

Juneteenth started when U.S. Army Major general Gordon Granger made it to Texas and freed the last cohort of slaves on June 19th, 1865. That was the real end to the Civil War. I am grateful that my four great grand-uncles served with the Union in the Civil War, fighting alongside many other Whites and thousands of Black freedmen, because they put in motion a healing of American society from the terrible wrong of slavery.

In back of me is the Juneteenth Flag, created in 1997, with the symbolic star in the center referencing the freedom of African Americans first in Texas and now in all 50 states. The starburst around it represents a new beginning. The red curve represents a new era for African Americans; the red, white and blue colors remind everyone that enslaved people and their descendants are American citizens with full rights and responsibilities. This flag is aspirational. These symbols represent goals for which we can strive. We can be grateful for everyone's recurrent efforts to make equality under the law a lived reality. People of all races strive right now to eventually fully realize a new era in which full rights and responsibilities are equally honored for everyone in American society.

We don't yet know how to celebrate Juneteenth with a social consensus. Some have advised us simply to dress up or eat a native food of Africa or soul food. We are advised to listen to freedom songs, spirituals, R&B, jazz, soul, and hip-hop. There are Black authors and Juneteenth books at your library for your education. You could visit a museum of African American history and culture. We can be grateful for all those resources. The large corporations have also given us opportunities to buy merchandise.

We can also be grateful that these symbols are not just for African-Americans. We can expand the meaning of this flag to help all who are oppressed--all the Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islanders, Africans, Jews, Ukrainians, and others who have been displaced to our shores and contribute to our society. We can be grateful for all of the LGBTQ+ folks who expand our sense of what it means to be human. This is an appropriate flag for all oppressed peoples.

We can be grateful that the liberation represented by this flag is about more than legal rights. These colors call us to recognize and own those internal attitudes that have shaped us to unknowingly perpetuate damaging assumptions about each other. When anyone is oppressed in our society, we are all hedged in by internalized prejudice. Juneteenth is for African Americans and asks everyone to affirm and work for equality and freedom with love. This flag represents what it could best mean to be American.

Our Unitarian Universalist spirituality calls for tolerance of others' language and rituals. There will, inevitably, be judging and self-righteousness about celebrating Juneteenth "properly." I know someone who will attend an "Egg Roll, Egg Cream, and Empanada" festival celebrating a particular neighborhood of Manhattan that received successive waves of immigrants. Juneteenth will be like that. Celebrate diversity over the coming years however you want. Be grateful for this tolerant space to experiment. Our spirituality gives us space to grow together; no, actually we grow each other up in a community of freedom and tolerance.