

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

My Dinner With Dr. King

By William Hood

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FORTY-FIVE years ago, the Rev. Dr. and Mrs. Martin Luther King Jr. went to a small dinner party in Atlanta, not far from the campus of Emory University. It was a quiet January night in 1968. I was one of the guests.

Our hostess, Wanda White, was a young public-school teacher. In the fall of 1967, she worked with Mrs. King, helping with her schedule, as well as other personal and professional responsibilities. During a conversation, Wanda asked the Kings over for a low-key dinner. They accepted, and Wanda invited some of her close friends. (All of us were white.)

My best friend, Larry Shaw, and I were invited to the dinner. He came from a long line of salt-of-the-earth skilled tradesmen anchored in Appalachian South Carolina and the red clay fields of Georgia. My father was a successful industrialist in Birmingham, Ala. We anticipated the approaching dinner with the empty-headed excitement of young people who rarely think beyond their own self-interest.

For us, in fact, the thrill was primarily in meeting a real-life celebrity. Wanda's corgi heard the Kings' car before we did. He rushed to the door and flipped over to offer his belly in greeting as the Kings stepped in. As Mrs. King bent down to give him a scratch, Dr. King asked to use the telephone. I took drink orders. Knowing that the Kings were Baptists and most Baptists — white Southern Baptists anyway — didn't drink, I made sure to tell Mrs. King that we had nonalcoholic beverages.

"I'll have a Coke, thanks." She seemed shy and a little nervous. I was, too.

Dr. King was neither shy nor nervous. When he came back, I asked him the same question. “Any Baptists here?” he asked with a smile. “No, sir,” I said. “We’re all Episcopalians.”

The grin blossomed into a smile. “Good! I’ll have Scotch on the rocks.”

Mrs. King blurted, “Well, I’ll have cream sherry.” Everyone laughed, and the early stiffness relaxed.

At the table Wanda, Larry and I regaled the Kings with tales of our common avocation, breeding and showing purebred dogs. (For days afterward we wondered whether the Kings were more bemused than amused, but they were good sports for all that.) Larry told them about the boarding kennel he ran to support his show dogs, and I talked about my graduate studies in art history.

Gradually the conversation moved to more serious topics, and Dr. King himself talked about the blight of poverty on our national life, as well as his feelings against the Vietnam War. Of the three of us, only Wanda had turned her moral attention to issues beyond race, which seemed to be one of the only things that preoccupied Southern liberals in those years. Self-absorbed as I was, only later that year did I begin to realize how prophetic his words were.

After dinner Dr. King asked Wanda if he could use the telephone again. When he came back, he settled onto the sofa next to me. I tried to think of something clever to say, but before I could speak, he asked why I was studying for a Ph.D. in art history. He asked what I thought art could accomplish that other forms of communication could not. I remember that he said that he’d rarely discussed art, or even thought much about it. As I stammered an answer I cannot recall, he listened with the concentration of someone who genuinely wanted to understand. Never before, and rarely since, had I witnessed such authentic humility. It was so simple, so powerful a form of energy that for a few moments it freed me from bondage to myself.

A conversation that cannot have lasted more than 10 minutes ended up changing the way I thought about my life. When I got back to New York, my viewpoint toward earning a doctorate shifted. The determination to use my education to become a famous scholar gradually made room for a half-baked resolution to become a useful art historian. I began to consider the moral or religious content of Renaissance art; and once I got a job teaching art history at an institution whose values encouraged me to develop that ambition, teaching became a means for me to help students identify and examine their own values. That remains my goal. The short conversation I had with Dr. King had a lasting effect.

The next morning Mrs. King called Wanda. We learned that after dinner he'd called to tell the person who would pick them up to come at 11:30, rather than 10:30, as planned. She thanked Wanda for a pleasant evening. She also told Wanda that she and Dr. King were looking forward to inviting us to their home, perhaps when I returned from New York.

Of course, there was no next time. A few minutes before 8 p.m. on April 4, 1968, I arrived at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University to give my first seminar report. As soon as we walked out of class at 10, we learned that Dr. King was dead.

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