

LETTER TO A SOUTHERN BLACK MAN WHOM I MET SOCIALLY IN CALIFORNIA, WHO NOTICED MY ACCENT & DIDN'T BAT AN EYELASH; NEVERTHELESS, HERE GOES . . .

Somewhere else on my website is a clip from a 1957 local newspaper in North Central Louisiana, showing my photo along with the announcement that I had won First Prize in the Louisiana State Collegiate Writers Conference for the academic year 1956 - 1957. This was just after the Montgomery, Alabama bus ride of Rosa Parks (December 1955) and the ensuing Montgomery Bus Boycott and just before Federal integration at Little Rock, Arkansas (September 1957). After Rosa Parks, I finally realized that the question posed by the old labor union song, "Which side are you on?" applied to me personally, particularly since I was born a White Southerner, and that history (my own little half-acre of it anyway) would judge me by my deeds, not simply by my words, and even less by my "heartfelt convictions."

My decision to act came one night, and my body took over, as it would later do, first in a protest against a John Birch Society speaker who had come to our campus at Northwestern Louisiana State College (Natchitoches Parish) without revealing his membership in the somewhat paranoid ultra-right Society; and later against unfair housing practices in Wilmington, California: I boarded a bus in Shreveport, bound for Natchitoches, my college town (thirty miles from my birthplace in Winnfield) and simply kept walking past the seated white passengers and into the back of the bus, where I sat down among the colored passengers as if it were the most natural thing to do, which, as it turns out, it was.

If anyone had asked me why I did so [they didn't], I would have probably said, "Because of Myrtle Lee, the [black] lady who raised me while my own mother worked during the Great Depression." I remember Myrtle Lee taking me downtown [Winnfield] when I was five years old, to do the grocery shopping at Matt Milam's Grocery and Department Store. Several older black men were sitting on feed bags in front of the store. Myrtle Lee asked one of them whom she knew to lend her a dime so that she could get some candy "for my boy" putting her hand on my shoulder. (The year 1939 was near the tail end of the Depression, which lasted longer in the South, and all of us were on a tight budget, including my own mother and Myrtle Lee.) The man, however, gave her the dime.

I understood from this that if I was "her boy," her son, then in some very real sense she was my mother. In any case she was with me more hours per day than my own mother, except for Saturdays and Sundays.

So when Rosa Parks sat down on the bus instead of getting to "the back," I felt something of the sense of pride she was demonstrating to the world; by simple change of circumstance, she could have been my own "mother" Myrtle Lee. What I did was a rather small response to what Rosa Parks did, but it was what my entire person, and not simply my mind alone, seemed to insist to me that I do at the moment I got on that bus back to college. I later joined the Louisiana chapter of the ACLU as well as the N.A.A.C.P. (the latter after I met a personal black Natchitoches physician, a Dr. Johnson [don't recall his first name], who was then president of the Louisiana chapter. I went to him for a physical examination, another protest in a small way, and we had a long talk afterwards). In 1962 I left the South because of an incident that I call "The Shreveport Journal Protest Incident," which is described in a forthcoming essay on this website.

[I will soon publish a new essay on my website, "Shoes of the Sheriff" -- a memoir of my early days with my Grandfather, Rufus James Lasyone, a retired railroad engineer who became the first plumbing contractor in Winnfield Louisiana (Winn Parish), and his a black helper Slim. The latter was shot and killed by the Sheriff of Winn Parish in an incident before I was ten years old.]

In 1962, I came to California, found a house to rent, and sent for Marilu (whom I had been dating for a year) and her daughter Wendy, whom you met tonight. We were married that Fall in Los Angeles, by a Municipal Court judge (a civil ceremony) with Wendy standing between us (she was two years old then).

I continued to be active in the civil rights area and joined CORE here in the L.A. area and participated in nonviolent protest against discriminatory housing in the Wilmington Housing Tract. However, for one reason and then another, after a few Vietnam War protests, I discontinued my activity in civil rights. I have never regretted facing my own [and my region's, later my country's] past in this way.

Walter Rufus Eagles