



Notes from Roanoke Change Academy's Third *Caste* Discussion (January 25, 2021)

This session focused on Part Four of *Caste*. We began our conversation by discussing the Gunnar Myrdal's statement quoted on page 255: "the caste system is upheld by its own inertia and by the superior caste's interest in upholding it." We considered what the points on inertia in our castes system might be. Suggestions included:

- People's fear of losing what they have, whether that be power, economic status, material goods, employment, or social standing
- The economic reality that certain types of jobs are scarce
- Unawareness of the impact of the caste system on others
- Denial of problems
- An unwillingness to do anything that's not easy
- Uncertainty: *what am I supposed to do?*
- An inability to see things as possible any other way beyond the status quo: *we've always done it this way*
- Trouble figuring out what to do to make change and how to do it

We then discussed how you shift out of this inertia, both on an individual level and on a systemic scale.

- Have patience because change takes time. (For example, in some of our lifetimes, gay marriage has gone from a taboo topic to legal status)
- Think about the leadership you elect because the tone at the top sets the stage
- Changing laws will change behavior. Changing behavior will change hearts.
- Do your part as an individual to change your behavior because you cannot make others change.

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. Thoughts shared with the whole group are below each question.

- 1) On page 183, Wilkerson talks about the phenomenon of how "the elevation of others amounts to a demotion of oneself, thus equality feels like a demotion." How do you see this phenomenon being expressed today? How do you help people see that this is not true?
 - There's an inaccurate view about work ethic
 - Changing the standard/cost of living would combat the caste system
 - Reverend Barber's Poor People's Campaign is working to combat casteism
 - The debate around affirmative action has often misconstrued what affirmative action is and how it works

- Think of systemic change as a river running around a boulder. Eventually, that boulder will be eroded into a pebble.
 - “Ignorance is not bliss.”
 - There is a rising awareness of caste within our society
- 2) In what concrete ways does the caste system hurt people outside the subordinate caste?
- Members of the dominant caste don’t benefit from what others have to offer. Opportunities to be exposed to talent, discoveries, relationships, etc. are lost.
 - There’s a perception of scarcity and an unnecessary worry over status
 - The caste system creates a false sense of superiority. There has to be movement against casteism by individuals to change this.
 - Wilkerson’s use of the wolf pack’s response to the loss of the scapegoat gives us the opportunity to think about who we are outside the caste system and to reconsider what our roles could be.
- 3) Wilkerson describes how caste systems preserve themselves. In this moment of social shift, do you see our caste system working to preserve itself? How so? (page 236)
- The insurrection of January 6th was an illustration of caste
 - Violence is used to keep the system working
 - Consider the unequal access to the vaccine
 - The disparities of access and opportunity between highly resourced and under-resourced schools maintain the caste system
 - Each of us should take a look around our own lives. How can we as individuals break out of the caste system?
- 4) In what ways were you taught the rules of our caste system? How do you unlearn them? How do you ensure the next generation isn’t taught these same things?
- Many of us learned these rules through our exposure to art and media. Combat that by increasing your exposure to art and media by people of color
 - Our unconscious bias isn’t something we’re born with—it’s programmed early on.
 - Change your daily behavior. Show respect to everyone.
 - How we’re taught the rules of caste varies by our own race, gender, and class.

Other Thoughts and Questions:

- It’s a privilege to be able to wait for things to change. We can no longer wait for change.
- Remember that immigrants and women are part of the caste system too

Suggested Reading, Listening, and Viewing Materials:

- Look at Reverend Barber’s Poor People’s Campaign as a continuation of Dr. King’s work: <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/>
- *The Case for Reparations*: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>
- *White Tiger* (Netflix)
- *Everyday Ubuntu*, by Mungi Ngomane
- *Begin Again*, by Eddie S. Glaude Jr.

- Read Dante Stewart's works
- *I'm Still Here*, by Austin Channing Brown
- *Something Must Be Done About Prince Edward County*, by Kristen Green
- *Color of Compromise*, by Jemar Tisby
- *NY Times Sway Podcast [January 21 interview with Isabel Wilkerson](#)*
- *Thursday, Jan 28, 7 PM event at the Harrison Museum via Facebook: Insurrection in Black and White - <https://fb.me/e/3eallXAVd>*