

BLACK HISTORY

Context gives depth to events

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Once again we are holding our frenetic celebration of Black History Month. During this 28-day period, the airways fill with Black History moments, documentaries and feature movies. Teachers pull out units on the achievements and contributions of African-Americans. Students write essays about inventors, civil rights activists, entertainers and sports figures.

But to what end? Inevitably, this segregated approach to Black History trivializes it. Black history is taken out of context.

I do not advocate ending Black History Month, as actor Morgan Freeman has done recently. Rather, we must place this history in context.

In 1926, at the height of the Jim Crow Era and rampant racially motivated violence against black people, scholar Carter G. Woodson introduced what began as an annual one-week celebration to make "the world see the Negro as a participant rather than as a lay figure in history." He believed that such an event could counter the dehumanizing effects of racism on black men, women and children and perhaps engender in those whites who devalued an entire race some appreciation and respect for black life.

Woodson saw Black History Week as just the beginning of a process that could help liberate the minds and spirits of black people, freeing us to realize our worth and potential for profound contributions to the world.

Unfortunately, today most schools teach very little about the complexities of the experiences of African-Americans in any sustained way. This superficial approach also plays out in myriad ways in well-intentioned efforts throughout the year meant to commemorate individuals and events in African-American history. I'll note a couple of examples.

The activism, sacrifice and steadfastness of Coretta Scott King have been recounted in the wake of her recent death, and rightly so. However, we must understand something more about the context of her early life to fully appreciate the meaning and lessons of her contributions.

It is profoundly significant, for instance, that Mrs. King's birthplace, Perry County, Ala., was also the birthplace of the late Jean Childs Young, first wife of Andrew Young, and Juanita Abernathy, wife of the late Ralph David Abernathy.

All three of these women were literally married to the civil rights movement; all three came from the same nurturing environment in which young black women were groomed for and expected to lead efforts to improve the world.

There are some encouraging steps being taken locally to place the history of African-Americans in the proper context. The Georgia Department of Education is integrating into the social studies curriculum lessons about the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot.

Those of us involved in the Coalition to Remember the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot are attempting to extend the study of this shameful chapter in the history of our city by discussing it within the contexts of local, national and even international historical and current events. Our efforts are meant to be just the beginning of a process of collective healing and activism.

The aim is to memorialize those African-Americans killed during the massacre, improve communication and understanding among the city's diverse population and inspire people to make long-term commitments to addressing such issues as racism, poverty and disenfranchisement, which still plague us 100 years later.

The celebrations of Black History Month should embody such goals as well, enabling all Americans to engage in meaningful discourse regarding these issues. Only by placing our history in proper context can it provide lessons that can empower us to work for fundamental changes in our society that ultimately can benefit us all.

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