

Embracing Change

Endnote Speech presented by Slave Pug

Southwest Leather Conference – January 2012

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A heartfelt thank you is extended to the event organizers for offering me this opportunity to be the endnote speaker for the 10th anniversary of Southwest Leather Conference. It is an honor to be here and be gifted with the chance to share some thoughts as we near the end this year's Southwest Leather event.

Slave Alia gave a wonderful keynote address about the beginnings of Southwest Leather: where we have come from. I say 'we', since, even if you have not previously been to this event, being here this weekend now makes you a part of the tapestry of Southwest Leather history.

How perfect to start the event with a discussion of where we have come from and to complete the event with thoughts about embracing change: where we go from here.

For those who are not familiar with my background, I was a slave in service for over 10 years to Master Steve (whom many people now know as Kozen). He is the founder of Butchmanns Academy as well as a key instigator in the creation of the Southwest Leather Conference. Anyone that knows him would most likely agree that he has a way of getting people to try new things and move outside of their comfort zone.

My views regarding change have been heavily influenced by my former Master. He is now a Rinzai Zen Buddhist Monk and is no longer involved with leather events or activities. Do not mistake this to mean that he now looks down on leather: far be it from that. He has simply accepted the *change* his life has taken and travels the path that his heart and spirit now call him to follow. Hence he no longer has slaves in his service. My collar was removed about a year and a half ago. While I am no longer his slave, he will always be a spiritual Master - a guru - for me and I suspect for many others as well. In many ways his path really hasn't changed all that much.

I offer this background because Master Steve left an indelible mark on the heart of Southwest Leather and on many of the people involved with the event so it would be a disservice not to acknowledge that impact.

At the same time, it would be a disservice to all that he taught to continuously bemoan that he is no longer physically part of this event or other leather events. It has been difficult for many leatherfolk to let go of Master Steve and understandably so. "*It just isn't the same without him,*" I have heard that said many times. I smile at this statement because I, as do my former slave brothers, keenly understand that things have changed. Yet perhaps because we were his slaves we were more prepared to adjust to such change: more intimately familiar with the practice of understanding that things continue to change whether we want them to or not.

You see, one of the fundamental lessons learned in serving Master Steve was that, "*All things are subject to change.*" Change is going to happen: not just around us, but also within us even though we may not always realize it.

So too for events and groups: there will always be changes. We try to grasp onto what we once found to be a desirable or fulfilling experience, afraid that any changes may lessen or diminish what we appreciated or found comfort in. "*What? Change how things are done? Are you crazy?!? Things are fine just the way they are.*"

Some may argue, "*If it ain't broke, don't fix it,*" and certainly there may be no reason to repair something that is in working order. Yet in this instance we are not talking about a kitchen appliance: we are talking about human beings having experiences and humans are ever-changing whether they admit it or not.

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We tend to resist change because once we become familiar with the way things are we become comfortable. Embracing something different might mean being less competent and proficient because we are unfamiliar with the new situation. People do not want to feel less competent or less useful, even if it is only a temporary situation as they learn to adjust.

Even while some balk at any change, others advocate for it. Event and group organizers are tasked with trying to ‘keep things fresh’ and not fall into a rut. They are expected to ensure that the group or event fit the needs and wants of attendees, which can be a huge challenge as people continue to change and their wants and needs morph.

There is, of course, a large contingency of individuals who neither push for change or status quo. Rather, they prefer to criticize any and all actions yet offer no solutions and volunteer no assistance. It is far easier to denounce any efforts rather than invest time and energy to help cultivate the future of a group or event. They are quick to vocalize their cynicism and just as quick to fall silent when help or solutions are sought.

The question remains: what to do? Does a group or event attempt to maintain status quo or do they actively face change? Each group or event must answer that for themselves and they are challenged with needing to address that question on an ongoing basis: it is not a one-time deal.

Is it really so terrible to make changes? Well, I suppose at the heart of that question is another question: will the change serve the underlying purpose or goals of the group, event, or even a relationship?

Some may ask, “*What of tradition? Isn’t tradition lost if changes are made?*” If a group or event chooses to make changes it does not necessarily mean that its purpose or essence will be lost. When some traditions are maintained, the essence of a group or event *will* carry on. Tradition provides nexus between our past, present, and future. It may seem counter-intuitive yet change and tradition *do* go hand-in-hand. Traditions preserve relevant aspects of a group or event’s purpose and can provide a sense of continuity. Traditions are the boat that carry us through the flowing waters of change and move us from past shores to new territories.

A challenge that we face when we discuss change is that knee-jerk feeling of failure. We often view change to mean that things are not working and therefore it is a failure. How many times have we looked at relationships this way? The relationship ends therefore the entire situation was wrong and should have never happened. To think of it that way is the easy way out: it leads us down a path of regret and even resentment. We may even take on the role of the victim as we lament, “*Why did this have to happen to me? I should have never gotten involved.*”

This is not to say that bad things don’t actually happen or that there aren’t ever any victims: certainly there are times when terrible things happen and there are victims in the fallout. Yet oftentimes we will see ourselves as the wounded or wronged when, in fact, it simply is that things have not worked out the way we had personally wanted. We are hurt because our personal wants and expectations have not been met. There are times that I feel regret or sadness when I face such changes and the initial impulse is to feel it’s unfair and want things to go back to the way they were. Such feelings are natural.

Master Steve would say that we can not control what we feel: we can only control how we respond to those feelings. At those times when I find myself wishing that things had not changed, I work at reminding myself that the Universe does not give me what I want: it gives me what I need. Changes, while not always wanted, help us move forward. Without change, we will not grow, we will stagnate.

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We can acknowledge what we feel and have compassion for ourselves, yet we must also work at not letting such feelings hinder us from moving forward.

When we find ourselves resisting change, it is a time to take a deep breath and then question why we are unwilling to let things change. Most often, we fear the worst because change means taking us into the unknown.

The great delusion is to think that if we refuse to let things change that things will stay as they are. Somehow, things are still going to change. People get older, new people enter the picture, interests change, responsibilities pull us in other directions... things will always be changing. *::glass falls and breaks::*

Whether you perceive it to be by accident, coincidence, intentional or fate, things change.

Each of you will have your own perception of what just happened. Was it an accident? Was it intentional? What if the glass had not broken? Are you sure that was really a drinking glass, or was it simply a prop being used to make a point? Perhaps it was both? Does it matter?

At this point, what appeared to be a glass no longer is what it once was: it is now something different: broken pieces. Change isn't always pretty. Even if someone was able to painstakingly put all the pieces back together again and glue them in place, it still would not be quite the same. Try as we might, even if we attempt to put things back to the 'way they were', they never are quite the same again because time moves forward and we are never quite the same people again.

The question is raised: does breaking (changing) a glass invalidate what it once was, the purpose that it once served? Now that it no longer is what we perceived it to be - expected it to be - it may no longer serve the same purpose. Yet, even broken, the glass may still serve a purpose: perhaps indicating that it's time to get some new glasses or that I need to be more aware of my surroundings and hand gestures. Or perhaps it simply is a broken glass to be shrugged off, cleaned up, and tossed away without another thought.

It is much simpler to let go of an item we have no attachment to. Albeit as Master Skip says, all loss brings about some amount of grief even if it is just a momentary sense of grief over something simple like losing a pencil or breaking a glass. It is much more difficult to let go and move forward when we have developed attachments to an item and even more so to a living being: a pet or a human.

The stronger the sense of attachment we have to an event/group/pet/person, the more poignant the sense of loss and the more challenging it may be to let go and accept that things are no longer what they once were, or that they somehow need to change. Change involves loss: a loss of things as they once were.

Many years ago Master Steve once described to me the death of a former lover as a 'gift of pain'. That term resonated deeply with me and I have taken it to heart when dealing with losses or changes in my own life. While it hurts for relationships to change or people to leave our lives, the hurt we may feel is a gift in the sense that it reminds us that we had something meaningful in our life. If it had not been meaningful, we would not feel the loss as keenly. So the grief we feel from change reminds us that we had something valued in our life even if it was for a shorter time than we would have liked.

This is not to say all change is great or that it should be easy to adapt to. In fact facing changes can really suck!

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The trick is, you don't have to like change to embrace it. You can embrace change even when you think it sucks. Take a deep breath, acknowledge how you feel about a situation, learn what you can from the experience, and then move forward. Understand that our perceptions and responses are inextricably linked to the impact change has on us.

“And if it all goes wrong: the change doesn't ‘work’?”

Usually it is not so much a matter of things ‘going wrong’ or ‘not working’: it is more likely that the outcome simply was not what we personally anticipated.

There is a parable in which a daughter tells her mother how hard things are for her. The mother fills three pots with water and places each on a high heat. When the pots of water come to a boil she places carrots in one pot, eggs in the second pot, and ground coffee beans in the last pot. After a while, the mother takes the carrots and places them in a bowl, then takes the eggs out and places them in a second bowl. She then pours some of the coffee into a cup.

The daughter is told to feel the carrots, which she does and comments that they are soft. The daughter is then told to take one of the hard-boiled eggs and break it. After pulling off the shell, the daughter observes the hard-boiled egg is firm. Finally, the daughter is asked to smell and taste the coffee. The daughter takes a sip and enjoys both the aroma and taste of the coffee.

The mother explains that each of these objects faced the same circumstances, yet each reacted differently to the change it faced as the water heated.

The carrot went in strong, hard and unrelenting yet had softened and become weak.

The egg had been fragile with only a thin outer shell, yet its insides had hardened from the situation.

The ground coffee beans changed as well, releasing their fragrance and flavor into the water and changing not only itself yet also the water - the situation.

Our perceptions and responses are central to determining how changes will impact us. Ask yourself: how do you perceive and respond to changes you encounter?

The funny thing is that almost all of us had to make some rather significant changes in order to have leather and/or bdsm be a part of our lives. We have had to jump from the life that we once knew into uncharted territory, leaving our ‘safe’, familiar worlds that we were accustomed to. We have left behind what the general public might have deemed ‘socially acceptable’ or ‘morally correct’ to delve into interactions and relationships that many would disdain or even attempt to prohibit. And yet we did it: we made those changes to our lives and now here we are. How many more people are out there, having the same desires and feelings - sensing that same call - yet are too afraid to ever make the necessary changes in order to explore bdsm or follow a leather path?

Master Steve favored the story of the Velveteen Rabbit and would quote the portion of the story when the Velveteen Rabbit asks the Skin Horse, *“What is real?”* and the Skin Horse says that, *“Real isn't how you are made... it's a thing that happens to you...”* He tells the rabbit that becoming real can sometimes hurt and explains, *“It doesn't happen all at once... You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.”*

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Being real, means embracing change. As the Skin Horse truthfully admits, becoming real can sometimes hurt. Yet the result - the outcome - is worth it. For us to grow, to become and continue to be real, we must continuously work at opening ourselves to change. To try to hold on to things exactly as they are might bring a temporary sense of comfort yet it will hinder us from growing and becoming who we are meant to be as individuals and as a community. So as changes inevitably appear within your events, groups, and individual lives continue to ask yourself, *“Am I willing to embrace change? Am I willing to grow? Am I willing to be real?”*