

Black History Month: Why We Celebrate

Using David Letterman's technique of the day's "top ten", I thought I would share with you this evening my top five reasons for celebrating Black History Month. Of course I could match Letterman's magic number of ten and even more, but I figured that you did not want to hear me for ten hours.

Before I reveal my top reasons to celebrate Black History Month, I would like to share with you several seminal events that brought me to my top five. As some in the audience know, Michigan is not my place of birth – I was born in Birmingham, Alabama. Because my mother could not support two children on her husband's military salary, a decision was made to send me to live with my maternal grandparents in the very rural town of Hope Hull, Alabama. So, for the first four years of my life I lived a sharecropper's life with my grand parents, my maternal great grandmother, and an elderly lady who my

grand parents allowed to live with them due to her being homeless.

In this unique household, I became thoroughly acquainted with my maternal heritage. I was particularly drawn to my great grand mother, not because she was the oldest, but because she commanded so much attention when her soft-spoken words were uttered. Her folktales, as I learned many years later, were carryovers from the motherland- When she spoke of her family's plight after the Civil War I knew that I was getting a first- hand report of life in Alabama's Black belt , 1865 to the 1960's. And when my grandmother, reminded me that she was from the "East", I grew to know that she was talking about Africa.

I left my grand ancestors at the end of World War II just in time to enroll as a first grade student at Scott Elementary School in Birmingham. Even though our textbooks in this segregated school were hand-me-downs and the building was

not in good repair, we learned from some of the best educators America had to offer at the time. At the top of their goals, was our learning about our history, our ancestors, and ourselves. Every student had to subscribe to the **Negro History Bulletin**, a publication of The Association for The Study of Negro Life and History. Reading the pages of the “Bulletin” caused me to come into contact with Hannibal, Marian Anderson, Prince Hall, Lucy Terry, Monroe Trotter, The Pyramids, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Ira Aldridge, Marcus Garvey and other luminaries of African descent.

From Scott School, I journeyed out of my immediate neighborhood to attend Western-Olin High School. It was there that I met Mrs. Savannah Jones, a social studies teacher who opened my eyes to the world, particularly to the continent of Africa. She encouraged me to read, read, read—and as she said every day... “you will expand your world.” Her encouragement

led me to write my senior high school thesis titled “Hell in the Congo”.

From Western High School, and with Ms. Jones’ help, I received a scholarship to Talladega College, Alabama’s oldest historically Black college. The college was steeped in the history of African-Americans, after-all some of the descendants of the Amistad rebellion helped to establish the college. Additionally, the college was renowned for its distinguished guests: Carol Bryce, Howard Thurman, Adam Clayton Powell, Benjamin Mays, Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gwendolyn Brooks, Horace Mann Bond, Dick Gregory, and Sterling Brown, just to name a few.

It was at Talladega College that I continued my interest in Africa. Under Dr. Albert Anonye, a Nigerian professor, I wrote and defended my thesis titled “The Partitioning of Africa”.

My final seminal moment that prepared my remarks for this evening were two summers in the Berkshires of

Massachusetts where I worked as a counselor at a predominantly Jewish fine arts camp, Indian Hill. The camp's owners, Mordecai and Irma Bauman gave me the opportunity that allowed me for the first time to look at another culture other than my own in great detail. It was also the first time that I found myself in the midst of wealth. Quite a contrast to the poverty that surrounded me in Hope Hull, Birmingham, and the county of Talladega.

So what are the top reasons for celebrating Black History— you might ask. If you were paying attention to my “seminal” moments you could see my mind being shaped by these unique experiences that caused me to observe, listen and reflect on what it means to be Black in America and Why We Must Celebrate. Hence, I offer you my five top reasons for celebrating Black History Month.

Reason #5: To Recognize

Recognize the fact that people of African descent have played a major role in the World's development and America's development in particular. Just acknowledging the fact that all research points to humankind's development, beginning in Africa is the first step of recognition. Secondly, recognizing the fact, that in spite of our ancestors coming here as slaves, they have fought and died for democracy every step of the way. For example, name any war, long-term or short-term that America has engaged in, and you will see a Black presence. From America's French- Indian War to Afghanistan, African-Americans have played a significant role.

Of late, America has finally recognized the contributions of a group of African-American aviators who fought valiantly for their country, in spite of the fact that many of their critics felt that they were incapable of even getting

their planes off the ground. Recognition, in my opinion is first step toward understanding.

Reason # 4: To Clarify & Revise

I believe that most of us in here have a good dose of male Eurocentric education. That being the case, when you stumble across a piece of revisionist history that clarifies the roles and thoughts of Washington, Jefferson, Adams, and others, about their feelings toward slaves, you pause. Or when you find out the importance of Louis Latimer to Thomas Edison, you give pause. You give pause, largely out of the belief that what you had indoctrinated in you in your past is being challenged. For America to get it right, its history must be challenged and clarified, even when the mis- truths come from presidential candidates--- not just during Black History Month, but every month and every day of the year!

The clarification and revision of our historical past is not just in order for Black Americans, but for the original

Americans, Hispanics, women and others. When you clarify and revise the misinformation that you have ingested over the years, your mind becomes clearer and uncluttered! You soon will develop an insatiable appetite for the truth.

Black History Month does this!

Reason #3: To Celebrate

In his book, Defending the Spirit: A Black Life In America, Randall Robinson said:

Blacks are, wherever on the planet we live, a battered and damaged people, estranged from one another in our long and calculated victimization. It is not easy to see through the keloid blindness of centuries-old scar tissue that isolate African-Americans from African, African from Caribbean, Caribbean from Afro-Latin— branches of black world cast asunder by mean experience, time, and oceans; common-source victims hemmed into

separate and narrow alleys of stereotypical distortions.

During Black History month, we dispense of “keloid blindness and centuries old scar tissue” by celebrating **US**, no matter where the ships or our feet have taken us. Forever looking East, my grandmother knew full- well her ancestors’ journey from west Africa, to Jamaica, to the Carolinas and to Alabama’s Black Belt. She knew that the water and earthly chasms that separated her people were only a thin veil that caused a life time hunger to repatriate with her people from the Mother Land, no matter where they were.

The longing for reconnecting to one’s ancestral heritage was observed each day as I observed my Jewish hosts’ celebration of their Jewishness. Whether it was the synagogue, or a meal of loaves and bagels, or speaking broken Yiddish, the Bauman’s daily celebration of their heritage always raised my eyes and

thoughts on the need for me to celebrate my people with the same vigor curiosity, and resolve.

Reason #2: To Honor

In no way do I consider myself a biblical scholar, but I do recall a couple of verses from my youth calling on followers of Christ to give honor. For example, “Honor thy father and mother so that you may live long in the land of the Lord (Exodus 20:12) “ or Proverbs 3:9-10 “Honor the Lord from your wealth and from the first produce, so your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will overflow with new wine.”

A few years ago my wife and I traveled to Richards Bay, a farming and mining community located approximately 80 miles west of the South African city of Durban- a large metropolis. While visiting, a Christian Church, our host said that she wanted to take us to a sacred place after church. The place was located a few miles from the church in a lightly forested area. Here, we came upon a large clearing encircled by

gray and white stones. Soon, some of the worshippers we met at the church came to the center of the circle and began to give honor to their ancestors by calling out their names and conversing with them.

And so must we! During Black History Month, we communicate with our ancestors by honoring them and thanking them for a job well done

During this time, we pay honor and homage to the Black achievers who braved the slings and arrows of racism and the venom of discrimination and segregation. Hence, the likes of Marian Edleman Wright, Harriet Tubman, Asa Hilliard, A. Phillip Randolph, Mary McCloud Bethune, Carter G. Woodson, Duke Ellington, Barack Obama, Muhammad Ali, Muddy Waters, Malcolm X, and many, many, many, many more should be paid the highest honors at this time.

Reason #1: Because It Is The Right Thing To Do:

In paraphrasing Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he was questioned as to why he and others put their lives on the line over and over again, Dr. King said, “there comes a time when every man must take a stand, not because it is political or popular, but because it is the right thing to do”.

Black History Month is the right thing to do!