American Airlines Newsroom

NEWS RELEASE

Shining a light on my own Black history

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In 2020, my grandmother passed away at the age of 94.

Do the math and you can see how her story stretched across changing times in our history.

What strikes me most about the way Granny lived was her fondness for her grandfather, Henry Keller Sr.— a man born into slavery in Tennessee. His father, a white slave owner, allowed my great-great grandfather to work in the house. The knowledge Henry likely acquired from his father, his master, changed the trajectory of my entire family.

After slavery ended, Henry and his wife worked hard to acquire a farm in North Texas. Their efforts led to land that spanned 640 acres. Generations benefited from their hard work, and, to this day, my father fondly recounts childhood stories of growing up on that farm.

The family pride in land, hard work and the ability to grow something out of a “small kindness” was passed down from generation to generation. As a result, I grew up never being confused about my Black history because I knew where and when my Blackness began.

I knew the conflicted emotions and lives my grandmother, her mother and her mother’s mother must have faced, understanding their options doubly limited by their complexion and gender.

I knew slavery, emancipation, Jim Crow and segregation, a reality faced by both my parents, was not that long ago.

When I picked up The Water Dancer, the moving story of an enslaved man coming to understand his role in the Underground movement, I did not see an ancient tale.

In the story, I saw my grandmother's grandfather, my Black history, one I envisioned and personally knew to be true.

Hiriam Walker, the protagonist of the tale, finds his power by telling his story and encourages us to do the same. Sharing our stories, listening to experiences different from our own, is how we honor **our commitment to create and sustain meaningful change**.

> "It took time for me to see that the story was my greatest power."
> — The Water Dancer, Ta-Nehisi Coates

Black history is a living, breathing thing. And celebrating it this month, sharing our stories, is how we begin to "be better."

There is a "muck" in our American history, our historical disposition to build greatness off the backs of an oppressed group. But there is also a hope in our future and a hope for our present as we continue to review and critically acknowledge our past, no matter how painful it may be, and stories like The Water Dancer help us to do just that.

Thanks to a collaboration with Apple Books and Oprah's Book Club, American has created a way you can read this book for free. Eligible AAdvantage® members who fly with us during the promotion get a free e-book copy of The Water Dancer on Apple Books. There is more to enjoy in the air too — a special episode of Oprah's Book Club featuring the author, Ta-Nehisi Coates, via American's free inflight entertainment on the Apple TV+ channel. A custom reading guide for The Water Dancer is also available in this month's American Way.

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