AM I WOKE?

By Amber Joiner-Hill, April 2019

If someone asked you if you were woke, how would you respond? Perhaps you'd point out the obvious fact that you're not asleep. Or maybe eagerly talk about the last march you walked in. The term "being woke" has become popularized over the past couple years. There are t-shirts, songs, and hashtags that allow consumers to proclaim their woke-ness but very few explicit definitions of what it means are highlighted.

In its simplest definition, to be woke means that you intentionally educate yourself about social injustices <u>and</u> take actions to end those injustices and educate others about them. The "and" part of that sentence is an addendum that I've personally contributed, as I don't think that positive change can occur on a systemic level if you don't take action or give information to those who can. While there's no right or wrong way to be woke, it is key that you have made a conscious decision to educate yourself. Passively receiving information is not enough to move the needle towards equity. I hope to use my personal experiences to further explain the term.

I have always had an interest in injustices that people of color experience. But that simple interest didn't necessarily mean that I was woke. It was only until I purposefully read articles, attended speaking engagements, and participated in community dialogues that I was able to add knowledge to that interest. Then I was able to confidently speak with others who were in a position of power and could perhaps effect more change than me.
That brings me to the workplace. After learning about income inequalities across race and gender, I now use that knowledge to encourage employers to reconsider their more traditional approaches to hiring. By no means do I suggest that we lower standards, but instead re-evaluate them and question how many bore out of pure comfort.

For example, in grad school I interned at a place that was saturated with White women who mostly all went to the same school and held the same degree. I decided that by choosing my brown-skinned self as an intern, my supervisors were ready to talk about how to further diversify our team. Those discussions involved me pushing for better outreach efforts and more thoughtful examination of transcripts and resumes. Instead of solely recruiting from the nearby, very White and very rich university, why haven't we built a relationship with the predominantly Black university that's only a few miles away? I wanted us to think about the intersectionalities of life and the many factors at play that determine our access to opportunities.

In my imagination, that office now has a mix of genders, races, and educational backgrounds. In reality, though, I've been told that the composition is pretty much the same as when I left. What is different, though, is that supervisors purposefully discuss the *lack* of diversity that the office has. I don't know if more concerted efforts will result from those discussions, but I do know that because of my actions, people in power are talking.

I don't share this story to portray myself as a social justice warrior, here to tear down every wall. I want to give an example of how easy it is to be woke. To be intentionally aware of injustices and then work to eliminate them. I encourage you to think about an injustice or inequity that you want to educate yourself and/or others about, absorb information, and then *do something about it.*

Recommended resources:
Listen: Amanda Seales looks at the thin line between using your awareness to speak against inequality and using it to further divide people. Her commentary can be found on her podcast *Small Doses with Amanda Seales*, episode titled "Side Effects of Being Woke."

Read: In "*White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*", Peggy McIntosh writes about how she became aware of the privileges she experiences as a white person, and how she encourages herself and others to use unearned advantages to restructure institutional racism.

Watch: Crash (2004); This movie showcases how biases, some conscious and others subconscious, play a role in how we interact with people of different backgrounds.