

Juneteenth 2020. A day of freedom. Except ...

A Reflection by Dr. Terricita Sass

Today I celebrate Juneteenth, which also happens to be the day of my birth. I was born exactly 100 years to the day of this historic event, also known as Freedom Day, Emancipation Day, Jubilee Day, Cel-Liberation Day or the Black Fourth of July. On January 31, 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery throughout the United States and its territories. There were no cell phones, Facebook or Instagram to spread the news. It took several months, but on June 19, 1865, the message of freedom finally reached the slaves in the remote parts of Texas. The Civil War was over and all slaves were now free. Except they really weren't.

It was the day when the idea and legal action of freedom and equality officially began. It was proclaimed that the day would be a national celebration of culture, music, achievements and the many contributions of newly freed Americans. Except it wasn't.

It was the dream of my Black ancestors that this new freedom would bring relief, protection, acknowledgement of being human, wages for their previous free labor, justice, and the end of the cruel tyranny of racism they had experienced their entire lives. Except it didn't.

The United States and organizations in a number of countries supposedly take this day to commemorate the official end of legalized slavery. Virginia formally recognized the day in 2007. Except it isn't a holiday.

Reconstruction, sharing of political power, and the hopes and dreams of my Black ancestors seemed to die on the vine as new forms of discrimination evolved as The Black Codes, sometimes called Black Laws. The best known of them were passed in 1865 and 1866 by Southern states, including Virginia, after the Civil War in order to restrict the freedom of Blacks, most of whom were relegated to work for low wages, live in segregated communities, attend ill-resourced schools and live in the shadow of inferiority and fear. The founding principles of American society were not for them. Those freedoms were reserved for Whites. Giving way to Jim Crow, Blacks experienced increased backlash and overt racism which manifested itself in heightened White supremacist activities and the frequent murdering of Blacks – especially Black men throughout every level in our society. Even the most educated and successful Blacks, including doctors, lawyers and other professionals, were reminded that any freedom they were given could be taken away at any time if someone White decided to do so. There was a constant fear for their lives and the lives of their family members simply because they were born Black. They looked just like me. I am but one of the products, beneficiaries and responsible keepers of the flame for so many that came before me.

It was the hope of my Black ancestors that America would make good on its panned sacred national values that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Except the hope of 1865 and of 1965 are yet to be fully realized and we are reminded yet again in 2020 that we have such a long way to go as a race, as a community and as a nation.

Juneteenth is often filled with lively celebrations in the form of festivals and parades with local bands playing, storytelling, and yes, food.

Except this year feels different – tense - and unstable as it did in the year of my birth, which was also just one year after the signing of the Civil Rights Act.

1965 was a year of highs, with the passing of the Voting Rights Act, and lows, with Bloody Sunday and the assassination of Malcolm X. COVID-19, social distancing and significantly higher unemployment rates for Blacks are certainly factors in the current instability. More notable, however, are the endless blatantly racist acts flooding our news feeds over several years that have seemingly escalated and reached a tipping point during recent months. The combination of factors built on years of racism and racist acts set the stage for new levels of frustration, anger, intolerance and mere exhaustion at the ongoing accusations, discriminatory practices, brutality and murdering of Blacks-- just for being Black.

When my 93 year-old, feisty, self-sufficient and sharp-witted grandmother reminds me that things are much better than they used to be, I struggle with the very irony of being grateful for something (freedom) that is said to be mine and afforded to all of “my people,” if we would just try harder and pull ourselves up by our invisible bootstraps. Born in Columbia, SC, she is the product of her time in a state that removed its Confederate Flag from the State Capital grounds in 2015. It is that same symbolism and that of Confederate statutes erected to reinforce and remind “my people” that these ideals are still a part of our current day reality and will not die. After all it’s history not hatred – Right? Except we turn our heads at the most painful components of our past because those good old days were only good for one race of people.

My formative years in South Carolina during the turbulent sixties are only faint memories. I did not notice that my world was insular and Black. My paternal grandmother is very fair-skinned so Black was not about color, it had to be about something else. I did not have and still do not have hate for Whites, as they are part of me--10% of my DNA represents northwestern Europe, Ireland, Scotland, Norway, Germanic Europe and Italy. These are “my other people,” regardless of how that came to be. To hate them would be to hate who I am. To hate is against what I was taught by my mother and not what I believe. However, I do have anger toward our collective culture and systems that continue to support or blatantly ignore the many tentacles of racism and fail to call it what it is.

For a time, I attended integrated schools in Chicago; when I returned to South Carolina, I was labeled as gifted and an honor student because many of “my people” were life-long residents of the state and subjugated to the structural racism perpetuated within almost every facet of their lives. Many seemed numb and accepted that life was not more than their current experiences or those of their parents. Many of my peers were enrolled in inferior classes, had poor learning materials and were plagued with many of the social ills that had led my family to migrate from South Carolina to Chicago five years prior. As an honor student, I was relegated to learning how to properly wash dishes, clean house, and cook for Dick and Jane’s family (a White family featured in many of our used and tattered text books) instead of learning math and science. Under protest to my father, I demanded to be switched to a building construction class with the boys where I could learn to measure and build things. He was experienced with unions, a semi-radical, and it only took one interaction. I was moved to that class.

Later, I would be moved entirely from the segregated schools of “my people” because the hopes and dreams for this Juneteenth daughter was a better life – which in the mind of my father could only be achieved through a better education. At the time, that meant moving to suburbia at the very edge of the busing lines in a high rent apartment on a railroad salary so that access to the best public education was available to me.

That decision opened up numerous opportunities for me to grow and be challenged to excel on multiple levels. Except it came at the expense of leaving “my people,” who did not and never would have those opportunities. Further, some who did “escape” were unsuccessful in navigating the multiplicity of racial land minds. There were those unable to compartmentalize their desire to do and be better from the reality of their circumstances. Others refused to conform and still others simply fell victim to the criminal justice system and the systemic racism that continues to plague our espoused progressive society and permeate our cities and local communities.

Though I am physically removed from living in the neighborhoods so often associated with “my people,” my heart stands with them and all who struggle for equality. My life’s work has been to create opportunities, not just for “my people,” but for all people. However, I will not deny that the burden of opening doors for those who continue to bear the brunt of our social ills stirs my soul. I cannot ignore the outcry and pain of my daughter, my son, my extended family, my friends, my co-workers and my students.

The world is hurting. Those I love are hurting. I am hurting. I am the mother of a brilliant son and the wife of a retired Navy Commander. I tell myself “I will not live in fear. I will not worry. I will sleep.” I meditate on Psalms 23. But the reality is that daily I confront the possibility that their very existence could be wiped out in an instance because they are simply being who they are - a Black man in America. The Black community is fighting for the promises of Juneteenth. Reconciliation, repair and radical changes are necessary. Not just for police, but in the hearts and minds of everyday people, educators, leaders, pastors, politicians, business owners and so on. This work cannot be done by the oppressed alone. The need for others who believe in equality regardless of race or class, neighborhoods or titles, can stop talking and step up to begin the uncomfortable work of dealing with racism. I am specifically calling on “my other people” – the 10% of me.

On this Juneteenth, I reaffirm my commitment to do more to create spaces and pathways to openly address the issues of racism. I reaffirm my commitment to learn more and to be brave in my voice and actions for “my people” so that they have opportunities to learn and be exposed to all of the benefits that an education can provide them. It is an ongoing struggle and I am not sure if it will ever end. But it has to get better.

Confronting racism starts or ends with each one of us doing the inner work to become aware of how it lives and manifests itself in our daily lives. The binary view that only bad people are racist and good people are not is a false and dangerous phenomenon. We must listen and hear; we must read, learn and reflect; and we must be moved to a heightened level of social consciousness and action, because being WOKE is more than slang.

I will not be silent, apathetic or blame those who have been victimized. I will not participate in or condone violence of any kind by any group. I will do my part so that I live out my life’s calling and open doors of opportunity for the communities in which I live and work. And the dash between 1965 and a date unknown to me will stand for something beyond my individual accomplishments, possessions and comfort. My ending will not read, “she said she would – Except she didn’t.”

Dr. Terricita Sass is the Vice President of Enrollment Management & Student Success at Reynolds Community College in Richmond, VA.