



Juneteenth Becoming a Federal Holiday Does Nothing to Heal Our Wounds

June 17, 2021 by Educator Barnes

Malcolm X was once asked if he believed the United States was making progress. He replied and said:

No. No. No. No. I will never say that progress is being made. If you stick a knife in my back nine inches and pull it out six inches, there's no progress. If you pull it all the way out, there's no progress. The progress is healing the wound that the blow made, and they haven't even begun to pull the knife out much less try to heal the wound. They won't even admit the knife is there.

Frederick Douglass once asked, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" Today, I ask, what to a Black person is Juneteenth being a federal holiday? Most of us, and that includes me, recently learned about Juneteenth. I was heartbroken to learn that people with skin like my

skin stayed in slavery more than two years longer than they should have because that's how long it took the news to get Texas to inform people that President Abraham Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation freeing enslaved Black people. I wondered why I had not been taught this information in school. Once I learned about it a few years ago, I began celebrating the holiday.

I am not against Juneteenth being a Federal holiday, but this is not what Black people asked for. When demands are made, progress happens but it is surface level or seems performative. Did you see the performance of the lawmakers singing the Black National Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" in celebration of Juneteenth becoming a federal holiday? If you do choose to view the video, you can cleanse your ears with a Kirk Franklin version of the song later. We are tired, and I mean Fannie Lou Hamer, "sick and tired of being sick and tired" tired.

We wanted more diversity on television, and we got a Black male Bachelor. We wanted access to products that suit our needs, so we were given Band-aids that match various shades of melanin. We still can't get easy access to Black hair care products because some stores still keep them locked up, and they are only accessible after you hunt down an employee to open the cabinet. We asked for food deserts to be eliminated and healthy food choices in all neighborhoods. Instead, we were informed that Uncle Ben's and Aunt Jemima food products were going to have a name change due to racial stereotypes. We asked for truth-telling in the curriculum such as addressing slavery, and instead, we received instances of teachers asking students to list the positives of slavery. We asked for schools to do a better job of retaining Black educators because research has shown that Black educators improve outcomes for Black children. Instead, Black teachers' faces were posted on social media during Black History Month. We asked for the federal government to do a better job of protecting Black citizens and eliminating systems rooted in racism, and instead, we get a federal holiday for Juneteenth. How many Black people have federal jobs or jobs that will actually give them the day off?

Some of my non-Black associates have asked, "Why are Black people mad about the holiday?" After I remind them that Black people are not a monolith and that some Black people are indifferent or don't care, I then point out that this is not what we asked for. We have knives lodged in our backs from the experiences we have had in this country and the federal government gave us a big Juneteenth holiday bandage over our wounds without acknowledging that the wounds exist or putting meaningful federal legislation into place that will greatly impact Black lives in a positive way.

James Brown sang, "Say it loud! I'm Black and I'm proud!" I will feel proud on Juneteenth to know that more people including my children know about Juneteenth, but I need more than knowledge about past events. I need more than a celebration about the end of slavery. I need knowledge about the future my sons are inheriting. As the Black National Anthem states, "Let us march on 'til victory is won." Juneteenth isn't a victory; we still have marching to do.