

# My Dinner With Sidney Poitier

by Charles Blow

Yes, he came to dinner.

In the summer of 2014, I received word through a friend that I was being asked to a dinner in Los Angeles that would include Sidney Poitier.

I'm not easily star-struck. As you can imagine, in my line of work, you meet all types. Being easily impressed is an occupational liability. But Poitier wasn't just a star, he was a legend, a lion, an almost mythical figure in Black culture and the culture at large. He was Black royalty.

He was more than just the first African American to win an Academy Award for best actor, for his performance in the 1963 film "Lilies of the Field"; he and his lifelong best friend, Harry Belafonte, were also the exemplars of the artist-as-activist model, both risking not only their careers but their lives, at the height of their celebrity, for the cause of civil rights.

They paved the way for others to follow. According to Aram Goudsouzian's book, "Sidney Poitier: Man, Actor, Icon," before one civil rights march in Mississippi in the 1960s, the singer Sammy Davis Jr., "who avoided the Deep South, swallowed his fear and flew to Jackson. He remembered feeling safe around Belafonte and Poitier," calling them "two Black knights."

There are no contemporary corollaries to the paths Poitier and Belafonte took and the impact they had.

It was for those reasons that I was more than a bit doubtful about this dinner. People talk. They propose and promise. Only a fraction of the things they swear will happen ever materialize.

But sure enough, on the appointed date and place — Spago in Beverly Hills — Poitier was indeed there with his wife and two of their friends.

As I approached the table, Poitier greeted me with a blinding smile, the kind that beacons and beguiles, the kind that makes you feel that you have known a complete stranger your whole life. He insisted that I sit next to him.

Poitier was the center of gravity in that room, as evidenced by all the craning necks and slyly lifted phones trying to sneak pictures.

From beginning to end that evening, Poitier whispered slick, salty jokes to me with the devilish satisfaction of a schoolboy. He was 87 at the time.

He was overwhelmingly charming — God clearly gave him two scoops when the rest of us were lucky to get one — but also self-effacing and unassuming. I now knew, at close range, what star power was. His enchantment settled on you, like a soft sweater. Cashmere, of course.

He talked sometimes with his hands. Like many older people's, they moved through the air the way hands move through water: slowly, negotiating the element, not weightless but less weighted.

The server who took our order was familiar to Poitier, so he had greeted her warmly. When she returned to see if we wanted dessert, Poitier said that I simply had to try his favorite dessert on the menu. The server said that sadly they were out of it, but passing her back the menu, Poitier said, "But I really want it."

He wasn't angry or even insistent. His glee never left him. He said the words, delivered the line, more as an unfortunate fact than an admonition.

Later, the server returned to the table excitedly to say that they had "found" more of the dessert and slid it in front of us. "Found it," I thought, "Ha!" All I could imagine was a mad scramble in a kitchen freezer or a dash to a local grocer for the ingredients to make more.

I don't know why this exchange remains so vivid for me or exactly how I should consider it. On the one hand, you could argue that we should be as gracious as possible to restaurant workers doing a hard job, sometimes for

little pay, and when they say they are out of something, that should be the end of it.

But I saw it differently, from his perspective. He had learned that sometimes, when people say something can't happen, they simply haven't tried hard enough. Sometimes, can'ts are soft.

When Poitier arrived in New York, he did odd jobs until, as he wrote in his memoir, he said, "What the hell," and tried his hand at acting. That didn't go well. As Poitier wrote, when he went in for an audition at the American Negro Theater, "the man in charge quickly let me know — and in no uncertain terms — that I was misguided in my assumptions." He continued: "I had no training in acting. I could barely read! And to top it off, I had a thick singsong Bahamian accent."

As Poitier recounted, the man was seething: "You just get out of here and stop wasting people's time. Go get a job you can handle," he barked. And just as he threw me out, he ended with, "Get yourself a job as a dishwasher or something." Poitier had already worked as a dishwasher.

Undeterred, Poitier would will himself into becoming one of the greatest actors America has ever known. As he put it, "There's something inside me — pride, ego, sense of self — that hates to fail at anything."

For people like Poitier, who have lived a life in which, by sheer grit and determination, they turned noes into yeses, noes lack finality.

Toward the end of the evening, Poitier asked me about my family and then told me that he had six daughters and no sons. "I'm going to adopt you," he belted with a smile. He asked me to send him and his wife a copy of my book and commanded, "Sign it 'To Mom and Dad,'" which I did.

Maybe to someone else, this would have been just another ordinary dinner. Not me. That night lingers with me. I could see in Poitier what a life well lived looked like on a man, how you could grow old with grace and kindness or grow into them, and how elegance and sophistication are

timeless and eternal. He was the epitome of Black dignity, Black beauty, Black pride and Black power.

Now, whenever I face a roadblock, or even my own doubts, I remember the phrase that my “dinner dad,” maybe one of America’s dads, etched in my memory: “But I really want it.”