

State of the Scene: Contemporary Trends in Gay Kink
by Race Bannon

[The original version of this speech was delivered by Race Bannon as the Keynote for the Leathermen's Discussion Group 10th Anniversary Celebration at the San Francisco LGBT Community Center on July 29, 2006. Subsequently this version was delivered as the Keynote for the Leather Leadership Conference 2008 at the Holiday Inn Golden Gateway in San Francisco on April 11, 2008.]

Good evening to you all. Thank you for being here.

As you all know, the person who was supposed to be standing in front of you at this moment is Guy Baldwin. Unfortunately, Guy is unable to make the trek to San Francisco due to illness, and I hope I speak for everyone here in wishing him a speedy recovery. Because Guy and I have a past partnership history and I still consider him one of my dearest friends, I particularly extend to him my best wishes.

One of the reasons Guy was originally scheduled to speak to you today is that Guy is one of those voices in our community that demands attention. Why? Because Guy always dares to speak the truth, at least the truth as he sees it, without concern for what others might think, as long as he is true to himself. In honor of him, I plan to do the same to you today – speak the truth as I see it.

Also, considering I've had about 24 hours notice to deliver this speech, I hope you'll forgive hearing a speech I've delivered before and any stumbles I might make. I may be reading from my notes somewhat more than I usually do when I speak.

But let's hope I "arouse" you in some way and spark further discussion amongst our ranks. So, here goes.

I delivered a version of the speech you're about to hear in July of 2006 as the keynote address at the 10th anniversary celebration of Leathermen's Discussion Group here in San Francisco. That audience was comprised primarily of gay men and the speech most definitely took that into account. But I think much of its message will ring true with men and women of all persuasions and where possible I've attempted to update what I have to say.

For those of you that know me well, as one of my former partners would often say, I've been around this scene since the earth was cooling. (It was actually Guy who used that phrase and I thought it fitting to use it today.) I've been involved in many organizations and projects, but most important for my speech today, I am, at least I hope I am, a fairly decent observer and analyst of this leather/SM/fetish/"whatever we want to call it nowadays" scene of ours. But I guess I'll let you be the judge of that after you hear what I have to say.

Before I begin, I don't want anyone to be concerned that I'm going to drone on for too long. I consider brevity a virtue and practice it whenever I can. I'll speak for about 20 minutes and then you can all move on to the networking and socializing.

Also, if anyone would like to talk with me afterwards, I'll be around, feel free to say hi. If you'd rather chat virtually, my email is the same as my name, race@bannon.com.

So what am I going to talk about today? When I was first asked to deliver this original speech I bandied about a lot of topics, but ultimately decided on a topic I personally find fascinating, and that's the current trends in our scene.

As some background, in March of 2004 I gave a presentation at the Los Angeles Leather Weekend titled Contemporary Trends in Leather. To prepare for that presentation I interviewed 50 men and women from all walks of the scene asking them about trends they've noticed. For those of you with research backgrounds, this was a very informal ethnographic study.

Then when I was asked me to deliver this original speech in 2006, I decided to talk with an additional 50 people, this time just gay men since I thought their insights might be more relevant to the group I was speaking to at that time.

So today I'd like to mention some of the trends I spoke about in 2004, those in 2006, and some more current observations, and I'll provide my own personal perspective and commentary on those trends. And for one trend I find particularly interesting I'll pose some theories about why I think it's occurring.

But first, why should we care about trends in our scene? The reason we should care is that any community that doesn't exhibit trends, that doesn't change, is lifeless and risks extinction.

Author Anais Nin (ana-EESE neen) put it this way: “Life is a process of becoming, a combination of states we have to go through. Where people fail is that they wish to elect a state and remain in it. This is a kind of death.”

Philosopher Henri Bergson put it another way: “To exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly.”

So by us acknowledging trends, by discussing them, by dissecting and debating them, we are simultaneously validating that our scene is alive and vibrant.

Some trends may be perceived as not good, while others may be considered beneficial. Some might be perceived as neither good nor bad. That is something each of you here today has to decide for yourselves. But the mere acknowledgement of these trends gives us the hope that our scene will continue to grow and mature and serve the sexual, social and identity needs it’s meant to serve.

There will always be members of a community that resist change, that will see most trends as negative. Much the way parents often decry the music or dress of their children’s generation, there are those among us who will decry any change that deviates from their own comfort zone.

But change is the norm, not the exception. And the more comfortable we become with change, the more likely we can foster the good trends and correct the bad ones.

So what are some of the trends? I don’t have time to talk about them all, but let me mention a few of the ones people brought up most often when I interviewed the original 100 folks for this speech, and then validated by many of the casual conversations I’ve had with people since that time.

The first trend I’ll point out won’t surprise anyone here, and that is the profound influence of the internet and technology. During my interviews this was by far the most mentioned trend in 2004, and again in 2006, and in more recent conversations.

Virtually everyone mentioned this trend and said that the internet is now the primary means by which kinky folks communicate. It is truly the great common denominator in our scene today.

Because of the internet, almost all of the gay men I interviewed back in 2004 and 2006 said that they frequent leather bars, in fact bars in general, much less than in the

past. And for those that still did go to bars, they considered them much more of a social venue than a cruising one.

However, for this trend, at least from a gay male perspective, I have noticed an interesting shift since 2006. Many men have reported a hunger for more face-to-face time. From the chats I've had with others in the scene who are not gay men I'm sensing a somewhat similar hunger.

As a local example of that hunger being satisfied, the Chaps II bar recently opened here in San Francisco. At a time when many thought that sort of social and cruise scene was permanently on the decline, it has opened to seemingly universal praise, in particular because it touts itself as a leather/kink/gear bar, openly acknowledging some of the trends that require a more inclusive approach beyond just leather. Perhaps this is signaling, at least here in San Francisco, a resurgence in needing to see our fellow kinkoids in the flesh.

Of those I talked with that belonged to clubs or organizations, many said they were now focusing more on educational and social events rather than play events because the internet provides such an easy means for people to connect sexually.

Many said that the internet has exposed them to a wider range of kink and has opened their minds to more options. This actually relates directly to another trend I'll talk about in a few moments.

Most said that the internet is their only means of getting information about kinky sex and the leather/SM/fetish scene. This surprised me since the folks I interviewed are a fairly "networked" bunch. I also have to admit this sort of scares me, especially as we gather here this weekend as leaders and organizers who are working hard to get good information into the hands of the kinky, and the soon to be kinky, with the need for some of that education to take place in real time and not just virtually.

An interesting and heartening pattern also emerged regarding this trend. Those mentioning the internet's influence in 2004 were much more negative about it than they were in 2006 or today. The people I interviewed in 2006 and more recently seemed to accept the internet as the de facto networking medium without too much judgment about it.

The next trend probably won't come as a surprise to many of you either and that's the generational divide. A lot of gay men in particular mentioned this one. This does appear to be something specific to the gay men's community from what I can tell, but perhaps others here would disagree.

Younger and older men in our scene repeatedly mentioned a disconnect with each other. Older men often referred to younger men as not respecting traditions, while younger men tended to resist at least some of those traditions. Younger men, by far, mentioned this trend more often than older men.

There was no apparent lack of interest in playing with each other across age boundaries. So perhaps this divide will resolve itself in time in various dungeons and playrooms. I'd like to think so.

I had one interesting conversation with a younger man who belonged to an SM organization and he mentioned that while the group had been founded on some of the more traditional approaches to the scene, they were feeling compelled to modify the group's structure and protocols. Evidently younger guys were showing quite a bit of resistance to joining the group because of the more traditional approaches that, for whatever reason, they couldn't relate to.

The next trend I'm about to mention I must admit I'm a bit nervous about considering the audience I'm speaking to today. Please take it as an observation and not a judgment. It is that pansexuality appears to be reaching an equilibrium.

Sometime around the early 1980s the pansexual movement began in earnest. Men and women of all orientations mixed in ways that was unprecedented, often in play settings as well.

I believe this phenomenon reached its peak in the late 1990s and has been waning ever since and that seems to perhaps be due, at least in part, to the opinions expressed by many of those I interviewed, especially gay men.

Gay men in particular clearly want more gay male only spaces, especially when it comes to play spaces.

Let me be clear that the men interviewed did not judge women or heterosexuals when making these comments, but they clearly were more inclined to frequent events and groups with a gay male only focus.

In the conversations I've had with heterosexuals, lesbians and others, this sentiment seems to exist in those quarters as well. I talked just last week with a well-known heterosexual man in our community who candidly admitted to me that he rarely plays in mixed-orientations play spaces anymore. He is without a doubt one of the least homophobic het men I've ever met, but as he said "women just get my dick hard."

Among those I interviewed that I'd consider community or organization leaders – a few of you are sitting here today – there was understandably some fear that this trend might undo the good that the pansexual movement has brought about. I personally don't think it will. And here's why.

When it came to social situations, or community projects, events, fundraisers and the like, most everyone seemed to believe that the pansexual mixture was still a good thing at least some of the time. So again, this was not a repudiation of pansexuality, but clearly the pendulum has swung more to the middle as is so often the case with trends in general.

Another trend mentioned often was noticing greater versatility and more fluidity of roles among gay men. I didn't hear this too much from heterosexuals and lesbians, but I'd be curious to chat with some of you here today if you have any insight into this.

There appears to be somewhat of a generational gap around this issue. Younger guys, let's say 35 and under, mentioned this much more often than older guys.

This was a trend I hoped I could quantify in some way. Years ago I recall a researcher who surveyed about 300 men and women who clearly identified being part of the BDSM scene, asking them, on a scale of totally top to totally bottom, where did they see themselves. The result was a relatively smooth bell curve showing a normal, gradual distribution with a peak at 50/50.

About 12 years ago I did a similar exercise with a group of leathermen and found similar results with the distribution again being approximately a bell curve.

In 2006, when I gave the previous version of this speech, I did another casual study of roles based on how San Francisco men who belonged to the worldleathermen.com web site indicated their role identities. This is admittedly a skewed population, but it was one that was readily available. At that time I found an interesting shift.

For those here who are not members of worldleathermen, members can self identify as 100% active, 90% active, and so forth to 100% passive. This means that more nuanced top/bottom/versatile identifications were possible and therefore easier to quantify and plot on a chart.

Of the 900+ men in the sample, 291 said they leaned top, 355 said they leaned bottom, but an amazing 283 identified as being 50/50, equally top and bottom. This changed the relatively smooth bell curve of the data to one with a huge spike at the 50/50 mark.

Now, since I was asked to step into this keynote role yesterday, I figured I'd spend some time on worldleathermen.com last night seeing what the numbers might be today. (And I want no jokes from guys in the audience about how much I'm on worldleathermen anyway.)

So, of the 1,200+ men in the sample, 372 say they lean top, 456 say they lean bottom, but a truly unexpected 426 identify as being 50/50, equally top and bottom. This changes the relatively smooth bell curve of the past data to one with an even greater spike at the 50/50 mark, showing, at least using this same sample population, an even greater move towards versatility since I crunched the numbers back in 2006.

So maybe there is something to an increasing identification of gay men as versatile.

My instincts tell me there might, again, be somewhat of a generational divide regarding this issue. Someday I might do a similar exercise and use age as a data point as well. And I'd be curious if anyone here not gay male identified does anything similar on another site. Please send me your results.

Interestingly, the final trend I'll mention wasn't mentioned at all during my interviews in 2004, but was the second most mentioned trend during my 2006 interviews. Perhaps this is due to the fact that I only interviewed gay men in 2006, but I also interviewed a lot of gay men in 2004, so clearly there's something more to the reason behind this trend. Recent casual discussions with folks in the scene seem to back up this trend.

And that trend is that gay men are getting kinkier. And I'm guessing that men and women of all orientations have noticed this trend too, but I defer to you to explore this further.

Many men mentioned that they've noticed a rise in the variety of scenes men are into. And on an anecdotal level, if you look at the sexual interests people list in their online profiles these days, it does appear that this trend is indeed true.

So, assuming this is true, why is this happening? I have a theory.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Giacomo Rizzolatti, a neuroscientist and professor of human physiology, and two other scientists were doing research on the brain activity of monkeys as the monkeys performed various tasks (such as reaching for a banana). The researchers observed certain neurons in the brain firing. Then they noticed something unexpected. The same neurons fired when the monkey "only watched" someone perform the same task (such as reaching for a banana). Rizzolatti named these neurons "mirror neurons". Subsequent research has observed these mirror neurons in primates, some birds and humans. Therefore, it seems logical that mirror neurons allow humans simply observing someone doing something to truly experience at least some semblance of what that person is experiencing.

So consider the first trend I mentioned, the influence of the internet and technology, and how it might tie into this. We "see" other people's kinks via profiles and porn, and often in real time via chat and web cams, and, assuming the mirror neuron theory is correct, we actually experience the feelings and sensations in much the same way we would if we were actually do it. This brings about an energized interest in those kinks in ways more difficult to elicit before this technological age of ours came about.

Another factor that might be contributing to this trend is what I call "piercing the veil of fear."

Frances Moore Lappé, author of the famous book *Diet for a Small Planet*, and Jeffrey Perkins point out in their book *You Have the Power: Choosing Courage in a Culture of Fear* that people's natural tendency is towards happiness and the embracing of their uniqueness. But society, on many fronts, works hard to make people conform rather than embrace their uniqueness. Lappé and Perkins point out that the old way of thinking is: "If I'm really myself, I'll be excluded. If I break connection, I'll be alone forever."

The leather/SM/fetish scene has its own constructs, rules and paradigms that often serve to suppress people from really being themselves. The subtle message is – if your sexuality doesn't look this way, you're doing it wrong and you can't be part of our group.

The new way of thinking Lappé and Perkins observe more people are embracing is: “To find genuine connection, we must risk disconnection. The new light we shine draws others toward us, and we become conscious choosers.”

The kinky folks of today are, more and more, deciding to become conscious choosers. They are defining their own sexuality in ways that work for them rather than allowing the larger scene to define it for them. Because they have access to the intimate sexual interests of thousands of fellow erotic explorers at the click of a mouse, their fears are alleviated. They realize they're not alone in their desires for certain kinks and feel far more comfortable investigating and being open about them.

Personally, I think this is one of the healthiest trends in the scene today. And considering the theme of this year's conference is arouse, what could be more arousing than more erotic choices.

There were some other trends mentioned less often, but I think you get the idea that there are indeed trends.

So, what are we to do with all of this information? Well, here's what I think.

First and foremost, we must embrace trends, and therefore change, as a good and necessary part of the growth of our scene in order to keep it vibrant and alive.

We must look to trends and change as indicators of what the scene as a whole desires and needs; not try to conform the scene to what might be outdated rules and paradigms.

We must acknowledge that change will continue and will do so at an increasingly accelerated rate.

Two of the program track themes at the conference this year are “evolve” and “transform.” That sounds a lot like change to me. We should all keep our need to embrace change in mind as we learn and grow together this weekend.

We must stop judging the various segments of our scene – younger vs. older, Old Guard vs. New Guard, leather vs. non-leather, and newcomer vs. experienced. Another theme at this year's event is “involve.” How can we involve all of the various and

disparate types of kinky people unless we collectively, as leaders and organizers others look to for guidance, suspend our judgments and agree that we must all co-exist if we are to thrive.

We must accept that the monolithic “leather” scene will likely continue to be replaced with a network of smaller sub-scenes and we will need to work hard to keep those smaller sub-scenes united and networked for the common good, where it seems appropriate.

We must accept that the once all-inclusive “leather” descriptor, and even the more inclusive “leather/SM/fetish” descriptor may no longer suffice to truly describe the emergence of kinks and identifications that will continue to blossom over time. As another conference theme notes, we must “embrace” all of the growing and emerging identifications that keep this scene vibrant.

We must explore virtual communities blending with real-time communities in order to maintain a social connection with each other. As leaders in our scene, this task may fall squarely upon us. It is the men and women in this room that will transform the scene into what the troops are clamoring for and to re-ignite interest in face-to-face socializing, networking and, in some cases, play.

And, finally, and most importantly, while it is valuable to note and discuss these trends, none of us should look to these or any other trends as models for our own sexuality. Ultimately our sexuality is just that, “our” sexuality, and we must each pursue it in ways that work for us. And encourage others to do the same.

While he was referring to the movie business when he said it, a quote by the famous director Frank Capra is sage advice for us all. He said: “My advice ... is this: Don't follow trends, Start them!”

For those of you out there listening to this, my advice to you is the same for our scene. Don't follow trends. Start them. By your very presence here you are indicating you are willing to take up this challenge. Help our scene evolve. Get others involved in your passions. Embrace the diversity that makes us strong. Transform the mundane into the exciting. Use your influence to make things better while others might choose to stand on the sidelines. Ignite an interest in the larger population about who and what we are.

Do all of this, and the ultimate goal of arousal, individually and collectively, will be achieved. Because if we, the leaders, thinkers, organizers and mentors can't be aroused and foster that arousal in others, then what is the point.

This, tonight, is the beginning of what can be a valuable milestone for us and our kinky brethren. Meet, discuss, brainstorm, share, laugh, and get turned on... let's spark the arousal that is the reason we all got into this scene in the first place.

And most of all, give our scene hope for the future. Hope is powerful. Regardless of your spiritual leanings, the words of the famous liberal clergyman William Sloan Coffin pertain to us all, and our reason for being here. He said, "Hope arouses, as nothing else can arouse, a passion for the possible."

Thank you for your time.

*** END OF SPEECH ***

DATA

Here is data, used in the 2006 speech, collected by examining the profiles of all of the San Francisco men (929 in sample) that belonged to the worldleathermen.com web site on 25 July 2006. How they identified their role preference is noted below and the results represented graphically.

100% Active: 109

90% Active: 57

80% Active: 60

70% Active: 45

60% Active: 20

50/50: 283

60% Passive: 51

70% Passive: 79

80% Passive: 86

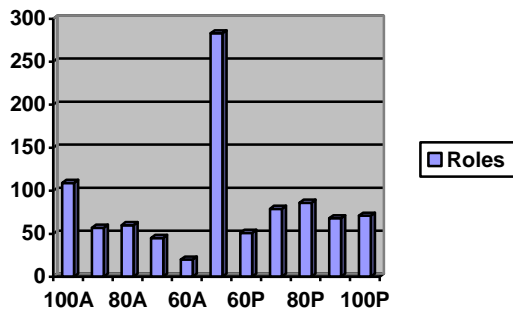
90% Passive: 68

100% Passive: 71

Leaning top: 291

Leaning bottom: 355

50/50: 283



Here is data, used in the 2008 LLC speech, collected by examining the profiles of all of the San Francisco men (1,224 in sample) that belonged to the worldleathermen.com web site on 10 April 2008. How they identified their role preference is noted below and the results represented graphically.

100% Active: 134

90% Active: 72

80% Active: 73

70% Active: 62

60% Active: 31

50/50: 426

60% Passive: 69

70% Passive: 97

80% Passive: 104

90% Passive: 92

100% Passive: 94

Leaning top: 372

Leaning bottom: 456

50/50: 426

