

## What Does Juneteenth Mean to Me?

I was raised in a faith tradition that did not acknowledge holidays, so I did not grow up celebrating Juneteenth. As an adult, I may have participated in a Juneteenth celebration a couple of times. I say all of that to say historically I have not had any great motivation to celebrate Juneteenth.

During COVID after the murder of George Floyd, I felt an overwhelming sorrow for the challenges of the Black lived experience in a country that struggles to see my humanity. In many of the networks I belong to, I believe I am seen as one of the “safe ones”. However, after all of social unrest of 2020 I realized how much energy and effort I had and was expending to assimilate. I began to realize how much of myself, my pain, and my disappointments I had suppressed. It was if I was awakening. In addition to the unrest going on in the world, I took on a role to lead as part of our African American employee networking circle at work. I had to figure out quickly how to navigate the paradox of my sorrow and the opportunity to influence the Black lived experience at work.

I began to revisit the history of the Black experience in America. The content I consumed was healing for me. The experience of many Black Americans past and present has included racism, exclusion, discrimination, bias, inequality, and oppression. However, Juneteenth is a reminder of the resilience of my ancestors.

The last of the slaves were freed on June 19, 1865 over a year and half after the rest of the slaves were freed. Imagine one day you wake, work, eat, and rest at the will and direction of someone else. You depend on them for every element of your life. You wake up at their command. You work at their command. You eat only what you are allowed. You rest only when given permission. Now imagine June 20, 1865. Officially, you are no longer at the will of another but now you have no housing, food, or way to provide for your family. What do you do? Where do you begin?

No one alive today can imagine what it would be like to live through this experience even if they are the fortunate recipients of an oral or written history from their ancestors. Juneteenth is a reminder for me of the resilience of my ancestors. It is by God’s grace that although there are still significant challenges, many of us are living a life that our ancestors could never have dreamed for us. “Christ has set us free to live a free life. So take your stand! Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you.” Galatians 5:1 MSG

Levernese Mell