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‘Jeopardy’ can be unifying force for polarized country

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Alex Trebek began hosting “Jeopardy” in 1984, five months before I was born. I have never known a world where I could not find Alex on TV every weeknight, reading answers while contestants asked questions. This week, the legendary host’s final episodes will air.

Why did an 80-year old man suffering from late-stage pancreatic cancer continue hosting a game show until less than two weeks before his death? According to the show’s producer, it was because Trebek “really believed in the importance of ‘Jeopardy.’” So do I. “Jeopardy” may be the sole unifying force we have left in this country.

The days of Americans tuning into the same three major networks are long gone. News audiences have splintered into right and left factions. Social media echo chambers distort our ideas about the world and help to accelerate partisan animosity. In fact, 73% of Americans believe we can no longer even agree on a basic set of facts, according to the Cato Institute.

So how can we step back from the brink? My crazy proposal: We all watch some more “Jeopardy.”

“Jeopardy” is the one place where facts are not disputed. It has no political agenda and is beloved by those on the left and the right. It is a universally recognized cultural touchstone — we all know the Final Jeopardy “Think Music” and how to phrase our answers in the form of a question. It may be the most referenced and parodied show ever.

“Jeopardy” has remained essentially unchanged (except for Trebek’s facial hair) since 1984, yet it continues to average over 8 million viewers per night. What is it that keeps us coming back week after week?

For one thing, it’s fun. We all remember that feeling as a kid when you were finally able to scream out answers before your older family members. And we laugh when a contestant shouts out a hilarious incorrect response.

But I believe “Jeopardy” represents something deeper. “Jeopardy” reminds us that as Americans, for all our differences, there are things that unite us. We have a shared history, a shared culture, and shared institutions.

Night after night on “Jeopardy” we hear about the Revolutionary War and the Civil Rights Movement, Mark Twain and Harper Lee, the D-Day landings and the moon landing, the Avengers and the Kardashians. “Jeopardy” seeks neither to whitewash our history nor rewrite it. It is the one

place where we can come together and agree on basic facts. It reminds us that we have overcome past challenges and that we are all in this together.

My dad watches Fox News and my mom watches CNN. But every night at 7:30 pm they watch Jeopardy together, shouting “Who is Dolly Parton?” and “What is chlorophyll?” I have a theory that it’s hard to stay mad at someone while you’re screaming “What is aurora borealis?”

On a recent podcast, Karen Murphy, director of international strategy at Facing History and Ourselves, talked about her work fostering reconciliation in Northern Ireland. After a long history of hatred and violence, she asked the two opposing sides if they could find something, anything that they could agree on. Someone shouted “Van Morrison!” They may not have liked each other, but they all liked “Brown Eyed Girl.” It was an appeal to their common humanity and shared culture. It was a start.

To be sure, a game show cannot solve all of our problems. It cannot end a pandemic or eradicate poverty. But maybe it can get some Americans talking to each other again.