

Leather Leadership Conference Nine Keynote Speech

by Skip Chasey

Skip Chasey (aka Master Skip) is a certified Grief Recovery counselor and practicing spiritual director living in Los Angeles, where he heads a family of spiritually grounded leatherfolk and also earns a living doing missionary work among the savages of Hollywood. He is co-owner of Southeast Leather Conference, a core instructor for the APEX Academy/Buchmanns Experience, and a co-founder of People of Leather Among You ("PLAY"), a social and educational group for Southern California men and women interested in the integration of spirituality and leather/fetish sexuality. Master Skip had the privilege of addressing a crowd of almost one million people as an openly gay, Christian, leatherman at the Millennium March on Washington, and since then has offered the keynote address or presented programs on the spiritual dynamics of BDSM and Master/slave relationships at dozens of events across the country. He is the past recipient of the Lee Montague Memorial award for Outstanding community Service from the Avatar club Los Angeles (where he is an active member), and was named "Best Trainer" at the 2002 International Puppy Contest (WOOF!), and was presented with the 2005 Pantheon of Leather community Choice Award. According to Master Skip, "blood may be thicker than water, but leather is thicker than blood."

Vision, Passion & Direction The Right Stuff for Authentic Leaders

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Thank you for that very kind introduction.

It is a tremendous honor and privilege to be here tonight, and so I first want to sincerely thank the LLC board of directors and the local organizing committee for inviting me. Some of you know that I grew up in Phoenix, and it was here in the mid-'70s that as a nervous, 19 year old gay man —a boy, really—I first began to explore the clandestine world of leathermen and leathersex. Do any of you local men who are of a certain age remember seeing a pale, skinny kid with hair down to here and gold Ray-Ban aviator glasses with rose-tinted lenses, wearing a belted shawl collar sweater, polyester bell-bottoms, and patchwork platform shoes with white suede heels, hiding in the shadows at the Connection or being turned away at the Ramrod because of how he was dressed? That was me. Thank goodness everything changes! So to be invited back to Phoenix, thirty years later, to deliver the keynote address to the Leather Leadership Conference is exceptionally gratifying to me.

Before I begin I must tell you that as I stand up here and see all of the "leatherati" gathered here this evening (and you all know who you are), and recall some of the keynote speakers from Leather Leadership Conferences past, including such leather luminaries as Guy Baldwin, Vi Johnson, Brian Dawson, Patrick Califa, and Travis Wilson, and then look at the stellar leatherfolk who make up the roster of the current LLC board, and the outstanding directors of the local organizing committee and their amazing crew of coordinators and volunteers as well...as I stand here before all of you and consider the enormous contributions you've made to our community over the years, individually and collectively, it's no wonder that I feel like the world

is a tuxedo and I'm a pair of brown shoes.

(Thanks to the late Lonesome George Gobel for that line.)

What is it that makes someone an authentic leader? What's the “right stuff” for effective leadership? I believe the right stuff can be summarized in three words: vision, passion, and direction, and we're going to examine each of them during the next few minutes. But before we do, we need to define our terms. The word “authentic” has several meanings, including “genuine,” “veritable,” and “bona fide.” However, for our purposes tonight “authentic” means that which is “worthy of acceptance or belief”, in other words someone who is “trustworthy.” As for “leader”, in the larger population it's generally understood that one's capacity for leadership is not dependent upon one's status, authority, title or rank, and so in our community your capacity for leadership should therefore not be dependent upon being a title holder, it should not be dependent upon being an officer of a club or organization, and to be a leather leader you need not be a published author or an in-demand presenter. You can possess the right stuff to be an authentic leader no matter what your body type, your specific kinks, or the size of your...fetish wardrobe. It doesn't matter if you're Old Guard, New Guard or avant-garde, and the capacity for authentic leather leadership should most certainly not be limited by your age, race, gender or sexual orientation.

Neither being a boss, nor even the boss, makes one a leader. One is not elected to leadership; indeed, those elected to office are in actuality elected to servant-hood, and although our political leaders occasionally pay lip-service to that truth, this is clearly something that many of them fail to appreciate. And in our community, just because you're a Dom, even a “born Dom”, it does not *ipso facto* make you a leader. Authentic leaders can be bosses, politicians and yes, even Doms, but they need not be.

I make that point because many Masters, Mistresses, Daddies and the like confuse being given authority over another with being qualified for leadership in our community. Authority is not leadership, and here's why. Persons in authority often engage in the use of coercive power, while a hallmark of authentic leadership is the use of persuasive power. Coercive power is used to dominate people in a bad way. It can be overt and brutal, as we've seen when countries engage in war, or it can be covert and subtly manipulative. The former is open and acknowledged; the latter is insidious and often difficult to detect but, in either case, coercion only strengthens resistance. Even if coercion achieves the desired result, its effects last only as long as the force is applied. On the other hand, the power of persuasion has a lasting influence that remains long after the situation for which it was utilized has passed.

Okay, now that we know what a leader is not, let's take a look at what a leader is. Because a leader is a leader, whether he or she wears a uniform, a business suit, a clerical collar or a pair of leather chaps, I've assembled a handful of quotations from some well-known people who—although most likely not kinky—are far more qualified than I when it comes to defining leadership. According to former President Eisenhower, “Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants it done.” The best-selling author of *Conversations with God*, Neale Donald Walsch, says that “A true leader is not the one with the most followers, but the one who creates the most leaders.” John Quincy Adams, our sixth President, stated that “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.” And none other than Napoleon Bonaparte advised that “A leader is a dealer in hope.”

What these leadership experts are telling us is that a trustworthy leader is one who puts the

common good above his or her personal agenda, and that authentic leadership extends beyond one's self as a form of ministry.

Now, I'm aware that the word “ministry” has a distinctly religious connotation, and it is not by chance that I chose that particular word. Indeed, there are two specific reasons why I did so. The first is that, as those who know me can attest, I am an itinerant preacher at heart, an archetypal *Priest in Black Leather* here to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, so be forewarned. The second is that, whether we know it or not (and many of us do), there is something that calls us to do the things we do as leatherfolk that is significantly more powerful than the stirring in our loins, and that is the heartfelt desire to merge flesh and spirit. Because of our desire to integrate our sexuality with our spirituality—notice I didn't say religion; religion is not spirituality. Religions are useful to the degree that they point us to our spirituality, but not a single one of them can adequately contain our spirituality. Anyway, because of our desire to integrate sexuality and spirituality, our leather clubs and organizations have much more in common with churches and spiritual communities than with any other type of association. You don't think so? Consider the following: (1) both churches and SM clubs take great pains to organize, standardize and institutionalize potentially transcendent teachings and practices, usually to the detriment of their congregates; (2) no matter how large or how small the group, ten percent of the membership does ninety percent of the work; (3) spiritual communities and leather organizations both have a history of eating their young; and (4) it's only the influx of new initiates that keeps each from imploding from its inherent dysfunction.

When spiritual teachings and practices—and that includes SM and our leather culture—are fashioned into a communal doctrine (a dogma, really), pollution sets in. As the community then evolves into an institution, the pollution increases and the underlying intention of the group's leaders quickly deteriorates from that of facilitating the spiritual awakening of the students, to maintaining the institution at all costs. When that happens, the community's pursuit of freedom—freedom in its most profoundly spiritual sense—is pushed aside by a toxic tribal dynamic of coerced reverence, oppression of new ideas, and the banishment of those who would question both the dogma and the authority of those who created it. Sound familiar? It's only because some—usually just a few—of the community's leaders still have the right stuff that anything good comes out of our churches. Or, for that matter, out of our SM clubs and other leather organizations.

One more thing that's important to note before we take a look at the “right stuff,” and that is not everyone is called to be a leader, nor must one be a leader to be a valuable member of our community. “Leader” and “follower” are two sides of the same coin and, because each is interdependent upon the other for its archetypal identity, neither is of greater status or importance. We who engage in consensual power-exchange relationships, and who respect and revere both Dominants and submissives, hopefully understand that.

But that's another sermon for another day.

So what about this right stuff I keep referring to; what makes vision, passion and direction the right stuff for authentic leaders? In a nutshell, when you have a vision, when you are passionate about that vision, and when you clearly see the direction in which you need to proceed in order to bring about the realization of that vision, you become exceptionally charismatic, which according to Webster means you “have or exhibit a personal magic of leadership that arouses loyalty or enthusiasm.” Having the right stuff does not, however, make a leader infallible. As some of the recent news coverage has reminded us, even a good Pope can make mistakes. It does, however, make a leader exceedingly trustworthy.

Well, then, what does a vision look like? Without getting too mystical on you, having a vision means that you see the bigger picture about life on this planet, about who and what we really are, where we're heading, and for what purpose. You've gotten a glimpse of reality, and because of that glimpse you have tremendous compassion for the human condition. Compassion gives birth to visions, and while visions are boundless in their form and imagery, a vision is never about one's personal needs or objectives; rather it is always about the needs of others. You need only to recall Martin Luther King Jr. declaring, "I have a dream..." to understand what I mean. Having a goal is not the same as having a vision. Goals can be stepping stones to the realization of your vision, but a vision is infinitely greater than a goal. Indeed, a vision may be too large for any one person to hold because, as Dr. King knew, a solitary person can effectuate only a small portion of the vision. If you want to see your vision fully realized you must be able to instill it in others, because only by the work of many hands can it be brought to fruition. Good communication skills are vitally important in this regard, because according to the authors of *The Leadership Challenge Journal*, "There's nothing more demoralizing than a leader who can't clearly articulate why we're doing what we're doing." I suspect that in this day and age that's something with which we can all readily agree.

It's not enough, however, to simply impart your vision to others; you must be passionate about your vision. Passion is contagious, and the lack of passion in someone is obvious. People may not share your vision, or even understand your vision, but they will always respond favorably to your passion. Passion will enable you to do much of the heavy lifting that the realization of your vision will require. And believe me, transforming your vision into reality will require a lot of heavy lifting. An absence of passion is a good indication that your accomplishment of a potential task is not necessary for the fulfillment of your vision. Or, to put it another way, it's not your job. If you're not passionate about something, don't do it, even if it means that it won't get done. How many times in our community has a lack of passion put the wrong person in the wrong job, with lackluster—if not disastrous—results? When you are passionate about what you're doing for the community you won't take it personally when you don't get the praise or the recognition for your efforts that you deserve. And since no good deed goes unpunished, we all know that sooner or later you will be unfairly criticized—or worse, unjustly maligned—by those you are serving, and without passion it will be all too easy for you to become resentful and bitter when that occurs.

One more thing before I move on. We who engage in BDSM do so for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the tremendous erotic charge it gives us. Leathersex is hot, potentially transformative and just plain fun, and presumably we want to keep it that way. However, nothing will diminish one's passion for this thing we do faster than an overload of leather organizational meetings and responsibilities. Let's be honest: notwithstanding the importance and usefulness of this event and the sincere desire each of us has to participate in it, the idea of attending a leather leadership conference doesn't get anyone wet or hard. If you want to remain passionate about your leadership role in this community, spend at least as much time in the dungeon as you do in the meeting hall, if not more.

Passion is fueled not only by the clarity of one's vision, but by one's direction as well. Thus far, when speaking about direction I've been referring to the manner in which we go about fulfilling our visions. But as Carl Jung said, "The true leader is always led," and in the context of trustworthy leadership direction also refers to what it is that directs the leader, that is to say who or what we turn to for guidance. Authentic leaders know that on their own they are not, and cannot ever be, the compass for the journey; instead they must become, metaphorically speaking, a kind of satellite navigational system through which the Universe (use whatever conceptual term works for you) transmits appropriate directions. I believe that, as leaders of our community,

we are being universally directed to concern ourselves more with facilitating the spiritual freedom of those we lead and less with demanding our place at society's table, at least at this time. Once we are free of the false belief that our well-being is dependent upon social acceptance, then our demands for equal rights for leatherfolk will be a compassionate act of service for both our community and for the oppressors of our community, because when one is free one knows that oppression causes the oppressor to suffer most of all. (A true vision is never just about us, remember?) Think about the life and example of Nelson Mandela if you don't agree with me. During the twenty-seven years he was unjustly imprisoned, Mandela was very likely the freest man in South Africa, and his record of compassionate service to both the oppressed and the oppressors in his country since his release speaks for itself. Until we know that kind of freedom the demand for our rights is merely an egoic clash of illusory authorities. I say "illusory" because we know, deep in our souls, that the Universe—not our knowledge, not our skills, not our strengths, our resources, or even our justness—is the only real authority. We know that we have no authority of our own and that we cannot command any genuine authority. At best we are merely conduits of a universal authority and, as such, we must remain connected to the Source of that authority in order to effectively and ethically lead. How you stay connected to that Source is up to you, but it can be as simple as staying true to your vision because, if you haven't figured it out by now, your vision comes from the same Source as your direction.

Before I close, there is one other matter I feel compelled to address, and I suspect that what I'm about to say will make some of you quite uncomfortable. I believe that the fundamental requirement for being authentic leather leaders is the willingness to come out about our radical sexuality to everyone in our lives that we care about. Modeling wholeness by telling the truth about the deepest longings of our hearts, despite the perceived risks, is a tremendous act of authentic leadership. Now I am not saying that you have an obligation to publicly proclaim yourself a pervert from every street corner; only some of us are called to do that. There is, however, a big difference between choosing not to be a public figure and hiding. As a gay man and a leatherman who has had to come out not once, but twice, I'm aware that there are sometimes very good reasons for staying hidden. But hiding the truth about one's self, in any manner and for any reason, always damages the soul, both the soul of the individual and the soul of his or her community. If we have accepted a call to leadership and are not out, or are not willing to come out as and when necessary, then I regret to say that as leaders we are nothing more than Pied Pipers who, no matter how sweet the music of our vision, are leading those who look up to us down a path of shame, low self-esteem and a more fearful existence.

Don't get me wrong—I know from personal experience that the reason we don't come out is because we fear what doing so will cost us. That fear is understandable, but rarely a legitimate excuse. As Mr. McGeorge and many others here tonight can tell you, integrity for a leader requires the willingness to risk everything to remain authentic. That is the price of leadership in this community. Fortunately, I'm going to let you in on a little secret, a spiritual law if you will, that hopefully will encourage you. When you stay true to the vision, passion and direction that have been instilled within you, they are transformed into courage, perseverance and inner-peace. That bit of spiritual alchemy is nothing short of grace, and it will provide you with some much needed sustenance when, as an authentic leather leader, you find yourself from time-to-time feeling like you haven't got a friend.

So that's my vision, and I hope you've seen that I'm passionate about it. My wish for everyone here this weekend is that, as a result of this conference, the clarity of your vision is sharpened, the fire of your passion is stoked, and the Universe's direction for you becomes ever more audible. When that happens, I promise you, we will all be the better for it.

Thank you for listening.

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