

# Consensual Obedience

October, 2001

Hortensio: . . . I wonder what it bodes.  
Petruccio: Marry, peace it bodes, and love, and quiet life,  
an awful rule and right supremacy;  
And, to be short, what not that's sweet and happy?  
–The Taming of the Shrew, William Shakespeare

Obedience – defined here in its only proper sense to mean the *willing* placement of another person's volition ahead of one's own – is not only among the most difficult of human virtues to practice, but among the most problematical to recognize and evaluate. Compliance extorted through intimidation is certainly no moral virtue. Neither is the habit of automatic subservience to authority – much as some authorities may pretend otherwise. The famous Milgrim experiment (look it up on the Internet) showed just how lazy, insensitive and dangerous our habitual subservience can be. A readiness to follow orders may be wise or shrewd; it may be a social virtue antithetical to chaos. Depending on the orders given, it may have many positive social consequences, but it is not *per se* a desirable quality, let alone a spiritual one. True obedience, often confused with mere compliance or subservience or suggestibility, is another story. The free gift of one's own volition to someone or something loved can be intensely erotic for both parties. As Petruccio tells us, it also makes for “peace. . . and love, and quiet life” by reducing stress in the practical business of living. And it may be a valid form of spiritual practice, and a precondition for any serious teaching situation. My project here is to discuss the nature of obedience in a full-time (i.e. 24/7) Dominant/submissive relationship, and I will use the male pronoun for the sub because I am one. Shakespeare's play is out of date in one respect only: Men are no longer necessarily the Doms of a relationship. Some couples, Lady Carol and myself among them, work better the other way.

To avoid confusion with styles of obedience that I do not particularly admire and have no wish to praise, what I have promised my good lady might be described *consensual* obedience. This sounds like an oxymoron, but I don't think it is. It differs little, actually, from the normal relationship on a good project team where the subordinates are not just willing hands, taking orders and carrying out the work, but professionals in their own right, bringing valuable knowledge and experience to the task at hand. In these situations, the team leader has final say. When there are disagreements on the team, she has the responsibility and right to call the shots and be obeyed. But she not only allows, but requires that her subordinates give her the benefit of their best thinking on any matter, and she takes careful account of their concerns. Moreover, if she hopes to get their best efforts and keep their loyalty she gives them as much input as possible into the over-all vision that guides their work. At the same time, she is entitled to respect and deference, and is both empowered and expected to discipline them when they screw up. (Though admittedly, corporal punishment is out of fashion in Silicon Valley during working hours.)

Consensual obedience (CO) in this sense<sup>1</sup> is at an opposite pole from the so-called total power exchange (TPE) relationship<sup>2</sup> where there is no explicit contract or definite limits, but rather an ideal of complete dependency, obedience and trust on one side, and an acceptance of total responsibility on the other. It differs also from the sort of contractual, indentured relationship described in Laura Antoniou's *Marketplace* series. What it amounts to, on the bottom line, is a serious promise to put the needs of the relationship ahead of one's own preferences in all situations, and not to fight – for any reason. If vital needs and interests are being ignored a CO sub might, in the end revoke his submission or, in the last resort, walk out of the relationship. In just this way, a responsible professional or loyal official might, in the last resort, resign from a position in which his vital concerns were wantonly ignored. Short of that point, he would give his superior the benefit of his views and judgments, staunchly argue for them to the extent this might be useful, but follow orders when over-ruled.

My own submission to Lady Carol seems to follow this CO model – one we are both familiar with from our professional lives. It confuses some people, and has confused us in the past, because it departs in several respects from the typical Femdom model, and certainly from Femdom fantasy. I do not worship my Lady as a goddess. I do not think of her as my owner. I may express desires and preferences, make suggestions, argue (respectfully) for my opinions, even be humanly manipulative or irritating within reason – – though she can always call me on it, and rebuke or punish as she sees fit. My promise to Lady Carol is that in the end, she will call the shots: We will have things **her** way. Her promise to me is to judge and decide in both our interests, and in the interest of our relationship.

The obedience that I have promised is not without its reservations. As she knows well, I have several vital needs that, systematically ignored, would put an end to our relationship – as indeed does she. There is no intention, not even a fantasy, that I have no life of my own. But there is every intention that we will live together and love each other, and that in all that concerns us jointly, she will reign and I will happily serve.

Two aspects of this “consensual” style of obedience – one political, the other genuinely spiritual – strike me as specially interesting, and worth discussing in more general context. First, as regards the politics of a relationship, consensual obedience empowers the submissive as much as the Dominant, which is why the Scene is correct to speak of a power *exchange*, and not of a power *surrender*. The incentive behind a feudal system was only partly the protection and support a vassal gained in exchange for loyalty. Just as much, it was the respect and consideration he gained in exchange for these same given, and the influence he gained through his gift of power. By offering – and, most of the time, delivering – obedience, he gained secure position in the “great

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<sup>1</sup> In a different sense, the obedience tendered in any legally acceptable BDSM relationship must be consensual. Whatever fantasy is in play, the submissive cannot truly be property: the services he performs are consensual and voluntary; and any punishments he incurs likewise. These may be – in fact, should be – a good few notches sharper than he can easily take but, in the nature of such a relationship, they cannot be harsher than he can *willingly* take. If they were, he would use his safe word and, at the limit, he would walk. Given their voluntary nature they have, in fact, more the nature of a *penance*, than of a legal *punishment*. Essentially, they are reminders that he has erred, and should be more careful next time.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://soiuser.hyperchat.com/midi/tpe.htm> for a thoughtful discussion of what a so-called TPE relationship entails.

chain of being.” He “knew his place” as we say – he knew “who’s who and what’s what” – which is more than anyone knows today.

The bourgeois, commercial world works on a different principle: on contractual obligation and voluntary exchange between individuals nominally equal before the law (however unequal in wealth and power), who owe each other nothing and have all but forgotten the meaning of words like *duty*, *honour*, *respect* and *loyalty*. “If you want loyalty, get a dog,” a man told his boss on quitting his job for a better one. The boss had asked, “Where’s your loyalty?” – after the company had just sacked a few thousands of its employees. But a man not only wants loyalty from others, but wants to be able to give it – without feeling like, or being taken for a sucker. That may be one reason our thing is gaining in popularity.

The spiritual dimension of obedience also extends far beyond the realm of BDSM. Traditionally, it was the last and greatest of the three monastic vows; and though the authority it gave to spiritual directors was sometimes abused, there is no doubt it could afford a valid form of spiritual practice. Indeed, it does so for us today: for my lady, whose discipline is to consider both our needs and order our life together in both our interests; and for myself, whose discipline is to serve her gracefully and submit my will to hers on the terms described.

What gives obedience its *spiritual* value, I’d suggest, is not that it be unconditional and self-abnegating, nor that it serve to anchor a personal identity by attaching it to something greater. Its value, rather, lies in helping to cultivate a certain independence of your own will – the ability to let go of it when it is getting in the way. The practice is to accept, without anger, without bitterness, without annoyance even, that you may not get exactly what you want, that something different may come to pass, that the world you live in is not in all respects the world as you would have wished it. The practice is to love and attend to the suchness, the actuality of things, at least as much as to your dream of how they should have been – or might yet become. As spiritual practice, the point of obedience is to learn to find contentment and freedom within accepted limits. It’s not just a question of having “the courage to change what can be changed, the patience to accept what cannot be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference.” It’s a question of loyalty to reality – a staunch commitment to the actual, a solid grounding in the actual, as a basis for such efforts or projects as you undertake.

When we say of someone that “his head is in the clouds,” or that “he doesn’t have his feet on the ground,” a failure of obedience is, fundamentally, what we put at point. There is a slippage between necessity and acceptance, or between acceptance and performance. (As with many people who live by words and ideas, this is one of my own failings.) For such people, immersion in the actuality of our own bodies through some concrete, physical exercise or task is a valid path to growth. The work is accepted out of love and trust in the person who assigns it; but the obedience involved becomes, most fundamentally, a practice of realism. What was undertaken at a flood tide of enthusiasm, must be carried on day-by-day, whether one feels like it or not. You begin by obeying orders and instructions, and end by learning to obey the realities from which they sprung – to which they correspond.

I emphasize that this submission, properly understood, is not an avoidance of personal responsibility but a deepening of responsibility. Obedience may be an evil thing, depending on whom or what one is obeying. You have the Mistress you choose and consent to serve; whatever karma attaches to the orders you obey becomes your own karma. That is a danger, of course, so the obedient servant must still have his wits, and moral sensibilities, about him. The Nuremberg trials correctly set a precedent that

“just following orders” is no excuse.

Here we can see the moral difference between true obedience and mere compliance, or habitual subservience, or suggestibility: Gregory Bateson remarks somewhere that “Binocular vision adds a dimension.” We see the world in depth because two eyes, set a little apart, send the brain slightly different pictures. The practice of obedience to a good Mistress creates a similar tension of two distinct but intertwined volitions, and thus an intentional depth much sharper than would be possible in a more casual, even-handed relationship. This added depth enriches both party’s worlds, but it is obedience freely and lovingly given that makes it possible. Obviously, the subordination of a chattel slave will achieve nothing of the kind if orders are followed just from prudential motives to avoid the lash.