

*Remaining Awake***A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on April 25, 2021**

Lately, I've been thinking about what it means to be woke. We here that term used a lot these days. Being woke. Unless you've been living under a rock (or just been off social media), you've probably seen or heard the word "woke" used as an adjective — as in, "stay woke." But what does woke mean, specifically, when you use it that way?

Unlike other four-letter acronyms associated with the social justice movement, woke doesn't stand for anything: it is literally the past participle of "wake," as in "to wake up," and that underpins its basic meaning. Someone who's woke has "woken up" to issues of social injustice. The Oxford English Dictionary officially added this definition in June 2017, citing the Black Lives Matter movement as well as lyrics of Erykah Badu's 2008 song "Master Teacher" as catalysts for the phrase's popularity over the past decade: the song's refrain repeats the phrase "I stay woke," which is probably now stuck in your head. A woke person is someone who has "woken up" to modern discrimination and social issues. Examples include cultural differences, racial injustices, and environmental justice. Wokeness is a proclamation and challenge to others, especially white people who benefit from certain privileges because of their skin color. The challenge is to not give in to pressures from other people and stand firm with those being oppressed.

Like Dr. King said, actions based solely on notions of expediency, politics, and popularity miss the essential question of whether the action is right, an inquiry rooted in an examination of one's conscience, their own moral fortitude to stand up, instead of staying seated and complaining in complacency. This act is called being "woke." The Urban Dictionary, which by the way I often consult to understand what the younger generation is talking about, offers several options for defining the term woke, but the top definition defines "woke" as "the act of being very pretentious about how much you care about a social issue." Another Urban Dictionary definition defines woke as: "A word currently used to describe "consciousness" and being aware of the truth behind things "the man" doesn't want you to know i.e. classism, racism, and any other social injustices. The term comes from a genuine place, but I submit that, as a result of its overuse, the term is beginning to lack meaning.

I hear some people saying that they are "woke," but their words are not reflected in their actions. These people are guilty of ignoring the advantages of their privilege, of becoming complacent when progression is needed, failing to stand up for those without a voice. I'm not saying every self-proclaimed woke citizen is insincere, but I am saying that we need to dig deeper in our actions and not hang onto hollow and trendy words if we want to actually normalize diversity and foster equality and inclusion.

I recently read an article by Priti Nemani. She said, "For me, as a woman of color, being "woke" is not a trend. Being woke started when I opened my brown eyes at birth, my dark brown eyes set inside of my brown face and my brown body at birth, and saw America for the first time. She says for her, and for countless others, woke-ness is not a hobby or a cause for. It is existence. It is

irrevocably a part of who she is. For a person of color, she says, sometimes I feel like I'm keeping my tired eyeballs open to make sure I survive in a world full of misunderstandings, misrepresentations, missed kindnesses. Acting purposefully, with an aim toward social justice and promoting the normalization of diversity, is how we stay aware of the ways that American society treats different communities differently, how the external world tears down some while uplifting others, and how society often seeks to minimize the personhood of those termed as "Other." We see this in the environmental justice movement too. Even now, there are those that deny climate change. I read something last week that said, "Stop asking people whether they believe in climate change and start asking if they understand it. It's science not Santa Claus." A great example of being woke.

President Barack Obama commented at the Obama Foundation Summit in October 2019, on woke culture: "I do get a sense sometimes now among certain young people, and this is accelerated by social media, there is this sense sometimes of: 'The way of me making change is to be as judgmental as possible about other people, and that's enough. Like, if I tweet or hashtag about how you didn't do something right or used the wrong verb, then I can sit back and feel pretty good about myself, cause, 'Man, you see how woke I was, I called you out.' Obama makes the point that that's not activism. That's not bringing about change. If all you're doing is casting stones, you're probably not going to get that far. That's easy to do." President Obama's remarks were met with some anger from liberals, likely confused how their meaningful Facebook likes and re-tweets could have no actual consequence, and for them, I feel sorry, and for us in a world with those people, I am terrified, by their shortsightedness, by their superficiality, by their refusal to act instead of click. While I am a liberal, I am not offended by these words. In fact, his words give me hope that there is a camp of ideology that sees woke culture as a very real obstacle to real change.

In his 1963 book *Strength to Love*, Dr. King writes: "Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity." So many patrons of social media know just enough to be dangerous. They know just enough to cause pain without a basis. They know just the right words and clicks to make another person feel less, feel other-ed, feel like an outsider. This is not activism or actions designed to right wrongs. This is showmanship, empty actions with empty consequences.

In his 1967 speech "Beyond Vietnam," Dr. King foreshadowed a necessary social transition that has yet to occur. He said, "We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered." Sadly, Dr. King, despite your words of caution over 52 years ago, our society remains dangerously still "thing-oriented," and our commitment to materialism over altruism remains forceful and dangerous.

To use "woke" accurately in a sentence, you'd be talking about someone who thinks for themselves, who sees the ways in which racism, sexism and classism affect your daily life. #StayWoke often accompanies social media posts about police brutality, systematic racism and the industrial prison complex. Someone who understands how to be woke thinks critically, with intersectionality at the heart of their work. As with other examples of woke slang, though, its meaning has been twisted over the years. Twitter urges you to #StayWoke about everything from conspiracy theories to dating red flags. You can take jokey quizzes to test how woke you

are; Fox News commentators bemoan “wokeness” in the same way they deride being politically correct. In 2018, Sam Sanders argued to stop using “woke” in an op-ed for NPR. He said, “Words that begin with a very specific meaning, used by a very specific group of people, over time become shorthand for our politics, and eventually move from shorthand to linguistic weapon. Or in the case of woke, a linguistic eye-roll.” You might also see it as a hashtag on both serious and joking conspiracy theory videos, making these feeds somewhat tricky to explore.

Years after “woke” became mainstream slang, though, it’s clear the word isn’t going anywhere. Knowing what woke means and where it comes from is key to using it correctly — and maybe, helping people *actually* stay woke in the process. The time has come for us to break with the trendy notion of woke-ness; instead, we should allow the eternal question of what is right to guide our opinions and, more importantly, our actions to right wrongs. Remaining awake. Until this distinction with a difference is both acknowledged and manifested, Dr. King's words from decades ago will continue to ring true. Isn't it time for us to actually honor Dr. King's message every single day of the year, instead of just posting his quotes once a year? We can do better, my friends. Stand up for your neighbor, speak truth to power by showing up, instead of clicking blindly, wistfully, and without consequence, and dare to challenge yourself and others to do better. Some among us aren’t able to do some of these things because of advanced age, illness, and the like. But let us carry their lamp too.

Let’s reflect on that famous story of Rip Van Winkle. Most of us remember only one thing about that tale; that Rip Van Winkle somehow slept for twenty years. But let us listen to Dr. King’s take. He said, “There is another point in the story that is almost completely overlooked; it was a sign on the inn in the little town on the Hudson from which Rip went up into the mountain for his long sleep. When he went up, the sign had a picture of King George III of England. When he came down, years later, the sign had a picture of George Washington, the first president of the United States. When Rip looked up at the picture of George Washington, he was completely lost, he knew not who he was. This reveals the most striking fact about the story of Rip Van Winkle is not that he slept 20 years, but that he slept through a revolution. While he was peacefully snoring up on a mountain, a great revolution was taking place in the world....There are all too many people, who, in some great period of social change, fail to achieve the new mental outlooks that the new situation demands. There is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution.”

I often revisit the writings of Persian poet Rumi, and find pearls of wisdom. He reminds us: "The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you. Don't go back to sleep. You must ask for what you really want. Don't go back to sleep. People are going back and forth across the doorsill, where the two worlds touch. The door is round and open. Don't go back to sleep." And so, stay awake my friends, stay awake.

May it be so.