

Below the Radar, Above the Radar: Coming out of the kinky closet

Keynote address delivered at Great Lakes Leather Conference August 2009

Thank you for that gracious and generous introduction. I am thrilled to be here, and that you asked me to be your keynote speaker. I believe this is the first time you have asked a slave to deliver the keynote at a GLLA, I am honored to be chosen.

It is always a challenge to find something erudite to say at Sunday brunch, the holiest of all homosexual rituals as Master Skip calls it. I thought long and hard about finding the right balance of witty, thought provoking entertainment, but then, I realize most of us are sadomasochists and therefore, I relaxed a bit, knowing we are used to transmuting anything into pleasure. So, here goes.

If you think S/m, M/s, leather and fetish is an expression that defines who you truly are, not just a kink but something that provides the meaning for your life choices and is a way of living, then perhaps you might find what I have to say today, boring, or speaking to the choir.

On the other hand, you might see this as an occasional hobby, something you do because it makes you hot, something that adds spice to your sex life - if that is the case, then what I have to say may at best leave you scratching your heads, and you might wish you hadn't wasted your morning.

In either case, none of what I have to say will cause you to reflect or think differently about what you do.

However, if you are at a place in your lives where you are beginning to realize that the expression of this "kink" is increasingly important to you, that at one time you may have thought that you could contain, compartmentalize your desires but are now finding it harder to take that collar off. If returning to your vanilla life increasingly feels like a charade, or that you are uncomfortable hiding who you are because it makes you feel inauthentic, then perhaps some of what I have to say this morning may well speak to you. Because, this morning I am going to invite you to spend a few minutes thinking about being above the radar, or below the radar: coming out of the "kinky" closet – being real. The number of people coming into our community is increasing but few of us are out.

Allow me to share something of myself with you. I am not famous (or infamous as the case may be) like say a Joseph Bean, or Guy Baldwin, or our very own Mark Frazier or Ms Kendra, I think it is important that you at least know who is speaking to you about "getting real", so I will start by doing something very edgy for me. and talk to you about "me".

I came into this 'lifestyle' way before there was the internet, when the way you got to know about the underground world of SM was by taking risks, going to the seedy porn shops. In my case, my first encounter was at a viewing of the Story of O (I believe in 1974) when my sixteen year old self was impersonating my future sophisticated grown up slave persona with a borrowed ID card to get into an R rated movie . . . it was there, in the movie foyer, when a couple approached me and struck up a conversation that didn't get their faces slapped, which led to a cup of coffee and then several further coffees before I was invited to go to a gathering. That gathering was in someone's house; actually it was in their back yard shed. You got to the shed by going down a dark side alley replete with rubbish bins and stray cats. That was the longest and scariest journey of my life, in which, my heart

pounding with fear, I negotiated that dark alley in stilettos, dodging rubbish and needles the junkies had discarded, in order to knock on that corrugated iron door that led to this party.

Those were the days when the gay leather men would not let a heterosexual man, let alone a woman, into their leather bars, and those were the days an event like this was not even in the realm of imagination. If you did this S/m stuff, you were underground, segregated, separate and not just private, you were sworn to secrecy.

In those days you couldn't find an outlet to buy a leather outfit – you had to get it made or make it yourself. We went to saddler shops pretending to be horse lovers or farmers to buy whips (we have the best whip makers in Australia and lots of vanilla folk own whips for horse racing or rounding up sheep and cattle). We scoured museums for displays on torture equipment to get ideas for our dungeons ... and the only commercial dungeons belonged to dominatrix's . . . some of whom let us hire their well equipped premises for a fee ... but always what we did was, hidden. That felt safe.

Then along came the internet; I remember the early heady days being on CompuServe for hours using excruciatingly slow bandwidths, finding connection and community among kinkster's across the globe. I recall one evening an epiphany hit me, after getting off the phone from a German Master in Hamburg, here I was talking to folk in real time across the world, defying time and space, and that *this* technology was going to change my kinky world as I knew it .

Somewhere since the early nineties the internet became a commodity everyone got into; porn sites mushroomed, BDSM became mainstream. We have what we have today a smorgasbord of BDSM personals for all sexual orientations, BDSM chat rooms where anyone can become, as Sir Stephen calls them, an “Internet Illuminati”. . . BDSM information is everywhere, the Internet Illuminati are available anytime, day or night, to teach, guide and police your kink to keep you safe sane and consensual, (David Stein's unintended hydra). We may be global kinkster's . . . but there is a world of difference between those on “Second Life”, and those in real life.

To be authentic, to be true to ourselves is what each of us here this morning are about. Look around, look into each other's eyes and you will see yourselves reflected a million times. Your story is as much mine as mine is yours. We may come from different cultures, backgrounds and even countries but our journey to here has been the same.

At some point we realized something outside of the ‘norm’ was calling us to live a life separate from the rest. At some point, usually not without some conflict we followed our calling, made our first steps into the unknown, frightened, thrilled, excited we stepped through a door way then realized it was one way. To go back was costlier to who we were than to go forward. We battled our inner demons, we may have failed, made mistakes but we got up and dusted ourselves down. . . and we turn up . . . we are here for each other, we learn from each other, and as much as we are educated, our presence educates.

Nowadays we have events like this nearly every weekend somewhere in the US. The gay leather world and the kinky het world are converging at flash points like this event . . . pansexual is the new catch phrase and the once sacrosanct barriers between sexual orientations have come down to provide cross gender sharing of information and education. Every year as I go around various events in our community I hear these words . . . “our numbers are up”; these words are usually uttered in a state of complete surprise, often unpreparedness. Each year the numbers of us kinky folk turning to these events is growing by a whopping 15%, I know because I rang around before coming here and got some figures from folk. Here are what the figures say . . . SWLC the first year had

~100, this year they broke through 570; NWLC 120 first year, this year bursting at the seams at over an unexpected 250; SPLF had over 200 first year, this year over 800; Ms Con had around 160 in 2004, two weeks before their conference this year I believe they have pushed through 350 and GLLA first year they had less than 90, this year it is close to 400. When you add up the numbers they are going up.

Years ago there were very few of us, now people are willing to come out from underground and be seen, we are numbering 100's pushing 500 to 900 per event. . . . What this means is that more of us are becoming visible

Many of these folk are new, and many are finding their way to these events from the kinky heterosexual on line community. Yes, the internet has changed the way we engage and connect; some would argue for the better, others rue the changes, but I am not here to discuss the merits of before versus post internet culture. I have a simple message: There are more of us venturing out from the privacy of our bedrooms and homes, and as we grow in numbers we are becoming more visible. There are positive and negative consequences and implications for whether we fly below or above the radar.

At this point I am compelled to make a public confession: Research is a rather obscure fetish of mine and good data can be almost orgasmic for me. Until recently there hasn't been much good research about BDSM; what has existed has been psychoanalytic drivel about how we are ALL the way are because we were badly potty trained, or because of our unconscious unresolved oedipal complexes. However, some recent surveys conducted in Australia and the USA is indicating a fascinating trend about us; that is that the number of people (cross sexual orientation) who identify as having done something "kinky" in their sexual lives is about the same number as those who identify as being gay. Demographically it appears we as a "kinky" community have the same numbers as those who identify as gay – that qualifies us as a sexual minority. Let me emphasize what that means. There are at least as many people who claim to have some sort of "kink" out there as there are those who claim to be gay which is estimated to be about 8 - 10% of the general population. That means we are a significant sexual minority.

These results err on the very conservative side; the sampling methods make it hard to be definitive. I suggest better sampling could well indicate that the numbers who have actually fantasized about and/or engaged in some form of kinky sex are far higher than that . . . but we don't currently have empirical data to show that. So if this is valid it must be reflected in some way in society. Is it?

If like me you have been paying attention to what goes on out there by reading trashy magazines and watching TV, there appears to be a sea change in the 'popular culture' vanilla world about kink. Apparently, you can wear full leather and walk down the red carpet as Angelina Jolie did wearing a black leather skirt and corset at the LA premiere of Quentin Tarantino's "Inglourious Basterds". Jennifer Aniston too appears wearing a black leather strapless bustier skirt combination, on the cover of the September edition of Elle magazine. Apparently black fetish leather is now acceptable mainstream "high" fashion.

Walk through any shopping mall in America these days and take a look at the black leather cuffs (with spikes) selling from as little \$10 as fashion accessories, or the many clothes and shoes that are virtually fetishistic incorporating chains, and buckles . . . things we used for restraints, are now decoration. They say fashion parodies cultural and social thought forms.

I want to demonstrate something about mainstream consciousness regarding kink. Can the five wonderful slaves whose Masters kindly permitted me to utilize for this demonstration now come forward. As I have already confessed, given one of my fetishes is research, I did a straw poll with a bunch of folk about their sexual fantasies

and fetishes before coming here. From what I learnt I developed a short pop quiz which I want to give you: these five slaves are each holding a statement made to me by five different people about what eroticizes them. Can you guess which of these statements came from a vanilla person? Is it:

- A. I have a metal collar and cuff set that are joined together with a steel chain in my closet.
- B. I like to tie him up before I fuck him.
- C. Oh I love him to take charge, pull my hair, and tell me what to do. I love a man who is in charge.
- D. Corsets, I love wearing corsets, it makes me feel so sexy and controlled.
- E. My hottest fantasies are straight gay sex.

Hands up those that think statement A was made by a vanilla person? B? C? D? E? . . . A, B, C, & D ALL came from vanilla folk. Statement E is the only one that came from a person in our leather community who identifies as a slave.

When things once considered edgy and marginalized become main stream something significant is shifting in the collective consciousness. It would appear our fetishes are becoming normalized. Twenty years ago to wear full black leather in the street would immediately attract attention, wearing full leather with a collar and cuffs on ... well, you would be certified. Today I can (and have) walk down a city street wearing full black leather, collar and cuffs, and feel positively conservative rubbing shoulders with Goths sporting metal piercings everywhere.

What is going on? Why are numbers at these events growing?

I theorize it is because we have two basic human needs: The need to be authentic to who we are and the need to belong.

The rugged individual depicted by the pioneer, the hero, the renegade, the outsider is a strong archetype in the American culture which is romanticized and celebrated in stories, films, history and myths. I can argue that to be into leather in the first place requires rugged individualism to step out from the vanilla norm and god damn it, do it my way; to be true to who I am.

However, very few of us want to be so individually out there that we don't need anyone else in our lives. As much as our human souls have a divine need to individuate and come into our authentic being as individuals, we also have a counter balancing force – to belong. At some point, our need to find our tribe with whom we feel accepted and understood kicks in. This is our need to belong – for affiliation.

As we gather and share our stories we give each other light and courage to do the same, we multiply. One of us affects another and another and another. . . I hear all over the country people claiming how it was in hearing or seeing so and so with their slave or with their Master that they felt empowered to do xyz. Indeed, as I move around our events, increasingly I hear the 'aha' of, "I am not alone!" "There are others out there like me!"

There is no doubt that the beneficial service these events provide for our community is to bring us together and provide us with a place in which we can truly be our authentic selves. The more we are our authentic selves, the more we attract others to be. When we part we continue to feel affirmed and nourished. It feels good, and somehow, we begin to realize the other parts of our lives are somewhat less whole . . . and perhaps we become lulled into a false sense of safety when we see fluffy hand cuffs on sale in Target.

Many of us have been flying under the radar in our individual lives . . . that is perfectly fine and adaptive. After all we have jobs, kids and reputations to preserve in a hostile ignorant world. But let's think for one moment, what happens when the numbers at these events continue to climb. What is happening to the radar when I walk into shopping malls and find faux collars and cuffs on sale as fashion items? Is our lifestyle suddenly de rigour?? Has it become fashionable to be "leather". Indeed in some circles it would seem so.

What circles? Go out any night to a Goth club, head on out to trendy bar spots, take a look at the types of movies being made with BDSM themes . . . heterosexuals are not necessarily coming out of the closet, but, look around . . . *being kinky* is becoming okay – people at dinner parties are openly talking about and asking about kink related things. Oh for sure not everywhere you say . . . to be sure we are unacceptable at the annual conference of the Southern Baptist annual revivals . . . But educated, middle class America appears to be at least aware and more curious – we are the latest fad to be into.

Does this mean it is safe to come out of the closet now?

Well sadly, apparently not. In this past year alone, I personally know of five kinky folk who have faced some serious discrimination for being "out". Children have been taken from our kinky mothers, and their non BDSM exes awarded custody because the judges have deemed the person with the kink to be unacceptable – I quote one judge – "people who practice sadomasochism do not understand the nature of love and therefore would not be able to provide a loving environment for a child to grow up in". I don't know what that does to you, but when I hear that I feel gutted, and am enraged. Our people have been fired from jobs. Others have not been fired, instead they have been singled out and harassed through punitive management practices, demoted, given less interesting work, placed on difficult duties in order to force them to resign. A doctor has refused to treat a patient because he thinks what they do is "sick" and threatened to report the Master for abuse despite repeated affirming that the whip marks and bruises on his slave's body are consensual. Our people have been reported to child care authorities for having paintings of nudes on their walls in their homes, and the same authorities have restricted access and visitation and demanded removal of undesirable art works.

Folks make no mistake; there is an epidemic of ignorance, prejudice, harassment and discrimination especially among psychotherapists, medical and legal professionals.

And what is more significant is that these things aren't happening to the gay or lesbian person in those strange cities on the West coast (you know the ones I mean) – it is happening across America to main street kinky heterosexual people.

Our community was led into the open through the courage of many of our gay and lesbian leather elders – some are seated here today. To them we owe a huge debt and gratitude . . . but right now, the expansion of our numbers aren't coming from the ranks of the gay or lesbian communities. These numbers are more main street folks. There will be a tipping point when these events start to draw the type of attention that puts us over the radar. What then?

Here is my fear. I am afraid our growing kinky pansexual community is not as clear or as prepared as our gay brothers and sisters for the possible tsunami of projection that will be hurtling our way. Nowadays, with increasing numbers of people choosing to identify as kinky more heterosexual individuals and couples are becoming targeted who are not well prepared for this.

As our numbers grow we will get closer to that horizon and we need to become conscious. By being aware and making conscious choices of whether we want to be above or below the radar and setting our flight details accordingly we will be better prepared. We have wisdom borne from “the killing fields” so to speak residing in our gay brothers and sisters on how to preserve our individuality yet form community; they organized while dealing with fear and conflict within their own community; they have successfully learnt to influence social, legal and political opinion. Our gay AND kinky brothers and sisters will tell you if you ask, they didn’t come out once, but twice, once as gay, the second time as kinky. The question is, are we as a pansexual community willing to hear this call to be authentic? Are we willing to learn from our gay brothers and sisters? Have we sufficiently grown up in ourselves to feel whole enough to collectively stand up for who we are?

Some say that the kink community today is where the gay and lesbian community was 20 years ago. I think there is some truth in that. They have come a long way – they **got** that coming out of the closet in large numbers was the road to liberation from discrimination; that to be accepted for having a different sexual orientation was not a crime, or something to be ashamed of, but a human right to be.

We in this pansexual kink community need to validate being kinky is a sexual minority and that coming above the radar is a political act to claim our entitlement to have our sexual orientation accepted as a basic human right.

I am under no illusion that there will be folk within not just outside our communities who will oppose the notion of us flying above the radar. They have good basis for their arguments. There could be an increase of persecution and discrimination, even hate perpetrated against us. In the past, this type of persecution was targeted at the homosexual community, and within that the sub set of leather was even more ostracized, sometimes even within their own tribe.

Let me touch on some of the negative aspects of being visible and the socio political implications of coming out from individual and community perspectives.

Oppression is an odd thing from a heterosexual perspective. As long as nobody knows you are kinky, and outwardly you look like the normal het couple next door, you are ‘safe; but, as the kinky community keeps growing in numbers, that safety is increasingly compromised and challenged.

These mega-events draw attention to our community. While one can argue that can be used as a political force (e.g. IML, BR), that type of visibility may also scare people away because some people like to be below the radar.

Our kink could become caricatured as fodder for titillation and entertainment – we will attract even larger numbers of people who are drawn to us because BDSM becomes the latest fad, further diluting and confusing what we do.

In addition to becoming targets for the well ensconced and politically adept right wingers, and fundamental moralists, we could get attacked from unlikely quarters, like the gay lobby who wish to preserve their image of ‘normalcy’ and the feminazi’s. What we do deeply threatens the very delusion of shared power and equality in the cult of feminism. On the other hand we may well find sanctuary among groups such as the Latter Day Adventists, and the return to the 50’s marriage advocates. If we are not conscious, we may find ourselves in unholy alliances with a few odd bed fellows so to speak.

Some of us already feel our lifestyle is becoming diluted, distorted and betrayed – there was a thrill in the secrecy, in the dark hidden unspeakableness of what we did. There are those among us who wish to remain invisible, fearful that bringing what we do out to the mainstream will irreversibly adulterate the ethos that underpins our community.

There are many downsides to coming out of the kinky closet – it is risky – we are not yet guaranteed freedom from persecution or discrimination. Despite our “safe sane consensual” credo or the compensatory “risk aware consensual kink”, what we do is anything but safe or sane and our presence challenges society’s deeply cherished delusions that civil society is founded on principles of equality. We run the risk of becoming scapegoated and ostracized.

Given all that, why fly above the radar?

The most compelling reason I can think of is to be oneself, and to live one’s life openly and honestly; to have the opportunity to have authentic relationships with people. Having to be constantly on guard and live with a major part of your life in secret is exhausting and stressful.

Others value becoming part of a community that accepts and affirms them for who they are, thus validates who they are as ‘normal’. Such community provides us those places of belonging I talked about before.

For others, idealism and social activism is an important element of who they are: Standing up for what you believe and being counted. Helping others learn from their experiences, leaving a better world behind, paving the way for future kinksters to come out are deeply held social principles for some. Getting involved in education, or activism to educate vanilla people, dispel stereotypes, develop increased tolerance and understanding can be as simple as being prepared to discuss why you are wearing a collar to organizing political campaigns.

It takes significant soul searching. Ask any of our gay brothers and sisters, coming out is a gradual process and a journey. Some are out at work but not to their families, or vice-versa. Every new situation, person requires a continuous choice to out oneself.

I want to circle back to my story and share with you a bit about my conscious choices. My significant soul searching reached an apex after a crucible experience in my life where feeling utterly hopeless, despairing about who I was and my kink, I was suicidal. The fact that you see me standing here is due to the grace of my Guru Sai Baba who enabled me to experience unconditional love and acceptance. When I experienced that, I had an epiphany: if God loved and accepted my brokenness, my queerness, my kinkiness, then no one, not even I, had a right to judge or denigrate who I am.

I have always been kinky and out as a kinky person to my family, friends, since my twenties, but until recently, only partially in my business. Those I employed know about my kink, as I will not hide or conceal my personal life from people who work with me; but not all my clients knew as it was not relevant. Since 2008 my life is freer, I turned fifty and made a conscious choice to align the structures of my life in a way that would support who I was going forward. My parenting duties are less as my son is now 22, I have scaled down my business and am not reliant on others for money, I moved to the USA to do my PhD, my life has changed markedly. Nowadays, when I am asked to introduce who I am, depending on the context, this is what I say: “My name is caroline, I am an active member of an underground, marginalized sexual minority and I practice consensual slavery and sadomasochism. I identify as a consensual slave.”

When people hear me state that unhesitatingly, boldly in a dignified way without being contentious, there is nowhere for them to go when they see and sense the absolute authenticity of who I am. It might make them uncomfortable, that is not my intention. 95% of the time that introduction gains admiration, respect and awe. There are those who are titillated by us. When I calmly refuse to be other people's titillation and entertainment my experience is they stop their attempts to make me an object for their amusement, and instead, have to deal with me as a real person with a legitimate different sexual orientation. In a respectful manner, it turns the tables on their socially contrived invalidation of us.

I want to emphasize that I am NOT advocating that everyone in this room has to come out, that is an individual choice; I strongly respect and validate each person's need to protect themselves, their livelihood and their families from persecution. The Human Rights Campaign advocates "There is no one right or wrong way to come out. It's a lifelong process of being ever more open and true with yourself and others — done in your own way and in your own time" (HRC, 2008). To make these choices it takes a long time figuring out who I am and what I want, why I am here and what I fear. And ultimately, what I am willing to give up to be authentic.

However, to the leaders of our communities I say this: Look to our future and help others become politicized. When individuals among us choose to fly above the radar, support, encourage and celebrate them. Let us make them our heroes instead of shunning them or bring them down as sometimes occurs. I say, let us collectively unite to think politically and strategically about how to marshal our resources to influence legal and social opinions to make it easier for the rest of us to be able to live a life of authenticity without persecution.

Finally I want to stress that we all have a choice about the kind of lives we want to live. We might aspire to live a pleasant life; one filled with generally pleasant emotions, thoughts, ideas, and memories. There is nothing wrong with that. Some of us might aspire to live a good life; a life in which we have come to understand our signature strengths and have begun to use them in our work and in our lives. That is admirable. There is another level beyond the good life to which we can aspire - the mythic life. A purpose filled life.

My teacher Jean Houston says; "each of us can help create the new world myth. The hopes and dreams of the human race in the last millennia are focused on what is happening to us in our generation, now. We are living mythic lives." We in this room live a mythic life when we understand our own stories, own our traditions and myths as a means of accessing a life of purpose, passion, and prosperity in the service of something bigger than ourselves. To be authentic is our mythic journey.

In living the mythic life we not only deploy our personal strengths, we do so in the service of something bigger than ourselves. When we live a mythic life we walk in the footsteps of heroes and in fact become a hero ourselves. We witnessed that this morning when Ms Kendra and slave garrett passed on leather.

The hero's journey is a universal myth that truly conveys our soul's journey. Joseph Campbell in his book, "The Hero with a Thousand Faces", describes the beginning of the hero's journey like this "The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand."

We in this room are individually and collectively heroes, on a hero's journey. We have been called and our "time for the passing of a threshold is at hand." . . . it is our time, knowing our strengths to take our gift of authenticity and carry it bravely into the world.

To live our mythic life of authenticity we need a great dream we can dream for the world: a vision that will give us the larger framework on which to hang the rest of our lives. When we seek such a vision, we are attempting to answer the question: "What kind of world do I want to live in?" What positive legacy do I want to build, leave behind? Let us dare to dream, and see where our vision takes us.

We need to know our purpose. Purpose is how we show up in the world. It's the song that we were born to sing, the gift we were born to give, and the piece of our vision that we are meant to embody. We need to ask, "Who am I? Why am I here?" and see what answers begin to come.

Answering the call to be visible IS the road less travelled and will challenge us in ways we could never have imagined. We need to help each other embrace our fears, because the journey requires courage, intelligence and support. But that which does not kill will only serve to strengthen us. Let us ask, what am I really afraid of? The answers will illuminate and fortify us for the journey.

And ultimately, service is at the heart of vision and purpose. Let us ask: "Who are my people?" and then watch to see who shows up. We need to know who or what we are to serve. A life lived in service means that we deliver our purpose into the world in the service of our vision and in support of something that is bigger than our own personal selves. Our lives become part of a bigger plan, a plan that is constantly unfolding and infused with love.

This is true Servant Leadership.

When we fully embrace who we are, and accept our shadow selves, we become "marked" in the biblical sense. We step outside of the norm and are no longer like others. We walk through a one way door and once on the other side there is no return. We enter a journey our soul's purpose . . . to individuate – to become whole.

We are people living a mythic life. Each of us embodies the mythos of authenticity. As such each of us will be challenged at some point in our lives to be true to our real self . . . that self that our spirit willed for us . . . that is the mythic play of our lives.

When you leave here, ask yourself four big questions: Who am I? What do I want? Why am I here? What do I fear? Then, make a conscious individual choice to fly above, or below radar.

Thank you for listening.

slave Caroline 2009