



# Video Story Transcript

## LEARNING AT THE DINNER TABLE

**By: Storyteller Bill Harley**  
www.billharley.com

**Link to YouTube Video:**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FsiQ8gKefM>

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Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

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Hi, my name is Bill Harley. I have a theory that what's honored at the table, at the dinner table, is who we become. I think about that, particularly, with my kids because, uh, they know that it's their job to be funny so they're always trying to make milk come out of someone's nose. But more than that, there's really questions about how we act in the world.

My dad, uh, was a New Deal Democrat. And his father had been a principal and the superintendent of schools and then he became a doctor and he died quite young. Uh, but he had married into... my grandfather married into this rock-ribbed Republican family and it was very conservative. Uh, there was all those changes that happened between Republicans and Democrats at that period. But there's a lot of evidence that that side of the family was instrumental in founding the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana. And my grandfather was quite different from that. And my dad was a New Deal Democrat. He was the only person in his high school when the principal asked in a convocation, "Who here would vote for Franklin Delano Roosevelt?" In 1936, my father stood up and said, "I would." And that's the way he was.

I remember going to, uh, Sunday afternoon dinners at my great-grandmother's house where all that side of the family came. All the Republicans and the business leaders and the more conservative people and then my dad would show up. And he would have to sit there in the living room, uh, with all those other folks, all the guys, while the women were in the kitchen and we would have to just sit there and take it. And the men would argue; they would argue politics. My grandmother would say, "I just hate politics!"

And my father would just kind of... have to bite his tongue through the whole thing. And then he married into a family that was just like that. His, his, uh, father-in-law, my grandfather, was a hardware salesman. He hated Franklin Delano Roosevelt 'til the day he died in 1973 and he was prejudiced. He was biased.

He did not use the "n" word all the time but I'd heard him use it. He, uh, favored the more polite term for the same meaning, which was colored. Um, he would talk about colored folks in an offhand way. There was a man named Bill (I don't even know his last name) who did odd jobs around the house. And, uh, he referred to my grandfather as Mr. Wolf and my grandmother would bring him a plate, uh, and have him sit on the back porch when he was done with his chores to eat, to share a meal with him. So that was hard on my dad. And I think it was probably hard on my grandfather. None of this was spoken about though. It was just this, um, milieu, this, this thing that you grow up in. And the truth is, uh, in Indianapolis where I grew up, we were surrounded by it too. The man next door to me was an incredible racist. And I knew that he was very kind to me but my dad didn't like me to go over there but he just said, "Don't go over there." He didn't explain why.

This is all unspoken, uh, or unclear to me until 1964. I remember sitting in the kitchen, uh, shortly after dinner on that night and the radio was on and the kitchen table and my dad turned it off and swore and walked out of the kitchen. And they just reported that Medgar Evers, who was a leader of the NAACP in Mississippi had been shot. And I knew that that was wrong and I knew that that was bad but I didn't understand. My dad didn't stop to explain it to me. It wasn't for kids. There I was in fourth grade and it was, uh, the Freedom Summer when SNCC organizers (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), uh, had young black people and young white folks go door to door to register, end... endangering, endangering themselves, breaking the law so that they could change, though I really learned on Thanksgiving dinner.

Thanksgiving dinner is a time when everybody comes and shares and there's all these rituals that we follow. And my grandparents, those conservative grandparents, uh, came to our house and they stayed at our house in my brother's room and my brother had to sleep with me. And my other grandmother came, my father's mother came, and the meal was prepared. And I look back on it now and I can imagine how hard it was for my father and his father-in-law, my grandfather, my mother's father to sit at the table with each other. And I can imagine my grandfather who is very clear about the way the world was just saying things just to bait my father a little bit about all the unrest and turmoil that was going on. I don't remember what was said until the very end of the meal. I remember my father was at the end of the table and my grandmother with my grandfather was across from me sitting next to my mom. And my grandfather made some offhand comment about, "Well, you know, you really can't trust those colored people, you know. They're the ones that are causin' all the trouble; they're the ones that are breakin' all the laws."

This is the kind of offhand thing as if we all agreed with this. He needed affirmation. And my father said, "That's not true."

So, it was a little bit of a throwing down the gauntlet. I never heard it spoken open like that and the table went quiet. And my grandfather said, Well, you know, it's... they can't help it. It's just the way they are." I see him chewing on a toothpick.

And my father said... and he swore and then he said, "Frank, that's not true!" He called his father-in-law by the first name. He said, "That's absolutely not true!"

And my mom said, "Max, Max!" And now all the women get up and they're all flitting around trying to figure out how to calm the situation down. My mom says, "I'll go get some more coffee" and my other grandmother says, "Does anybody want any more cookies?"

And my grandfather says, “Well, that's just the way I see it.” Like it's an opinion so I'm entitled to my opinion, whether it's true or not.

And my father said, “For every black man that breaks the law, I can show you a dozen white men who do the same.”

And my grandfather said, “Well, that's the way I see it.”

And he said, “Well you can't...” My dad said, “You can't speak like this at my table!”

And when he said that you could really feel something breaking. and I didn't... There I was nine-years-old, 10-years-old and I didn't really understand it except that I knew that the rules of civility and, uh, civility had been broken by my dad. Aah, now we weren't getting along. And everybody flitted around and I don't remember exactly what happened next. There's that awkward silence. This is not going to get resolved. There's no resolution to this story.

My dad went up...out of the front door and smoked a cigarette and tried to calm down. My grandfather went out the back door and chewed on a cigar and tried to calm down. And they went to bed that night and. I couldn't hear them. No one said anything to us. I remember my brothers and I just looking down at the floor wishing we weren't there.

My dad probably railed against his father-in-law to the daughter of the guy that he was mad at. My grandfather probably went in the bedroom with his wife and said, “I think we should leave tonight.”

So, I didn't know what it meant then but meaning takes time. And I look back on it now and I think that as one of the most seminal, the most seminal moments in my moral education 'cause my father had broken some rule of civility to say what he thought was right at the dinner table. And after that moment, I saw my father differently and I saw the world differently. And I also saw myself differently because this was my dad and this is what's at the table saying, “This is how things should be. We don't talk like this.”

And so, when I heard some of my friends or teachers or anybody speak and say these out..., like, ... right racist things or even the subtle coding, I knew that I was wrong if I didn't say something. That I needed to speak up and I didn't always because it's hard to do. But I knew that that was something I carried with me.

That was something I learned at the dinner table and that was what was honored. So, the question I ask myself all the time is, “What's honored at the table?”