

Student's Name:

Date:

Rewriting the Narrative: The True Celebration of Juneteenth

By Jennifer Stagner

Originally posted on LinkedIn, June 22, 2020

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/rewriting-narrative-honoring-true-celebration-jennifer-stagner>

Bio: Jennifer is a Social Studies and English teacher in the San Francisco Bay Area, and mother of four rambunctious boys. Her life-long passion is promoting positive systemic change at all levels of society.

As we celebrated Juneteenth this past week across the nation, many were scratching their heads in bewilderment about the whole concept. A new national holiday? Why do we need a holiday? Very few Americans would argue that the emancipation of the last slaves is NOT worthy of celebration; but finding an explanation that encompasses the full scope of its importance, other than to rubber stamp the 'cause celebre' of the value of black lives, is an exercise in mental gymnastics for conservatives and liberals alike.

But it is important. It is absolutely critical that we begin the process of expanding the chronicles that are taught to our children. Including the narratives of the oppressed in our record makes the story more true, and enlightens us all. It isn't just white guilt or a liberal media forcing some nonsense down our throats: history no longer need be written by the winners. We have the choice to tell both sides of the story, or not.

Brene Brown, the famed researcher and TED Talk sensation on the experience of shame, posted a quote on her Facebook page this week. It read: "We can't call ourselves free or brave when we keep running from the truth. We either own our stories or they own us. Only when we have the courage to own our history are we able to write a brave new ending to our stories."

Never has this been more true than in this moment in history. Everywhere you turn, people demand that you pick a side. You're either for them and against us, or against them and with us. The conflict we are barreling through with race relations in this country is the direct result of this oppositional narrative. The damage wasn't done by slavery, or by the failures of the Civil Rights Movement: *it was done by the explanation we made for it afterward.*

This does not by any means excuse the actions that individuals like George Chauvin choose to make. The crimes of the individual are not pardoned due to being unduly influenced by their forbearers. But the story we tell about it in the resolution phase has to be a story of "us," not "us versus them." We have to take each other into our collective arms, and bring harmony to the discord. Yes, traditionally the oppressors have been predominantly white Anglo Saxons; but the

Lesson Topic: The Historical Importance of the Juneteenth Holiday

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knife of false narratives cuts both ways, so making it about winning or losing a fight is missing the point.

There is a dangerous bent to the chronicle right now, which seeks to demonize the history of the Confederacy. Erasing the history of the Confederacy, or deciding they were “on the wrong side,” is a copout. It is imperative to face the fact that it was a long-standing conflict, exacerbated by the North continuing to rely upon Southern agriculture while calling them the bad guys. Fueling the slavery economically while politically decrying its effects was the North’s contribution to the story: fueling cognitive dissonance never leads to positive ends. BOTH sides passed continual compromises through Congress, allowing slavery to continue in the South, rather than abolishing it for once and for all. Slavery was absolutely horrible, and Africans who were forced to become Americans were utterly blameless in the conflict; but the story of slavery is not just the story of the bad white man, or the brave North freeing the oppressed in the South, but also the tale of how absolute power corrupts absolutely, and how poverty leads to desperation, and a million other tropes that need to be learned in order not to be repeated.

Suppressing the truth in ANY forum is damaging to the emergence of the whole story. We live in a world where we play by the rule that “perception is reality.” Alternate facts, news media that seek to divide for ratings instead of searching for resolution to conflict, separate liberal and conservative media outlets: these all signal a schism in our realities, a break in the collective consciousness. There really are two Americas being cemented into their own garrisons. This is a battle that forces us to choose if we are for or against our brothers and sisters across the ideological divide.

So what do we do? How do we fix this mess, and begin tearing down the walls?

It starts in the media. The media is the source of all information; it is the font of the flow that has led to the floods in the street. The media needs to stop telling one-sided stories and perpetuating “Yellow Journalism.” It continues in our Facebook and Twitter feeds. It bleeds into the upcoming elections, not only in the candidates we elect, but more importantly the debates we have in the electoral process. It emanates from the conversations we have with our neighbors who may have different skin colors or political views from our own.

In the end, we cannot change another’s heart, no matter how right we believe our cause to be. All we can do is have a conversation, and listen from a place of celebrating the differences and mourning the heartaches in each other’s narratives. When it becomes *our* heritage, then we know we are honoring the history of Juneteenth.

Handout: Juneteenth Assignment

Demonstrate what you have learned about Juneteenth by creating a poster of what YOU think would be a perfect symbol for this Juneteenth holiday. Present your project with a brief (20 second or 100 word) explanation of why you chose your particular symbol.

We all associate holidays with specific symbols: Christmas Trees, Easter Bunnies or American flags are a few popular and readily recognizable examples. Can you think of anymore?

Brainstorm ideas, then begin your design process. Remember: as long as you can explain why you chose this symbol, there are no “wrong” answers!

Graphic Organizer for Your Brainstorm Ideas:

Possible Symbol:	Pros/why it makes a good symbol:	Cons/why it might be misinterpreted

Single Point Rubric: Juneteenth Symbol Assignment

For grading only

Concerns <i>Areas that Need Work</i>	Criteria <i>Standards and Expectations for this Assignment</i>	Advanced <i>Evidence of Exceeding Standards</i>
	Quality of Work - Symbol Drawing/product is neat, and time and effort are apparent in work.	
	Representativeness The symbol chosen is clearly related to the experience of being freed from slavery.	
	Quality of Information - Presentation Information is accurate and the explanation of why they chose their symbol displays attention to material and lesson provided.	
	Historical Awareness Student demonstrates an understanding of the impact of slavery in their symbol and word choice.	
	Extra Credit: Artistic Merit Artistic ability, exceptional attention to detail, or superlative effort displayed in production.	
	Participation Engaged in all points of the process - learning, collaborating/brainstorming, production and presentation of final product.	