

Posted on Fri, Jan. 16, 2004
LEONARD PITTS JR./COMMENTARY
On King's day, dinner can feed understanding

So, what are you doing for Martin Luther King Day?

Not much? Not a surprise.

While we have rituals to celebrate other holidays -- put up a tree for Christmas, watch fireworks on Independence Day, lie about losing weight on New Year's -- King Day is less a celebration than a commemoration. Meaning that while some of us mark it by attending parades and interfaith breakfasts, many others allow it to pass unmarked.

Some folks in Dallas are out to change that. They would like you to honor King Day on Monday by going to dinner. More to the point, by going to dinner with a small group of people with whom you may or may not have anything in common.

Dallas Dinner Table is the brainchild of Jeff West, executive director of the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza, the repository of artifacts related to the John F. Kennedy assassination. It began four years ago from discussions he had with fellow alumni of Leadership Dallas, a civic program designed to identify and groom the city's next generation of movers and shakers.

But West's idea is, for my money, too good for Big D to keep to itself.

Dallas Dinner Table is, well, a night of dinners, each attended by eight to 10 ordinary folks who gather in restaurants, churches and private homes. A facilitator moderates the conversation, which centers on issues of cross-cultural contention, consternation and confusion. You can find details online at www.dallasdinnertable.com.

GET PEOPLE TALKING

West says there are no flip charts, no efforts to forge consensus, no ''directing toward a result.'' The only goal, he says, is to get people talking.

It's not as easy as it sounds. It never is where race is involved.

You can easily get the sense, if you're black, that talking outside the group about race and culture is useless because nobody on the other ''side'' is listening. There is, instead, a depressing eagerness to discount African-American complaints of inequity, no matter how well documented and readily demonstrable they are.

But if black folk are reluctant to engage white ones on issues of race and culture, you get the sense many white Americans are downright fearful of being engaged. There is, they will tell you, almost no way to win in such a discussion, no way to avoid being accused of bigotry.

Any fair-minded person can appreciate their apprehension. Over the past generation, we've seen many African Americans charging racism almost as a matter of reflex.

The result is that there is, on the subject of race, little real communication in this country.

Instead, we have periodic outcries about insults and injustices, interspersed with silences that some of us mistake for peace.

HUNGER FOR COMMUNICATION

To get people talking, then, is not something to be taken lightly. And there is, for all its inherent difficulties, a hunger for such talk. Last year, Dallas Dinner Table drew 300 participants. This year, organizers expect well over 800.

As West points out, issues of race always seem to get wrapped up in demographics, statistics -- ''intellectual stuff you can count.'' Real people, he says, don't think like that. Real people make fundamental connections that transcend superficial division -- if they are given the chance.

It brings to mind a white lady who called me once to ask a racial question. She didn't want to talk affirmative action or police profiling; she just had a gnawing curiosity about the elaborate braids some black women wear. I found it telling and sad that she apparently knew no black women whom she felt comfortable enough to ask.

Which is why I like what West seeks to do, like the idea of gathering black and white and all the other colors of the human rainbow at the same table so they might break bread and talk. I think Martin Luther King would have approved of these dinners in Dallas.

The rest of us would be well-advised to pull up a chair.