

What I won't forget

By [James Calvin Schaap](#)

April 4, 2012

The night

Dr. Martin Luther King was shot, four of us--small-town white boys--followed the Gulf of Mexico's eastern shore on an all-night trek from south Florida to New Orleans. It was spring break, 1968, only a few months from the summer that seemed, even at the time, to change all of our lives. Somewhere down south we heard of Dr. King's death over the AM radio in that '62 Chevrolet with Iowa plates.

We were on our way to New Orleans' French Quarter, four lusty guys, tired and sunburned, traveling along some several hundred comfortable miles south of our own Calvinist enclaves homes.

All night long, from the time we'd scarfed down cheap hamburgers for late supper, through the next morning's first whispered glow, the radio kept spilling news stories about Dr. King's death--statements being read by just about anybody important enough to merit media time, memorials and obituaries that may well have been produced and taped months before a man by the name of James Earl Ray had even known about a garbage strike in Memphis, the event which brought King to the motel balcony where he would be shot.

The sun wore a heavy mask of Gulf fog that morning when light finally opened our eyes to the coast line. I don't remember where we were exactly, but the chore of keeping ourselves awake made us pull over at the some greasy spoon, however seedy--we weren't sinless ourselves.

It was still before six, the morning dressed in haze. Two guys kept right on sleeping in the back seat, but two of us walked up to the door of a roadside cafe and found it very much awake.

What we saw inside remains as the most vivid picture I took during 1968 spring break--a party, the place full of rednecks, open bottles standing on tables even though the place was not a bar.

A sign up

near the cash register told us that all proceeds that day would go to the Klan. The jukebox wailed out music I'd never heard before, half rock 'n' roll, half-country, all thick with racist spit. I remember wanting to write down the words as we waited for our hotcakes. But I was afraid of men I'd never seen before, men another man knows instinctively as dangerous

We had walked right into an all-night party--all-male, all-white, and all hate, a whopping good celebration of a dead body sprawled in a mass of blood on some Memphis hotel balcony.

We sat quietly and ate a breakfast served up, ironically, by a man whose black face appeared then disappeared above the window shelf where plates full of biscuits and gravy and grits came up miraculously from the back.

The party-ers were oblivious to us. As I remember it now, years later, we sat there and ate hotcakes as if something invisible sat between us, as if some omniscient theater director had staged this moment for us, something we'd never seen before and would never see again.

That's what I remember best about the night Dr. King was murdered, 44 years ago today. That's what I know of unalloyed racist hate.

But

Martin Luther King had come into my life already several years earlier, when my friend's father, a good man, asked me to go along with him to a meeting, a meeting spread around in whispers and fleeting glances, a get-together of like minds in a huge mansion, on the bluffs above Lake Michigan in a small Wisconsin city near the town where I grew up.

It was the middle of the Cold War, and I was a boy--barely 16, an evangelical Christian, a sworn enemy of atheistic communism, a patriotic American youth who that very fall wrote a civics essay about our American responsibility in Southeast Asia in the face of the global communist menace. I still have that essay, written purposefully in a fine cursive hand.

We sat on folding chairs on the lower half of that mansion--not just steel folding chairs, but padded folded chairs--in straight rows, facing a screen. The meeting was opened in prayer. I remember feeling excited about being in that

place, as if we were banded together like the disciples, doing some upper-room plotting to determine what measure of righteousness America really needed. Invitation to the mansion had come only by word of mouth, and I felt privileged to be there.

The feature of that evening's meeting was a slide/tape presentation featuring Martin Luther King caught in candid shots talking to people who the taped voice insisted were known communists. This was Wisconsin, after all, home to Senator McCarthy.

I remember the clearly stated message of the presentation because I knew my own father believed it: that behind the movement for civil rights in America, the Russian bear--atheistic communism--sat on its well-muscled haunches and waited to devour the honey sweetness of American liberty.

I respected my friend's-father, the man who'd asked me to come along. Maybe that's why in my memories of that furtive mansion meeting is complicated by my own respect for the man and his devotion, even love of country, of culture, of home, and of God.

Maybe that is why those two moments in my life--an all-night bayou glory bash and an evening's anti-communist meeting, shrouded in secrecy and glutted with conspiracy theory, both virulently racist--seem almost to clash in tone and spirit, while the line that separates them is actually thread-thin.

Most of us do not find hate particularly attractive. Love redeems us, cleanses us, after all. I've never felt any affinity with the men in the all-night diner, but I still admire the man who brought me along to the mansion, even though that night and forever since I've not shared his politics.

In those moments when I feel latent racism running in me--as I do--I know that its source is often least recognizable and most unmanageable when it emerges from love. Hate is not one of the seven deadly sins, oddly enough, although it has a kissing cousin in wrath.

The king of seven deadly sins, to the world of medieval theologians and to the world we know today, is still pride, pride in self first of all, but also pride in culture, in country, in race-pride that sometimes upholsters itself in the soft fabrics and gentle lines of love.

I wish, sometimes, it were easier. But that's what I remember today, the anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King--that's what I will never forget.

*Originally posted at [Stuff in the Basement](#)*