



James Reeb Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Juneteenth: Sadness to Celebration

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Happy Juneteenth!

or

Happy Freedom Day

or

Happy Emancipation Day

Juneteenth is actually this coming Tuesday, June 19th, and the term comes from a shortening of the words "June" and "nineteenth." After the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation was issued on January 1, 1863. The problem was that it had little effect on the actual status and condition of slavery in the US. Particularly in parts considered the "Wild West" like Texas.

It took another two and a half years, and enforcement by federal troops, to begin the freeing of the slaves in many Southern states. On June 19, 1865 2000 federal troops arrived on Galveston Island, Texas under the leadership of General Gordon Granger. The federal government took "possession" of the government of Texas in order to enforce freed slave's new rights.

From the balcony of the Ashton Villa, in Galveston, Granger read the contents of General Order No. 3 which began:

"The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor. The freedmen are advised to remain quietly at their present homes and work for wages. They are informed that they will not be allowed to collect at military posts and that they will not be supported by idleness either there or elsewhere."

The enforcement was met by freed slaves with dancing in the streets, song, sharing of food, etc. The first Juneteenth celebration occurred on the first year anniversary of this re-proclamation in Galveston. It quickly grew in numbers of participants and in fervor over the coming years. Freed slaves in Texas began to buy land in some towns to create "freedom parks" as a year long reminder of the Juneteenth celebration. Examples of this can be seen today in Houston's Emancipation Park, Mexia's Booker T. Washington Park, and Emancipation Park in Austin.

After a few short years, the idea of Juneteenth began to spread to surrounding states, often becoming annual traditions. Just after the beginning of the 21st Century thirteen states had made Juneteenth an official holiday, though the celebrations continue to occur in states that have not officially recognized Juneteenth.

It's sad in a way that almost 150 years later, there is now only about 25 states that have adopted Juneteenth as an official holiday. A few other states decided to endorse it by a resolution rather than make it an official holiday. Wisconsin began exploring this issue seriously in 2005, and I must admit that I'm still not sure whether Juneteenth is an official state holiday here or just affirmed by a resolution.

The saddest of all is that countless attempts have been made to get the federal government to acknowledge Juneteenth as an official federal holiday.

To date that has not occurred. And measures have stalled in attempts to sway the current administration. As recently as May 25, 2007 a letter was sent to President Bush from the National Juneteenth Christian Leadership Council imploring him to add Juneteenth to the list of national holidays. And though the number of states which have chosen to add Juneteenth as official state holidays has doubled in the past few years, the president has chosen not to respond favorably.

Celebration often has beginnings in sadness. Most often it's the overcoming of some hardship that leads to the greatest and most authentic celebrations. Examples are Independence Day on July 4th when we overthrew the abuses of English rule, for Christians it's the risen Christ, who overcame the abuses of Roman rule, and the power of death and evil. Holocaust Day celebrates the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto during W.W.II when the Jews fought back. And Cinco de Mayo celebrates the defeat over French forces coming to collect debts from Mexico after Mexico received independence from Spain years earlier.

Celebrations are moments of triumph over abuse and exploitation. They are also living reminders so that future generations will not forget that the freedom they now enjoy came at a price. They also serve as historical testimonies that hopefully ensure that future generations of would be oppressors find it difficult to "cleanse" the official records and minimize past abuses. Today that's evidenced by the Holocaust detractors that want to say that the Holocaust never happened in spite of overwhelming and undeniable evidence. It's also evident today when after 150 years; we still don't have an official federal holiday commemorating Juneteenth.

I have to admit that my own personal journey has glaring holes in it when it comes to some traditions like Juneteenth. It's only been recently with the Selma project that I'm working on that I've become "painfully" aware of the importance of Juneteenth.

On my trip, which began as a rather self serving journey within a UU context, I was opened up, almost gapingly, to the power and importance of the civil rights movement. I began this journey out of a guilt feeling that basing my experience and feelings about the March to Montgomery on the death of a white UU minister was inappropriate, and minimized the importance and real meaning of the civil rights struggle in United States. And yet, even then, I was prone to all sorts of "acting out." I "acted out" my good intentions. I came there and found a struggling museum committed to telling the "true story" of a struggle, both the stories of sadness and of celebration.

Their struggle was foreign to me. I had no context for the stories I heard.

Never as a gay man, nor as an epileptic; nor as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, nor any other experience in my past though at times some leave me feeling marginalized.....

No, none of my experiences "fit" this situation. I was forced to accept that I was an outsider. And my only hope, or chance to understand, would be to let go of my own personal agenda, and try to be fully present in the moment.....realizing that I was merely a guest, not a participant.

It was painful really.....to see these men and women whom I had come to for their stories and experiences, and see the work they're still doing today.

Yes I "captured" their stories from the past.....hopefully for some bit of truth telling, or a rounding out of a story that is being somewhat rewritten today.

But more importantly, I tasted, just the briefest bitter flavour, of how their stories are still unfolding painfully slowly, just like the Emancipation Proclamation and General Order No. 3.

I caught myself being impatient as I waited in Marion, a little town in the next county to Selma, for an interview with Ms. Willie Nell Avery. She was in court that day and thought that she could "get away" for a moment of conversation with John and me. We were there for over an hour before she could "get away." Court had been dismissed for the day. I was flustered as I tried to regain my sense of "presence" to do the interview. It was later on that I realized the full impact of her commitment to do the interview. Her gracious acceptance of my need to "get her story" about the events of 1965 was over her work in 2006. That day she was in court because as an employee of the records office at the court house, she had observed a trend in regard to elections and certified voters. She noticed that numbers seemed to "swell" occasionally, particularly when there was a black person up against a white person for the same elected position. She took it on herself to look into the irregularities. She found that many names that were added to the voters registration just before the cut off, suddenly disappeared again shortly after the election. She and others made some subtle phone inquiries and found that what was happening was that white men and women from surrounding counties were "brought in" and temporarily housed, or mythically housed, in Marion. After the election, it seems that most of these "new voters" decided to return to their home county.

These men and women were being housed in rooms of existing homeowners within the county, or at least said to be housed. She believed that the person never really moved to the county, except on paper in order to stack the votes. She was in court with her findings from a recent election where the "white" person won over the Black person by less than three votes. Her concern was for her community today, for justice today.....and yet she took time out to help me with my project surrounding the events of 1965. She shared her story with me, and I'm fortunate to have it recorded as part of the project I'm working on. But greater still, is the lesson I personally learned and one that I want to share.

Privilege constantly "acts out" of its own interest over the needs of others. Even when the "acting out" is veiled in an allusion of Social Action.....it can non-the-less still be "acting out." I may always have to be alert to keep from or at least curb my own "acting out." It's natural to look out for one's own interest. It can be dangerous though, when that need to look out for one's own interest is disguised in some altruistic, noble, more righteous-than-thou garb.

Of the interviews that I did in Selma, all of the men and women were continuing their work for racial justice today. Their stories were about our justice system, the number of Blacks in our prison

system, the number of pleas made that gave less time for a felony than pleading to a misdemeanor which lends to that person's inability to vote for the rest of their life.

They were about the Wal-Mart moving in on the outside of town "robbing the town's central district, which had hard won Black owned stores, and leaving them empty as the money, goods and services followed the big box stores to edge of town, and where "white" neighborhoods sprang up almost over night.

These were stories of voter fraud today. Active ways of manipulating voting and accessibility to favour "white privilege." And there I sat.....sweaty in the dripping heat of a Deep South summer.....feeling the pains of guilt and discomfort.

Yes, I got what I came for.....I got some incredible stories from seven brave men and women. The personal experience that I was gifted only reinforced the reality of my own privilege. I came back with stories from the past that I have yet to tell.....and was challenged to tell a greater story.

Now I watch on the side lines, as privilege runs through Selma, Marion and Montgomery like a wild fire in August. Not only from the voter fraud, and Big Box racial injustice....where the majority of workers are Black or of colour and the majority of "shoppers" are white men, women and children of privilege.....where the greeter at the door was "white" and every employee I came across, expect the one in fine jewelry, was Black.....

The dust has cleared from my eyes....and the light hurts them.....

The dust has been cleaned from the mirror I use.....and what I see sometimes pains me.....

And this.....

This pain....this realization.....

Is what Social Justice is really about.....

From sadness and pain, comes celebration.

I look forward to my personal movement from the pain of new awareness into the celebration of victory over exploitation and abuse.

May we each have the luxury of such a journey in our lifetime.....