

Sadomasochism 101

I am a masochist. We all know what sadomasochism is. It's people decked out in black leather—Tops beating bottoms with whips and canes. Sadists are those who get pleasure from inflicting pain. Masochists are those who get pleasure from receiving pain. These people, however, as much as they do exist, and as colorful as they are in our imaginations, merely represent almost pure examples of phenomena that are as common as dogs and cats. Dogs like pit bulls or Dobermans say *dog* loudly, but there are countless other more subtle breeds.

In order to understand just how common sadomasochism is, we'll first discuss what happens, materially and psychologically, in an SM scene. While I have a grasp on such goings-on from a masochistic viewpoint, I have little knowledge of how a Top feels about flogging a bottom. That's a serious shortcoming of this essay. But as I have mentioned many times in this book, I *can only* discuss broad topics from my own narrow viewpoint, and that's as it should be. Furthermore, Tops need to understand what a bottom experiences to be good Tops, but bottoms need only seek to please their Tops, not necessarily understand their whys or hows.

SM is best practiced *sober*. Drunk or high Tops or bottoms pose a strong degree of danger in a scene. Also, SM scenes

endow both Tops and bottoms with intense, ineluctable sensations and emotions. Why would anyone *want* to ruin a good high with painful distractions, or dissolve exquisite pain in drunken dissipation? Furthermore, sadomasochists need to know lots of rules to ensure that a scene remains safe. Carelessly handcuffing someone can lead to loss of digits or limbs—not to mention, keys get lost; striking a bottom on the lower back can cause life-threatening kidney failure. Top and bottom have to be so diligent in protecting themselves that it's easy to see why we would no more want SMers playing drunk than we would gun-toting hunters wandering the forest drunk.

Assuming the Top is experienced and sober enough, he or she will assign the bottom a safeword. *Red* is a famous safeword. At any time during the scene, even to the chagrin of the Top, the bottom may utter its safeword, ending the scene. The Top must stop beating the bottom, and release it from any restraints. Theoretically, the bottom will use the safeword because it has reached its limit of endurance. Good bottoms will never use a safeword unless a) some physical problem has arisen, like chest pains indicating heart trouble, for example, or more often b) it has tried its absolute best, and *cannot* go on. In practice, use of the safeword for trivial discomfort, or even serious pain, will shortchange both Top and bottom.

Next, the Top will cuff the bottom, wrists and ankles, to a piece of furniture, chains suspended from the ceiling, a cross, or some other object. Restraint has obvious psychological and symbolic meanings, but those are not the primary reasons why a bottom *must* be restrained. If the Top didn't restrict the bottom's movement, the bottom would thrash and move—a natural biological response to the Top's ministrations. A whip can take out an eye. A cane can break a bone. Any implement can cut the bottom in a vulnerable spot, making it bleed profusely, which is usually not desired. Tops do not want to take bottoms to the emergency room.

Since restraint is a necessity of SM, a fundamental corollary follows. After much discussion, my partner and I came up with the first rule of sex. Anyone who has sex with multiple partners should obey this rule like a commandment: *never let anyone you don't know well restrain you*. Get fucked without condoms, drink to intoxication and go home with a stranger, suck a cock with an obvious sore on it, let drugs cloud your judgment, but *never* let anyone you don't know well restrain you. This essay isn't about this commandment, but much could be written about the reasons for it. At least, it will be clear that a stranger can do you harm, if he chooses, and restraining you makes it impossible for you to defend yourself.

Does the Top have to know the bottom well, too? Yes. SM is illegal in all fifty states and all municipalities. It's not really that there are specific laws forbidding SM. Indeed, in many cities, law enforcement is aware of the local SM community and tolerates it. However, *assault* is illegal everywhere, and there is no provision in any law for *consensual* assault. SM usually leaves marks on the bottom—welts and scratches. A well-worked-over bottom has physical proof that it was assaulted. Inexperienced bottoms can change their minds, decide that the Top went beyond their consent, or even become jealous and seek to punish the Top. Tops have just as much interest in knowing their bottoms.

So, Top and bottom have vetted one another, they have refrained from drink or drugs, the Top has assigned the bottom a safeword, and the Top has safely restrained the bottom to a cross in his basement. An SM scene can unfold in as many ways as there are SM scenes. No two are exactly alike. Almost all scenes open with light, sensual play that gradually builds, over as much as twenty minutes or more, to actual pain. Part of the pleasure is the bottom's anticipation: when is it going to start hurting? Flogging, for example, can feel really good, and it tenderizes the skin, preparing it for harder blows or a

whip. When the pain starts, the excited bottom yelps in response. This is itself a kind of intoxication. With each stroke of the cat or later a whip, the sum of everything that came before seduces the bottom to take ever harder blows. Had the Top started with mean strokes of a whip, the bottom wouldn't have been able to handle it, but its body responds well to the gradual buildup.

Finally, the bottom's mettle is tested by serious, stinging swipes of the whip. They may come fast and furious, whipping the bottom into a frenzy. Or the Top may tease the bottom with many-second delays between strokes. Tops frequently play games designed to assist their bottoms in dealing with the pain. "Count the strokes," they say. "I want you to say 'One. Thank you, Sir. May i have another?'" The game distracts the bottom from the pain. It has to concentrate on counting and saying the words, so it can't anticipate the possibly agonizing strokes to come. I made up a method of my own to deal with this kind of pain. Howl like a dog. I imagine a dog in my mind. What would a dog do in response to the whipping? Growl, yelp, and howl. Becoming an animal helped me go with it, and not resist it, not focus on my plight. It *empowered* me in coping with the pain. This goes on until the Top gets tired, or feels the bottom has pleased him and had enough.

Non-Leather folks wonder why people would engage in this kind of scenario. There are a lot of reasons, but for me, the most notable is the biological response of the human body to pain. As soon as the first truly painful blows are struck, the nerves at the locus of the pain send signals to the brain. The brain springs into action. It secretes endorphins, an opioid, which it sends to the source of the pain. This accounts for the claim of many bottoms, myself included, that the pain feels, after a while, like sugar tastes. With each crack of the whip, more endorphins are sent into the bloodstream. The opioids

flood the body with positive sensations, and soften the pain at the location of the developing welts. Furthermore, the adrenal gland pumps out adrenaline (the fight-or-flight drug), which also floods the body. The bottom cannot readily end the pain, fight back, or run away, so endorphins and adrenaline keep flowing.

At the end of the scene, if all goes according to plan, when the bottom's wrists and ankles are released from the restraints and it turns around to look at its Top, it is intoxicated with a sensation of pure bliss. I think of it as the elation one gets from a hit of ecstasy, without schlucking a pill. This high is felt by runners, boxers and other fighters, soldiers in battle; it even accounts for the good feeling you get from running on a treadmill, or climbing a StairMaster at the gym. The joy you feel when you've been thoroughly worked over in an SM scene is that much more intense.

I cannot speak for any SM bottoms other than myself in explaining *why* this behavior appeals to me. I imagine there are as many meanings for it as there are SM bottoms. Besides the physical pleasure I get from endorphins lubricating the painful blows, and the blissful high after the action, I have already indicated that SM helps me become an animal. It also makes me more of a man.

Before I ever experienced SM, I secretly held myself in contempt. I had never been in a fight. I tended to be submissive. I feared confrontation. In order to deal with the magnitude of pain in an SM scene, however, you have to find a strong, willful, powerful *self*. If I could take that kind of punishment, and come out the other side elated, I must actually be a significant man. Every SM scene I engaged in reinforced the feelings of masculine power I had always craved so much. The trajectory of my life post-SM veered in a completely new direction—a good direction. Years of therapy didn't do what the whip and cane accomplished in

minutes. Certainly, most boys will play a sport or get in fist-fights or fuck their girlfriends to intensify their feelings of manliness. That's good for them. But I can attest that SM functioned beautifully for *me* as an antidote to *my* fears of being a pussy.

SM also enlightened me profoundly as to the nature of bipolar tension, and therefore exposed me to an essential aspect of my religious faith: Taoism. Obviously, SM is replete with bipolar tensions: sadism-masochism, Top-bottom, Him-me. I never *really* understood bipolar tension, however, until I experienced it *on my body* in the form of the pain-pleasure duality. When pain literally became pleasure for me, in a spiritually deep and mysterious way, it opened my eyes to the fact that pain defines pleasure and pleasure defines pain. I also realized that they, and indeed *all* bipolar tensions, are heads and tails of the same coin. Pleasure and pain are *different ways of looking* at the same phenomenon. They *are* the same thing. Pleasure contains pain, while pain contains pleasure.

Subsequent to my exposure to SM, I began to see that the painful, disagreeable parts of life—the blood and guts—are every bit as marvelous and important as the pleasant bits. For one thing, both define us. People who never experience pain and suffering can't possibly appreciate pleasure and joy. So I started looking for the agreeable parts of disagreeable things. Poverty was, for me, a miracle of growth and discovery. Painful sobbing over loss or heartache *felt good*. Sickness and disease were badges of honor. I also found that it went in the opposite direction. Beautiful artworks can be heartbreaking. Great sex or wonderful conversations with intelligent people can elicit painful thoughts. When I experienced joy, I might start crying. When asked what was wrong, I would lament, "Why did it have to be so hard?" If there's *this* level of love in the world, what's with all the hate, strife, struggle, and war? *None* of these mystical understandings would have been pos-

sible for me, living in our culture, without my having been whipped on a cross.

Many will object to SM because of its *cruelty*. It's simply wrong to inflict pain deliberately, they will argue, perceived benefits notwithstanding. SM is cruel, and by necessity, the SM Top is cruel. Cruelty, however, has nothing to do with inflicting pain. It involves harsh decision-making processes that disregard all tangential issues, especially emotional ones. A man may consider a range of issues in making a decision, but the cruel man is able to choose an arbitrary course of action that rejects most considerations. The cruel man must steel himself against self-doubt. Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan was cruel. Art is cruel. The artist *must* make choices without vacillation. This will be blue; this will be red; I choose this word over all others. When art isn't cruel, it's bad art. The SM bottom says, "i will make myself and my body submit to this pain, because i know it's good for me." *Both* Top and bottom engage in cruelty. Cruelty is a necessity of SM, because the parties involved must put an awful lot aside (social conditioning, biological anti-pain response, ethical and legal considerations) in order to get down to it.

Finally, sadomasochism is as common as hair. *Everyone* is sadistic and masochistic to some degree. Remember, all those terms mean is that one gets pleasure from giving or receiving pain. Black leather, whips, and safewords are not required. People like watching horror movies. When one is scared, adrenaline flows into the body. That's why people come away from horror movies feeling mildly elated. It's a natural drug. People like watching sad, tragic tearjerkers. That's nothing but self-inflicted pain. When people come away from those movies crying, they're *enjoying* feeling what they're feeling: pain.

Bullies are sadists at heart, and our culture is replete with bullies. If the bullies are politicians in the party we vote for,

we enjoy watching them inflict pain on their victims. All competitive sports are ultimately sadomasochistic contests. We're delighted when a football player inflicts a concussion on a member of the opposing team. We may pay lip service to the idea that sports should be made safer, but if we weren't delighted by the violence, no one would watch them.

We all know of women who stay with exploitatively abusive men. Those relationships are sadomasochism in action. You might say the woman doesn't enjoy being assaulted, but her addiction to it—her physical addiction to the biochemical changes in her body when she's being abused—is *exactly* why she stays. If that element weren't present in the mix, she likely would have been gone a long time ago. Proper SM practitioners frequently tout the phrase “safe, sane, and consensual” to describe a healthy disposition to SM. This last example of SM in everyday life violates all three of the mantra's components. Beating someone exploitatively isn't safe. Beating someone in rage isn't sane. And beating someone against their will isn't consensual. While these abusive relationships *are* sadomasochistic, they are also mentally ill and destructive.

We don't realize that we like pain, inflicting it and receiving it, because our culture is prejudiced *against* pain. That prejudice is no more reasonable and intelligent than a preference for white people over black people, or men over women. Until our civilization embraces its secret love for pain, next to its overt love for pleasure, it will continue to suffer from a neurotic inability to understand and love its own humanity.