

We should all be 'woke'



By MICHAEL GERSON

In the evangelical Christian tradition, you generally know when you've been "saved" or "converted." It comes in a rush of spiritual relief. A burden feels lifted.

But how does one know if he or she has become "woke"? How does one respond to this altar call and accept this baptism?

It's a question that came to mind as I read *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States*, by Walter Johnson, a history professor at Harvard University. I grew up in St. Louis, in a placid, White, middle-class suburb. At school, I was inflicted with classes in Missouri history that emphasized the role of the region in the exploration and settlement of the American West. I visited the Museum of Westward Expansion in the base of the Gateway Arch, which glorified the sacrifices of American pioneers.

The Broken Heart of America is a strong antidote to such lessons. In this telling, St. Louis was "the juncture of empire and anti-Blackness" and "the morning star of U.S. imperialism." It was the military base of operations for the ethnic cleansing of Native Americans from the Upper Midwest. It was the home of vicious lynch mobs and racial redlining. "Beneath all the change," Johnson argues, "an insistent racial capitalist cleansing—forced migrations and racial removal, reservations and segregated neighborhoods, genocidal wars, police violence and mass incarceration—is evident in the history of the city at the heart of American history."

William Clark was not only an intrepid explorer, he was the author of treaties that removed more than 81,000 Indians from their homelands. Sen. Thomas Hart Benton was not just the populist voice of "the West," he was the father of "settler colonialism" and an apologist for slavery. Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation—but merely a few days before he had ordered the execution of 38 Dakota men, which "remains the largest mass execution in the history of the United States." The 1904 St. Louis World's Fair was a festival of white supremacy, in which the organizers "assembled living human beings in a zoo."

And so on. My first reaction, honestly, was to bristle. Was every character in the American story a villain? Must one accept Marxist economic and social analysis to believe in social justice? Is every institution and achievement with injustice in its

history fundamentally corrupt and worthless forevermore?

It is my second thought, however, that has lingered. Historians such as Johnson might dwell on historical horrors and put them into narrow ideological narratives, but the events they recount are real. The U.S. government's Indian wars were often conducted by sadists and psychopaths such as William S. Harney (who beat an enslaved woman named Hannah to death because he had lost his keys and blamed her for hiding them). A White lynch mob murdered a free Black man named Francis McIntosh in 1836, burning him alive while he begged his tormentors to shoot him. Over two days in 1917, a mob of Whites in East St. Louis murdered scores of their Black neighbors and destroyed hundreds of buildings, in a horrible preview of Tulsa's 1921 Race Massacre.

And it's true that white-supremacist ideology pervaded institutions and systems—labor policies, construction contracts, city planning, racist policing, the exclusion of Black children from public pools. Place names I know well—Ladue, Kirkwood, Webster Groves—were scenes of exclusion, oppression and petty cruelty.

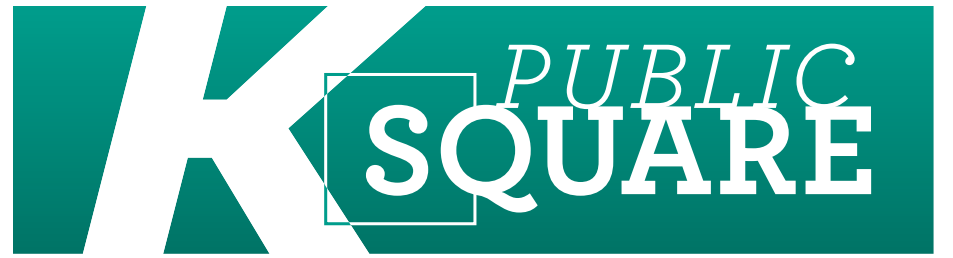
How to process all this? If being "woke" means knowing the full story of your community and country, including the systemic racism that still shapes them, then every thinking adult should be. And books such as Johnson's are a needed corrective to history as pious propaganda. But for a fuller explanation of what patriotism means in a flawed nation, there are more reliable guides.

Frederick Douglass, for example, felt incandescent anger at the "hideous and revolting" hypocrisy of the free country where he was born into enslavement. He said in 1852: "There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States. ... The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense and your Christianity as a lie."

For Douglass, however, this founding crime did not discredit American ideals; it demonstrated the need for their urgent and radical application. He insisted that the Constitution was "a glorious liberty document." He drew encouragement from the "great principles" of the Declaration of Independence and the "genius of American institutions." He challenged the country's hypocrisy precisely because he took its founding principles so seriously.

How can you love a place while knowing the crimes that helped produce it? By relentlessly confronting hypocrisy and remaining "woke" to the transformational power of American ideals.

(Washington Post)



PUBLIC SQUARE welcomes all points of view. Published submissions do not necessarily reflect the views of the Keizertimes

What we owe the Class of '21

By LYNDON ZAITZ

Next Wednesday, June 9, the McNary High School Class of 2021 will accept their graduation diplomas at Volcanoes Stadium. Hundreds of our students have completed their primary education. Many will go onto higher education at the college of their choice, others will opt for service in the military or to directly enter the work force.

What do we owe those who faced their final semesters in front of a computer screen at home, forgoing the extracurricular activities that complement their classroom studies? Those graduating are survivors—they, with the rest of society—weathered a life that was upturned. A hallmark of youth is resiliency. Our youth can take hit, shake it off and continue moving forward. We owe it to them to let them have their feelings, though. It is not just adults who have been touched by depression and loneliness over the past year.

As safety protocols bring the pandemic under a semblance of control, we can all begin to think of what comes next. Graduates have a life ahead of them they can make their own. For many their next step is set. College life, like everything else, will be different for today's high school



graduates, more so than in previous years. Different doesn't have to mean bad, it just means different. It is difficult to lament something that one has never experienced. The Class of 2021 will make their post-high school years different in their own way. We owe it to them to embrace their journey and help them fit into the world.

We owe it to the Class of 2021 to recognize what they have been through as young people. Once you've lived through a global pandemic as well as unrest and riots in our streets, anything else from here on will be easier.

Graduation ceremonies next week will be more of a celebration than usual for students and their families alike. From the depths of despair of coronavirus a year ago, hundreds of students will accept their diplomas with a sense of survival and accomplishment. The phrase "We did it!" will take on added poignancy. They sure did do it. They did it with distance learning. They did it without athletic or arts events.

The Class of 2021 finished their education in a way no one ever thought could happen. Some may have stumbled along the way but school leadership wasn't going to leave anyone behind. The proof of that success comes next Wednesday at Volcanoes Stadium.

What do we owe the Class of 2021? Start with hearty congratulations and continue with love and support as they make their own world.

(Lyndon Zaitz is publisher of the Keizertimes.)

SHARE YOUR OPINION

TO SUBMIT

a **letter to the editor** (300 words),

or **guest column** (600 words),

email us by noon Tuesday:

publisher@keizertimes.com

JOURNALISTS are NOT AFRAID to ASK PRESIDENT BIDEN the TOUGH QUESTIONS...



Editorial Cartoon

KEIZERTimes



PUBLISHER & EDITOR
Lyndon Zaitz
publisher@keizertimes.com

FOLLOW US ON SOCIAL MEDIA:
Facebook
Instagram
Twitter

NEW DIGITAL SUBSCRIPTION PRICING:
\$5 per month, \$60 per year

YEARLY PRINT SUBSCRIPTION PRICING:
\$35 inside Marion County
\$43 outside Marion County
\$55 outside Oregon

Periodical postage paid at Salem, Oregon

WHEATLAND PUBLISHING CORP.
142 Chemawa Road N, Keizer, Oregon 97303
Phone: 503.390.1051 • www.keizertimes.com

PUBLISHED EVERY FRIDAY
Publication No: USPS 679-430

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: Keizertimes Circulation, 142 Chemawa Road N, Keizer, OR 97303