



Why Your Campus Should Celebrate Juneteenth

by Dr. Charles Taylor

The purpose of this article is to promote cultural inclusiveness. One of the most meaningful things colleges can do to make students feel like they belong, is to celebrate their cultural holidays.

Juneteenth is a Celebration of Freedom

It's important that we celebrate Juneteenth because freedom is always worth celebrating and that's ultimately what Juneteenth is about. Juneteenth or June 19, 1865, is considered the date when the last slaves in America were freed, almost two and a half years after President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation and two months after the civil war had ended.

When General George Granger rode into Galveston Texas on June 19, 1865 you could see the dust from the soldiers' horses in the distance as they were approaching. You can imagine the anxiety mixed with joy in the hearts of our enslaved ancestors. The record tells us when they heard the news of freedom, they alternately sang, danced and prayed. There was much rejoicing and jubilation that their lifelong prayers had finally been answered. Many of the slaves left their masters immediately upon being freed, in search of family members, economic opportunities or simply because they could. They left with nothing but the clothes on their backs and hope in their hearts. Oh freedom!

I hope we can appreciate this moment—the first Juneteenth celebration because blacks were emerging from a long dark night. There was this great promise that for the first time since they had been in this land, the U.S. constitution would protect them and grant them their true rights as U.S. citizens. However they soon realized slavery's bitter legacy was just beginning to unfold and that equality was to remain an elusive dream. Oh Freedom!

Slavery's Bitter Legacy

Indeed their optimism was so short-lived and replaced by a betrayal so soul-shattering, enslaved blacks questioned whether the U.S. was serious about granting them their freedom, (Taylor, 2002). Ex-slaves found that despite the Freedman's Bureau and the passage of the 13th & 14th amendments, they were left to fend for themselves.

General Granger didn't bring any economic relief. He offered no jobs, or health care or housing relief. In Texas, the editor of the Harrison Flag newspaper denounced as "treasonable" the sale of any land to blacks, (Campbell, 1989). Ex-slaves entered freedom under the worst possible conditions. As Frederick Douglass said "ex-slaves were free, without roofs to cover them, or bread to eat, or land to cultivate, and as a consequence died in such numbers as to awaken the hope of their enemies that they would soon disappear." (Douglass, 1968).



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Blacks were freed without an economic base to make emancipation real. This allowed former slave owners to set up a sharecropping system that soon spread all over the deep South. It kept many blacks from starving, but had little to distinguish it from the slave life blacks thought they had escaped. This was the other side of emancipation where high expectations gave way to heart-crushing disillusionment.

A decade later—at the end of Reconstruction, the North had completely abandoned black Americans to the will of southern whites, who through violence, racial discrimination and Jim Crow laws succeeded in disenfranchising them, resulting in more than 100 years of oppression.

Why can't Blacks just get over Slavery?

Thus we arrive in the 21st century with a huge amount of racial and intellectual baggage because we've never come to grips with slavery's harsh legacy of racism and poverty.

Frank Hargrove, a white Virginia legislator, once said "black citizens should just get over slavery." Besides asking blacks to commit historical amnesia he essentially was saying: the discrimination blacks experience and he benefits from, is an illusion—or at least has no historical context." He should know better. He should have known that when Paul Revere rode through the countryside waking up minutemen, he woke up black minutemen as well (Kaplan, 1989). When George Washington crossed the Delaware River, blacks were in the boat with him, (Kaplan, 1989). Blacks have fought and died in every war. But when they signed the declaration of independence blacks were not included. When they wrote the constitution, our Founding Fathers said black lives were worth only 3/5 of a white person's life. Frederick Douglass said: "We have worked without wages; we have lived without hope, wept without sympathy and bled without mercy," (Douglass, 1968).

Mr. Hargrove, the reason blacks can't get over slavery is because the racism and economic disparities that slavery produced have not ended—even in 2012. Oh, do I wish it were not so.

The Southern Poverty Law Center reported (in 2010) that there are 1002 active hate groups operating in the U.S. (Potock, 2010). The Klu Klux Klan formed almost 140 years ago during reconstruction, is still active. Civil rights legislation that we are so proud of was only passed in the 1960's—100 years after the emancipation proclamation. Mr. Hargrove, by understanding slavery, we'll better understand the link between contemporary problems and their historical roots.



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Understanding Slavery helps us Understand Contemporary Problems

For example 80% of all westward migrating whites received land grants while blacks received none, (Sharpe, 2005). This allowed whites to pass down wealth, from generation to generation while blacks remained impoverished. In addition, the economic gap, the educational achievement gap, the housing gap and the harsh disparities in the criminal justice system all have historical roots.

During slavery there were 72 crimes in the state of Virginia [Mr. Hargrove—the state that you're from] that a black man could be sentenced to death for, while only two of these same crimes would subject a white man to that extreme punishment. Today black males are incarcerated at a rate over six times higher than white males. (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010) Acknowledging this fact is not a case of playing the victim but rather of seeking justice.

Despite the gains of the civil rights era we are still a nation shaped by segregation and inequality that has its roots in slavery. Oh do I wish it weren't so! While it's true that the majority of whites in both the north and south did not own slaves, everyone benefited from slavery except the enslaved and the continent of Africa which was devastated and has never fully recovered. Most blacks suffered and continue to suffer the economic consequences of slavery and its aftermath

Juneteenth Teaches us that Blacks and Whites Fought Together for Freedom

I don't want to sound like we haven't made considerable progress because we have. Even during the dark days of slavery, blacks and whites formed an anti-slavery movement that ultimately succeeded. Later they fought and died together to force an end to slavery. This lesson of cooperation must never be forgotten.

The Underground Railroad sheltered thousands of runaway slaves in white homes, barns and cellars until they could safely continue to Canada. I also believe the goal of a color-blind society is a worthy one, but we should never ignore that many U.S. citizens still live lives where race determines how long they will live; how their children will be taught, what kind of medical care they will receive and the type of punishment they will face in the criminal justice system. Race still matters.

According to Bill Clinton, the challenge of our past remains the challenge of our future: Will we be one nation, one people, with one common destiny—or not? Will we all come together,



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or come apart? (Clinton, 1997) That's why we must celebrate Juneteenth and begin a national dialogue about slavery so someday we can heal the wounds of our troubled past.

Conclusion

There is a national organization <http://www.nationaljuneteenth.com/> that is working to make Juneteenth a national holiday. To date they have been successful in getting 39 states to recognize Juneteenth as a State Holiday or Observance. Every time a state passes legislation recognizing Juneteenth a copy of my book: *Juneteenth: A Celebration of Freedom* <http://www.openhand.com/juneteenth.php> is given to the governor of that state.

Make sure that your campus participates in the annual Juneteenth celebrations and encourage students to learn more about this important historical event.

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