up and get rid of all of his feminine attributes, while removing all of the “gay” articles of household

furniture and art. The ensuing action is hysterically funny and very sad at the same time. But it is all to no avail—Albin just can't pull it off.

But as Albin realizes he cannot change, he sings, “I am who I am!” standing up and being proud of being who he is. All of their schemes unravel in the course of the movie and you just have to see it to get all of the twists and tangles.

But here's my point—authenticity is hidden behind a façade—when the drag queen is unmasked, her/his real identity is revealed, as a drag queen. Albin is not simply a man pretending to be a woman but rather a different kind of person, a drag queen, one whose life embodies multiple genders.

When we take off the façade that most of society associates with the words “Master” or “slave,” that you use here, we find something much more authentic underneath—true service, deep responsibility, each offered freely, with meaning. Hopefully bringing contentment, fulfillment, and even joy.

Albin would agree with Mr. McGeorge I think: “I do not believe that yielding to societal demands is necessary, right and normal. I am an individual and I believe in exercising choice whenever and wherever possible. In almost every circumstance we have choice as long as we are willing to pay the price for non-conformity.” Because the price of conforming is too high when it erodes our selfhood.

We do not have to conform to ways of being or loving or connecting or having sex that yield to societal demands or normativity. But we do need to embody what is right and true for our lives, letting our embracing of responsibility and service mold us into people whose lives daily come more and more to be our authentic selves.

“I am who I am,” the song from *La Cage Aux Folle*, became a song popularized by Gloria Gaynor in the 1970s. So, we've come from the voice of Mr. McGeorge, a Master, on integrity and authenticity, to Popeye, Robert Redford, Donald Trump, anti-slavery activists, a moral philosopher, a musical by Harvey Fierstein, and we're ending with a disco queen. Because we love diversity of perspectives here. For those of us of a particular age in the gay community, this is a sacred anthem:

Listen to part of the song ... and embrace it with all of the fabulousness and zeal of a queen hitting the dance floor:

I am what I am
I don't want praise I don't want pity
I bang my own drum
Some think it's noise I think it's pretty
And so what if I love each sparkle and each bangle
Why not try to see things from a different angle
Your life is a sham
Do you can shout out I am what I am

I am what I am
And what I am needs no excuses
I deal my own deck sometimes the aces sometimes the deuces
It's one life and there's no return and no deposit
One life so it's time to open up your closet
Life's not worth a damn till you can shout out

I am what I am

I am I am good
I am I am strong
I am I am somebody
I am I do belong

I am I am useful
I am I am true
I am I am worthy
I am as good as you

May this be your rallying cry as well, “I am what I am.”