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Can Love And Manners Get Us Through?

Angela Wright

Bigotry teaches us that we don't belong to each other, but we do. As much as we try to resist it, the truth is that we all belong to one tribe.

MY GRANDMOTHER GATHERED OUR FAMILY FOR DINNER EVERY Sunday night, and every Thanksgiving and Christmas for over forty years. With Granny at the head of the table, we all did our best to behave ourselves—both the kids and the adults. But after she died, our family table, like many, came unglued around the fault lines of CNN and FOX News. Even invoking her memory was not enough to keep us together.

At every family dinner, Granny presided, relaxed and certain, as three generations gathered around crisp white damask. My sisters and I set the table as we had been taught: forks and properly-folded white cloth napkins to the left of china plates; knives, spoons, then iced-tea spoons parading to the right. We moved the red or pink carnations that during the week graced her table to make room for our weekly glut of food: either a rib roast or leg of lamb; pole beans, turnip or collard greens, and butter beans, cooked with what she called streak o' lean; buttery Parker House rolls; then, homemade ice cream and chocolate sauce for dessert.

My father told stories of recent or long-past adventures with his high-school buddies—tales of hunting, fishing, skiing, partying, usually spiked with a shot of near-death or superhuman exploit, excessive drinking always the subtext. Granny told stories about us grandkids that

made her laugh, sometimes so hard she had to wipe tears from her eyes with the tissue folded in the cuff of her blouse.

The family's commercial real estate business—a handful of seedy strip malls and warehouses on the outskirts of Atlanta—wasn't discussed at Granny's dinner table, at least not until after my grandfather died. After that, my grandmother and father argued about business at every meal, oblivious to the rest of us. We kids were spectators but not uninvolved, more like avid fans in the bleachers. So caught up in the action, we thought we were in the game.

Likewise, we listened intently as the adults spewed variations on their favorite theme—Blacks were taking over Atlanta. We were indoctrinated into southern white privilege and politics at my grandmother's table.

The problem was, the more this rot was served, the less able I was to stomach it.





Granny tried her best to teach my sisters and me what was required of a good southern girl. We practiced our manners in her dining room—napkins in our laps, elbows off the table—and also at the downtown Rich’s Tea Room, which is where the trouble began. Rich’s was hallowed ground for white society, including my grandmother. Maybe for that very reason, it was also ground zero for a year-long sit-in campaign that ultimately integrated Atlanta’s downtown lunch counters, Rich’s included. Even after the sit-ins, however, we never once saw a Black person dining there.

When I was six, my sisters and I sat down with our grandmother at the Tea Room after shopping for school clothes. Our waitress, a middle-aged Black woman in a starched white uniform that matched the crisp linen table cloth, asked if I wanted sweet tea. I answered as I had

been taught: “Yes, Ma’am.” When the waitress walked away, my grandmother corrected me, as if I should have known, “You never say ‘Yes, Ma’am’ to a colored woman.”

Wait, what?

I had learned by then not to talk back to grown-ups. But I knew she was wrong.

I didn’t become the good southern girl my grandmother wanted me to be. Instead, I became an activist for social justice and a pastor—roles she found unbecoming, especially for a woman, and more especially for one of her granddaughters. I marched, lobbied, and advocated for all kinds of things she didn’t agree with: labor rights, voting rights, immigrant rights, civil rights. As smart and independent as she was, she didn’t even agree with the notion of women’s rights. When I asked her to help me pay for seminary,

she said, “No one wants to hear a woman preacher. They want a man’s voice because it sounds like God.” All this she said while writing me a check.

After seminary, I strayed even further from my roots. I started an alternative church in downtown Birmingham where Black, Brown, and White people worshipped, worked, and gathered at the table together. And I fell in love with a Black man.

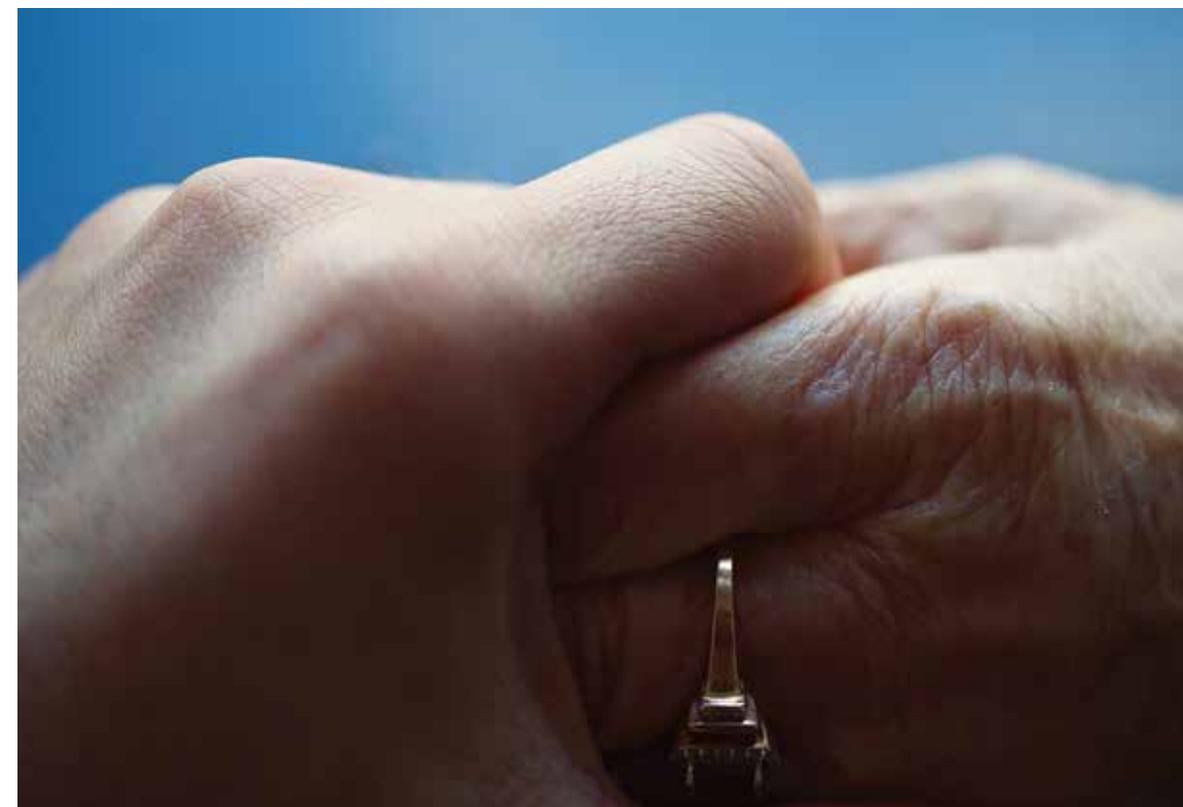
Regardless of our disagreements, every time I turned into my grandmother’s driveway, I found her standing with the screen door wide open, a huge smile on her face as she called out, “Hey, Sugah!,” and walked toward me to gather me up in her arms.

After my grandmother died, I was startled to find, nested among notepads, fingernail polish, and a romance novel in her night table drawer, a

Smith & Wesson pistol. It was ladylike, adorned with mother-of-pearl and small enough to fit into her evening bag where she could reach it if she heard an intruder in the house.

It’s hard to imagine Granny with a gun in her hand. Not that she wouldn’t defend herself—legend has it that when she was a young bride, she chased an intruder out of her kitchen with a cast iron skillet. The only weapon I ever saw her brandish was a yardstick, which she waved around, threatening to whack my siblings and me if we didn’t stop jumping on the twin beds where we slept on Friday nights. She placed the yardstick in the corner of the bedroom by the door, illuminated by a nightlight. There it stood in the shadows like a sentry—only more menacing.

I also found a book called *Sex After Sixty* on one of my grandmother’s bookshelves. I can’t picture that and don’t much want to. I imagine





that Ray, her second husband, bought it with some hope of transgressing their separate bedrooms, perhaps enticing her into his room or, in a desperate measure, trying to climb into Granny's twin size bed.

Most enlightening, I found among my grandmother's things a yellowed clipping from Sunday's *Parade* magazine with a headline that read, "Martin Luther King at Communist Training School." Granny didn't think a lot about politics, nor was she a person who pasted every photo and memento in a scrapbook. I think she saved this clipping to prove to her grandchildren, most especially me, that King was a traitor. The article's sub-heading said that the photo was pure propaganda, that neither King nor the school had actually been communist, but that fact didn't faze my grandmother. The headline confirmed her worst suspicions and

helped to discredit the man who threatened one of her core beliefs—people should keep to their own kind.

Granny called Martin Luther King, Jr. a communist, a coward, and an outside agitator, an insult often leveled against anyone trying to change our so-called way of life, an invective that still moves Southerners to resist what's best for them. My father called him much worse.

I never heard the term "white supremacy" when I was young, but if I had, I wouldn't have pictured my grandmother. Her racism was the mannerly sort, a social creed that even a poor White girl learned growing up in Charleston, South Carolina, in the 1910s, and it is still passed on in white society today, however unspoken, unconscious, and unexamined—Whites are better and deserve better than other people. She passed that dogma down

to my father who embraced it with fervor. The dogma didn't take with me. Ultimately, it severed the family in two.

The schism came after a dinner-table argument about John Kerry's presidential bid. My father was incensed by Kerry's plan to raise estate taxes. I supported Kerry, not because I was all that knowledgeable of his platform, but simply because he was a Democrat. To me, that made him one of the good guys. And that made me the enemy of my father. From the day we argued about John Kerry until the day my father died eleven years later, he never spoke to me again.

I inherited from my grandmother a complicated yet uncompromising love for family. I love and protect my family every bit as fiercely as she once did. Yet this is also where we part ways. Granny defined family by blood, skin color, and membership in the club of southern white Christianity. Unlike her, I find little joy in keeping to my own kind.

Granny loved her kin with a ferocity that burned against all perceived threats, foreign or domestic. An upset of racial hierarchies would imperil, in the nativist parlance of today, our family's so-called way of life, something she regarded as a birthright. Love for her own tribe, however distorted, incited her against people not her own kind.

It was love, but also fear. I suspect she was afraid of losing her toehold on the shaky outer ledge of Atlanta's upper crust, her place there more precarious than she would ever want to admit.

Or maybe she was afraid simply because she had been taught to be afraid.

I don't share my grandmother's bigotries, and I still don't want to sit at the dinner table with

people who are quick to share theirs. Just this week, in a single phone call, my brother used the N-word as part of a verb and called someone a faggot, both times apologizing before he said it, then going right ahead and saying it anyway. I love my brother but that didn't make me want to sit next to him at Thanksgiving dinner. In these days so fraught with political animosity, I find myself often choosing to keep to my own kind, a tribe defined not by race but by political sentiment.

Our country's political tribes are ever so alienated, and we seem to prefer it that way. We don't read the same things or watch the same news. Most of us don't really even know people from the other tribe. We don't want to see the good in them or reckon with the fact of their humanity. Members of each tribe are confident they are better—and deserve better—than the others.

Sometimes when I'm speaking about those other people in that other tribe, I can hear my voice become shrill and condescending, not unlike my grandmother's when she talked about Blacks and Jews. It's unlovely and unloving, to say the least. I'm not proud of it.

Bigotry teaches us that we don't belong to each other, but we do. As much as we try to resist it, the truth is that we all belong to one tribe. Estranged from each other, we're like amputees, nowhere near whole, only sometimes sensing our phantom limb.

I still have a decision to make. Will I skip family and holiday meals, avoiding conversations that might only escalate the tremors between my family members and me? Or will I stand at the open screen door, inviting them in, hoping that love and manners will get us safely through? ❖