



Notes from Roanoke Change Academy's Fourth *Caste* Discussion (February 1, 2021)

Participants read Parts 5 and 6 of *Caste* for this week's session. We began our conversation by reviewing a passage from page 267:

"It is easy to say, If we could just root out the despots before they take power or intercept their rise. If we could just wait until the bigots die away...It is much harder to look into the darkness in the hearts of ordinary people with unquiet minds needing someone to feel better than, whose cheers and votes allow despots anywhere in the world to rise to power in the first place. It is harder to focus on the danger of common will, the weaknesses of the human immune system, the ease with which the toxins can infect succeeding generations." (page 267)

After this reading, we discussed how we are currently in a moment of reckoning here in the U.S., trying to grapple with how millions of people buy into Q Anon, the Proud Boys, etc. Does Wilkerson's depiction of the Nazi supporters impact your understanding of how people support these hateful movements? Responses as to why people might support these movements included:

- Fear of losing what people have, or anger at seeing a family's economic status decline
- Generations of resentments and insecurities
- Belief in American exceptionalism
- Manipulation of crowds
- Participants also wondered how we could relate to these supporters in a nonjudgmental way. They asked how one talks to people who live in the same place but have a totally different reality?

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) The term "group narcissism" applies to the American South of the past. Is it also applicable today? (270-271)
 - It's not regional narcissism; it's nationwide. It comes from the illusion that we're the greatest nation.
 - This group narcissism is from insecurity, a sense of lack, and from misattributing hardship to other groups' rise instead of to larger forces
 - The psychiatric definition of narcissism includes a note that narcissists can't understand that they are narcissistic. You can draw a parallel here to how some racist people don't recognize their own racism.
 - One participant connected this narcissism to the concept of the scapegoat. With both thought patterns, there's an external source of blame that prevents people from taking personal responsibility.

- 2) In Chapter 23, Wilkerson describes a series of personal incursions she has experienced. Why do you think members of the dominant caste don't speak up when they see these personal attacks happening?
- A lack of preparation—not knowing how to speak up
 - Fear of discomfort or of having the situation's attention shifted onto you
 - Fear of making the situation worse, especially when a white man is the aggressor
 - Women in particular have been taught not to speak up
 - To disrupt these attacks, we must use the privilege we do have
- 3) In Chapter 26, Wilkerson says that many White voters elected Trump because they were more interested in preserving their long-term dominant caste status than in maintaining their short-term benefits (health care, safety, etc.). In other words, they chose whiteness over their own self-interest. What do you make of this statement?
- Is this preference for whiteness over democracy conscious?
 - White supremacy underlies voting against one's self-interest
 - Exposure to inaccurate information prevented some people from recognizing that they were voting against their own interests
 - Subliminal fear of losing status
 - Changing laws is one thing, but we must also change our hearts.
 - Remember that the U.S. is unusual in that it was built on an idea
 - We must determine how to make change when no one wants to give up their power. Can we imagine a world in which the dominant caste shares power?
- 4) Germany has consciously undergone a process to recognize, remember, and hold itself accountable for Hitler's rule. What would it take for the U.S. to undergo a similar process?
- The U.S. is far from a true public reckoning, but we can start the process with people who are open to it.
 - There are 2 prongs to an approach for this work:
 1. Education: Young people must learn the true history and have experience of being immersed in historical information
 2. Combatting Misinformation: We must recognize the importance of telling our personal stories. We must recognize myths and disrupt those false accounts
 - Consider the role of public memorials, like Germany's stumble stones and the Equal Justice Initiative's memorials. Could we have a memorial for Lavender and Smith here in Roanoke?
 - German has used public art. How can we use our imaginations to create a positive vision of the future?

Suggested Reading, Listening, and Viewing Materials:

- *Think Again*, by Adam Grant
- *Daughters of the Dream* book and blog: <https://daughtersofthedream.org/>
- *One Night in Miami* On Amazon—here's a trailer: https://youtu.be/K8vf_Cmh9nY

Additional opportunity:

We're going an online **implicit bias training** with **Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities on February 8 and 19** . Participants in the group are staff and board members of the community's arts, cultural, and human services organizations. We've got some additional seats left if anyone would like to attend – 15 spots are available. Each session is \$15 (\$30 total).

- The registration link is:
<https://shop.taubmanmuseum.org/collections/professional-development-vcic-training>
- If you're having any difficulties with registration, please contact Stacy Reece, Accounting Manager at the Taubman, 540-204-4119, sreece@taubmanmuseum.org
 - Session 101 **February 8** from 9-10:30am
 - Session 201 **February 19** from 1-2:30pm

Please share your suggestions for next week discussion questions with Doug and Marissa. Please also share your ideas for our next book!