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**Opinion: Proud to be ‘woke’**

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“I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality.” – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The first time I heard the term “woke” it was used in a derogatory way to describe people on the political left, like me. Curious, I decided to find out just what it meant.

I learned the term originally emerged in the 1930s in a recording by Lead Belly, and later by Erykah Badu, to signal attention to the social and political issues affecting African Americans. In 2014, following the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, it became a cautionary watchword in the Black Lives Matter movement meaning to stay awake to police brutality and unjust practices. Since then, the term has taken on a more generalized meaning and now is often used as a catchall for leftist social justice politics.

Interesting. It seems in our current climate of increased polarization, hate speech, violent rhetoric, and mass shootings, in a country where anyone eighteen or older can carry a weapon of war, I’d say, if you’re not “woke” to your surrounding conditions, you’re not paying attention.

As a nation, we are simmering on a high flame toward a boil and any one of us, at any time, can be collateral damage in some indiscriminate act of terror. Now, no matter our race, religion or political party, we are each someone’s enemy. Now, sadly, drawing from its original meaning and use, we could say it behooves all of us to stay as “woke” as possible.

But I believe most people, across the political spectrum, don’t want to live in such a climate of hate and distrust and, in particular, don’t want to be responsible for the potential fallout of such a state of affairs on our children and grandchildren. We recognize childish bullying for what it is, masquerading too frequently now as normalized political discourse. We see the extremism, emanating from the far corners of both political parties, religious groups, and nationalistic movements promoting ideologies that thrive on divisiveness. And many of us are disgusted, feed up and simply exhausted.

The irony is, if we removed the labels ‘Democrat’ and ‘Republican’, we’d likely find the majority of Americans would feel quite comfortable, if not proud, to be called “woke,” as the term is more often used today. For example, to me, “woke” now means striving to overcome barriers to an atmosphere of tolerance, even when inclusion feels incompatible to personal beliefs and points of view. It means a desire to legislate reasonable gun control so we can send our children to school with less fear of mass shootings. It stands for a yearning to think of ourselves as a people worthy of our Statue of Liberty, a people who welcome immigrants fleeing rampant persecution with an immigration policy that is both compassionate as well as judicious.

“Woke” now means we want the government out of our doctor’s offices, bedrooms and healthcare decision-making, and that we’d never think to require a 10-year-old girl, or any woman, to endure a pregnancy, in particular, started by incest or rape. It means we herald free speech in our schools, encouraging children to practice the Golden Rule and older students to engage in real dialogue and examination of where we’ve been and who we are as a people, and how even the greatest nation on earth can do better.

And, finally, at its core, “woke” means we want an American democracy run by the people, from the bottom up, and not by a theocracy that legislates unilateral beliefs and values from the top down. Yes, I, for one, now stand proud to be called “woke” and suspect there are many Americans from across the political divide who would stand with me.

Can we imagine unarming our hearts so we could, at last, see the truth of what we have in common? The place where, regardless of our political party, religious affiliation, racial or ethnic status, we could join hands in the spirit of common purpose and unconditional love to work together to form a more perfect union, where life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, for all peoples, could, at last, become the final word in reality.