

Juneteenth: Let's Make It Personal This Year

What occurred between 7:50 -8:00 that April morning ultimately changed the trajectory of my life. It was more than 20 years ago, and I was sitting in the parking lot outside of my office in Philadelphia, after having changed the dial just in time to catch the tail end of a program on public radio station WHYY. What traveled from the air-waves to my ears were sounds that emanated from what I had considered to be the far, far, far away distant past. **The voices coming through the speakers of my Honda Prelude were actual voice recordings of people that had been enslaved before the start of the Civil War.**

Sure, I had previously read *The Peculiar Institution* by Kenneth Stampp; *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*; *Stranger Than Fiction* by Josiah Henson; *Before the Mayflower* by Lerone Bennett, Jr. Like millions of others, I had watched Alex Haley's *Roots*, and Cicely Tyson's portrayal of Harriet Tubman, and taken in several other books and movies. However, now hearing the voices of people that had lived through slavery did something that even to this day, I find it difficult to describe. If you've seen the sci-fi movie titled *The Matrix*, then you will recall what occurred for Neo, the protagonist, when he took the "red pill." Upon swallowing this pill, his perception of reality was immediately and forever changed, and reverting back to his previous (and false) "reality" now became virtually impossible, and more importantly, would he ever want to go back. Like Neo, what I had ingested in my car that morning immediately began to challenge and alter my perceptions of reality, and now I can never go back.

The radio program ended, and it was 8 a.m. Still, I sat there for an additional 10-15 minutes, just trying to process what had just happened. I knew that it was JUST a radio program, and that they were JUST recordings of people's voices. Yet, what I heard was causing me to experience some sort of internal conflict. My mind raced, while my emotions were all over the place. People that I had thought of as dead and long gone were now suddenly alive again, and they weren't in Mississippi, South Carolina, or Georgia. Instead, they were no further away than the back seat of my car. Oh my goodness. These were "people." They had names (that weren't Harriet or Frederick). These were people that had their children sold or given away as wedding gifts. These were people that had prayed long, hard, and earnestly for freedom. The people that once felt the lash were now "sitting in my car," educating my mind and gripping my emotions.

Their experience was no longer that of a distant past. It was as if 150 years suddenly collapsed and became the day-before-yesterday.

My experience that morning turned me into a ferocious reader and student of American slavery. *I had to know more . . . I had to have more.* What had previously been for me an interest in history, now became an interest in people. Yes, I had read about the experience of the enslaved in our country, but hearing these voices now resurrected the dead for me, as they rose to tell me their stories. "They" were no longer "they," no longer a collective, but individuals with hearts, souls, and minds. Among them were self-taught mathematicians & mechanical engineers; philosophers & theologians; musicians extraordinaire & navigators (and many would ultimately use these skills and capabilities to navigate the trails of underground railroad to escape north to freedom).

They had lived, died, and were forgotten by the country where they toiled under the threat of the whip from sun-up to sun-down, 6 (and sometimes 7) days a week from the time that were 10-12 years old until the day they died. More accurately, they were not "forgotten" by their country. For to say they were "forgotten," would imply that they had at one time been recognized, remembered, or honored. They had never been paid any such homage by their country. Other than a handful of exceptions (such as Harriet and Frederick), they were figuratively (and often literally) dumped into common graves without so much as a tombstone to say here lies . . . They've been lumped together in our textbooks (and in most of our minds) as "slaves" or "the slaves" without any interest or concern for their names, significance, individual identities, or personhood. They simply didn't matter.

The people I heard on the radio shared stories of their lives, they expressed their emotions, and offered their opinions on important issues. They were people, they were individuals. Their lives leaped out of the radio, as the crackling sounds of these old recordings now bypassed my ears and went straight to my heart. These folks became people for me. I began, for the first time, to truly ponder their humanity. They were no longer a "they." "They" were unique

individuals. I didn't have the language at that time, but in hindsight I proclaim that on that April morning I realized that, "Slaves Lives Matter."

Saying "Slaves Lives Matter" brings a "personal" dimension to the conversation. Personal, because in proclaiming this, I'm expressing my personal, values-driven opinion about the significance of millions, millions, and millions of human beings that this country enslaved. Making the statement that "Slaves Lives Matter" expresses that I believe that these enslaved people have been treated as irrelevant and trivial to the story of America, and that is not okay, not acceptable. Yes, in saying that "Slaves Lives Matter," **I've expressed an opinion that is very personal to me and for me.**

However, please allow me to make it a bit more personal.

Travel back with me to June 19, 1865 in Galveston, Texas. On that particular day 250,000 women, men, and children were told that they were no longer slaves. I long to write here of what it felt like for these people on that day, but I obviously cannot understand their experiences or begin to do justice to their feelings, thoughts, emotions, shock, and joy they felt at that moment because such things are so far beyond any contemporary woman's or man's comprehension. To study their well-documented experiences of oppression, fears, psychological trauma, burdensome labor, their malnourished existence, along with their daily exposure to the elements while clothed in rags moves us toward a miniscule glimpse of the overwhelming joy that must have flooded their souls on that day in 1865. Many of them had certainly hoped and prayed for the impossible for themselves and their children, and now freedom had come. If you had been there that day and asked these women and men if they viewed this as the day their slaveholder lost valuable "property", or the day that important federal legislation was enacted, or the day that a critical effort was finally achieved through military measures, or how they felt about this day possibly becoming a national holiday, I highly suspect that they would have shaken their heads to express the sorrow and disappointment they felt for you for having completely missed the point. This wasn't about their former master's economic circumstances, the federal government, or even soldiers or officers that arrived with the good news. I feel we can say with certainty that this day, for the formerly enslaved, was about THEM . . . **This day and all that it meant was PERSONAL for them.**

It is here that I ask you to join me (*and them*) in celebrating Juneteenth in a much more personal manner this year. Close your eyes and allow your mind, body, and soul to journey back to experience the very first Juneteenth for yourself. Because joy begets joy, you will soon find yourself rejoicing with the folks there that day who had so suffered severely, many for 60+ years, far beyond anything we could imagine today. Dance with them as they celebrate the "Year of Jubilee." Get personal and allow them lead you in singing songs of praise. If you believe in prayer, then join them in prayers of thanksgiving. Pick up their toddlers and swing them around dancing with the joy of knowing that these little ones will never grow up to suffer the indignities of being "examined" on the auction block. Regardless of your race, color, ethnicity, or national identity, allow your humanity to have its way as you become one with these folks in shouting for joy. Make their joy, your joy. Find yourself shouting, "glory, halleluiah." Laugh, smile, rejoice, and be happy **with** them.

Let's get up-close and personal with these wonderful people this Juneteenth.

*Michael Hughes
Chief Equity and Inclusion Officer
Frederick County Government*

RESOURCES

Sample Voice Recordings of Interviews with the Formerly Enslaved

https://www.loc.gov/podcasts/slavenarratives/podcast_hughes.html

<https://www.loc.gov/audio/?fa=subject:slave+narratives>

<https://www.loc.gov/audio/index/subject/?fa=subject:slave+narratives>

Information on Interviews with the Formerly Enslaved

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/>