

WHAT LURKS BENEATH

By Jeff Dunne

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CHARACTERS

- DALE A guy who feels that he is all about doing what is right, but with some unconscious biases that he needs to work through.
- LESLIE A woman (or man) who has thought much more thoroughly about the nature of racism and unconscious bias.

There are ideally a few other dinner guests present as part of the environment, and to emphasize points by their reactions (generally discomfort), but that is not essential.

SETTING

A dinner party.

SCENE

(Lights up on a gathering in a reception area where a dinner party is being held, possibly personal, possibly corporate. A group of individuals are gathered in a “conversation circle”.)

DALE

Well, folks, this has been fun, but I should probably be hitting the road. I’ve got a busy morning tomorrow, and—

LESLIE

Dale, before you go... There’s something I’ve been wanting to get your thoughts on.

DALE

Okay, sure. Shoot.

LESLIE

Did you know that people estimate that there are now only around 26,000 polar bears?

DALE

What?

LESLIE

Yeah. There’s a lot of concern that they might not make it as a species, what with global warming and all. Just wondering how you felt about that.

DALE

That really sucks.

LESLIE

I know. It’s terrible, isn’t it?

DALE

Yeah. Why—

LESLIE

I mean, it’s really the fault of humans. Between hunting and global warming and such, we’ve done a number on them for sure. How do you feel about that?

DALE

I think it’s unconscionable. People need to think about the consequences of what we do as a species, you know?

LESLIE

Yep. Couldn't agree more. So theoretically, if you could make a difference in that... would you?

DALE

Yeah. Sure. Are you asking me to make a donation or something?

LESLIE

No. Just wondering how you felt about it.

DALE

I think it's terrible.

LESLIE

Because you want what's best for them.

DALE

Right.

LESLIE

Also, I'm curious. Remember when we were talking about teachers before?

DALE

Tonight?

(Leslie nods.)

Yeah. I guess.

LESLIE

When Marie said that her sister is a teacher, and that she's scared for her going back to school?

DALE

Leslie, what—

LESLIE

Do you remember what you said?

DALE

I think I said 'that's really crappy' or something like that?

LESLIE

You said: That's awful. How can they justify taking advantage—

DALE

Advantage of such selfless people.

LESLIE

Selfless and *decent* people.

DALE

Right.

LESLIE

And I want you to know that I agree with you.

DALE

Uh... thanks?

LESLIE

I have a lot of teacher friends, and I'm really worried about them.

DALE

Me too.

LESLIE

I know. You talked about it for a while, about how they were treated so badly, and how they all deserved raises.

DALE

Well they do.

LESLIE

I know. Completely agree. But I was wondering. You didn't say anything about nurses.

DALE

Nurses?

LESLIE

Nurses put themselves in danger every day, especially now with all the COVID going on. I think they're totally underappreciated.

DALE

You're right. They are.

LESLIE
But you didn't bring that up.

DALE
No, but it's true.

LESLIE
And they get paid pretty poorly.

DALE
Yeah, I supp—

LESLIE
And social workers too. They can barely make enough to pay rent sometimes.
Especially in the cities.

DALE
That's—

LESLIE
Or zookeepers. Or single mothers working three retail jobs, or folks trying to get by
driving for Uber, or—

DALE
Leslie! Leslie. I agree. It's terrible. These are all terrible things. But... why are
you...

LESLIE
I'm trying to understand something you said.

DALE
About Uber drivers?

LESLIE
No.

DALE
Then—

LESLIE
I'm trying to understand what you meant about not being a racist.

DALE
What!?

LESLIE

You said you weren't a racist. I'm just trying—

DALE

First of all, you're right. I'm not a racist. But... I don't recall saying that, at least not tonight.

LESLIE

Do you remember when Mark was talking about driving through DC during the Black Lives Matter protests?

DALE

Yeah.

LESLIE

No. Specifically. Do you remember what you said?

DALE

Not word for word, no.

LESLIE

Marie was saying how black people really have it tough.

DALE

Right.

LESLIE

And *you* said that you think the situation's improving, but that there's still a way to go.

DALE

Uh, yeah. Okay.

LESLIE

And then you said that the problem is that people are pretty awful, and that there's too much hatred everywhere.

DALE

Leslie—

LESLIE

And then I said, "I think what we need is a lot more attention to the Black Lives Matter movement. A lot more than it's getting."

DALE

Les—

LESLIE

And you said “I think people need to realize that every life is precious.” That’s what you said, right?

DALE

Yeah. And I stand by that. Life is precious. Every single one. *Including* black lives.

LESLIE

Yep. That’s what you said before, too. “I think people need to realize that every life is precious. *Including* black lives.” I took that as a statement that you aren’t racist.

DALE

Okay. Fair enough. I’m not racist.

LESLIE

And I believe you, Dale. I do. Which is why I have this question I’ve been waiting to ask you.

DALE

Wait, you haven’t even gotten to the question yet?

LESLIE

No. Here’s my question. When I asked you a moment ago how you felt about the endangered status of polar bears, you said “that really sucks.” And when Marie brought up the point about how teachers weren’t treated fairly, you said “that’s awful”. And you then went on at length about just how awful it was. You didn’t say “yeah, teachers have it bad, but then so do social workers and the cashiers at 7-11.” When I asked you how you felt about polar bears, you didn’t talk about what a shame it is that we only have 20,000 giant tortoises left in the Galapagos. When I brought up these topics, you agreed with me about the injustice. In fact, you actively supported my point. You’re a humanitarian, Dale. You want what’s best for the world. Yet when we talked about how we’re destroying the rainforests, you didn’t make a point of commenting on how we’re also polluting the oceans. When we talked about how poor Jimmy didn’t get a promotion this year, you didn’t list off the other people who didn’t get promoted either. So here’s my question. Why is it, as one who is not a racist... and I really do believe that you feel that way... why is it that when Maria brought up the Black Lives Matter movement, you felt compelled to emphasize that all lives matter? Why is that on *that* topic, you felt it was important to defuse the focus on one injustice and turn to discussing another... But on every other topic tonight... you didn’t. Why is that?

DALE

I'm not a racist, Leslie.

LESLIE

Can you explain... why is your behavior on a matter of race different than your behavior on any and every other topic?

DALE

It's not.

LESLIE

Dale. This isn't hearsay. I'm not just making something up to irritate you. Believe it or not, I'm trying to help you learn something about yourself. I genuinely believe that you think that you're supporting equal rights for everyone. But what I just laid out for you is unbiased, objective evidence. We covered a wide range of topics over the last hour or two. Unreasonable expectations for teachers, endangered species, living wages, environmental stewardship. We talked about bullying, about political corruption, promotion policies... and those are just the ones that come to mind. Probably a dozen topics. And consistently... time and time again... your response was to support the point. Explicitly. In most cases to further emphasize just how bad or unfair it was. But when it came to the topic of black people being treated unfairly, your behavior changed. Rather than focusing on that injustice, rather than emphasizing how awful it is... you changed the focus. In essence, you changed the topic – from a discussion of race-based discrimination to one of human cruelty. Now Dale, when you say that you don't harbor any ill-will toward blacks... I believe you. I genuinely believe you. But I think you owe yourself some introspection. Why does the topic of discrimination against black people – and that topic alone – makes you want to change the subject? Anyway. You don't need to give me an answer. The question's just for you to consider, and I know you have a busy morning tomorrow. Just give it some thought, okay?

(Lights out.)