



Notes from Roanoke Change Academy's First *Caste* Discussion

We began the session with a brief introduction of the purpose of this series. In short, we hope to use Wilkerson's book as a foundation from which to learn, talk, and to consider concrete steps towards building a more equitable society.

Analogies: The session kicked off with a discussion of the analogies Wilkerson uses to describe the caste system and our understanding thereof. Analogies participants identified included:

- The example of heights
- Bones of a building
- What is artificial vs. natural
- What is fixed vs. what is flexible
- The ways the expectations of caste parallel the expectations place on women
- A ladder
- Anthrax
- Toxic permafrost
- Race as skin, caste as bones

Shared Definitions: We highlighted the ways in which Wilkerson defines key terms.

- Definition of Caste: "A fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups on the basis of ancestry and often immutable traits."
 - It is "an artificial construction" with "arbitrary boundaries."
 - = "the infrastructure of our divisions" (page 17)
 - One participant reminded the group that the English word *caste* comes from *casta*, the Portuguese term for race.
- Casteism: "Any action or structure that seeks to limit, hold back, or put someone in a defined ranking, seeks to keep someone in their place by elevating or denigrating that person on the basis of their perceived category." (page 70)
 - Vs. racism, which is "the combination of racial bias and systemic power." (page 68)

Discussion Questions: The group split into breakout rooms to discuss the following questions. We then returned to the large group to have a brief discussion about each.

1. What is your understanding of the distinction Wilkerson makes between racism and casteism?
 - The historical fluidity of who is considered white was raised.
 - People also discussed whether one place's caste system would be recognized elsewhere.
 - In some eras and places, race has trumped caste as the foundation of social divisions.

2. How do you see the caste system playing out in your everyday life? In what ways does racism distract from casteism?
 - This group discussed the distinction between caste, which is fixed, and class, which isn't.
 - Casteism is another way to put even more people into categories.
 - The conversation around higher education (who does or doesn't need a college degree) has echoes of casteism.
3. "To achieve a truly egalitarian world requires looking deeper than what we think we see" (70). How do we do this? What do we then see? What comes after seeing?
 - This group concluded that egalitarianism means that everyone's human needs are met, human rights are guaranteed, and that everyone has the same opportunities. Using this definition, we do not live in an egalitarian society.
4. What do you think of the parallels Wilkerson draws between India and the United States? How does this differ from what you'd previously understood about India? (pages 74-75)
 - The group discussed how U.S. society has more parallels to Indian society than many of us had previously thought.
 - Consider the way Dr. King was introduced in India as a "fellow untouchable."
 - When two caste systems interact, people may be categorized according to their social function instead of their social position.
5. How does it feel to learn that American casteist practices, including our "knack for maintaining an air of robust innocence in the wake of mass death" inspired Hitler, and that some American laws were even considered too harsh by the Nazis? (81 & 88).
 - This lesson was described as "a gut punch." Even Nazis didn't send postcards commemorating their atrocities.
 - Is groupthink truly a reason for the way lynchings were turned into festivities?

Other Thoughts

- In order to truly look forward, we have to have a true understanding of our past.
- Conduct a thought experiment: look at your community through the lens of caste.

Questions Raised:

- Who benefits from the caste system?
- How can creativity illuminate and/or break open the caste system?
- How do you look deeper?