

Caste -- The Origins of our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson

Week 6 – Part Five: The Consequences of Caste; Chapters 19-24

This document includes passages and prompts for reflection and discussion.

In Chapter 19, *The Euphoria of Hate*, Wilkerson recounts the parade upon Hitler's return to Berlin after the Germans seized Paris and wonders if the German people knew the carnage they were celebrating. Yes, they had seen the news reels, had seen their Jewish friends and neighbors taken away, and were still smiling and happy. On page 266 we read:

Everything that happened to the Jews in Europe, to African-Americans during the lynching terrors of Jim Crow, to Native Americans as their land was plundered and their numbers decimated, to Dalites considered so low that their very shadow polluted those deemed above them—happened because a big enough majority had been persuaded and had been open to being persuaded, centuries ago or in the recent past, that these groups were ordained by God as beneath them, subhuman, deserving of their fate. Those gathered on that day in Berlin were neither good nor bad. They were human, insecure and susceptible to the propaganda that gave them an identity to believe in, to feel chosen and important.

1. Consider the different times in history highlighted in this excerpt and imagine yourself in various roles during those periods.
 - What are some factors that may have positioned you in one role or another?
 - As you imagine yourself in the various roles, how does it make you feel?
 - What might cause you to break from your expected role?
 - What price might you pay for breaking from your expected role?
 - Thinking of the caste system and what we have read so far, how does it inhibit people from freely choosing their roles?
2. In the excerpt above, the author talks about the message accepted by a big enough majority that some groups “were ordained by God as beneath them... deserving of their fate”. What are some secular messages in today's society that justify the elevation of some groups above others?

On page 207, Wilkerson ends Chapter 19 saying:

... the enemy, the threat, is not one man, it is us, all of us, lurking in humanity itself.

Through the UU 1st principle we covenant to **affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person**. In her Reflection on the First Principle (www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles/1st), Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker, says:

Reverence and respect for human nature is at the core of Unitarian Universalist (UU) faith. We believe that all the dimensions of our being carry the potential to do good. We celebrate the gifts of being human: our intelligence and capacity for observation and reason, our senses and ability to appreciate beauty, our creativity, our feelings and emotions. We cherish our bodies as well as our souls. We can use our gifts to offer love, to work for justice, to heal injury, to create pleasure for ourselves and others.

3. Consider the statements from Wilkerson and Parker quoted above and notice your reactions to them. Reflect on the idea of “both/and” rather than “either/or” as you think about these statements.
 - What are some ways the 1st Principle can guide us in our response to inequities perpetuated by systems of hierarchy?
 - What are some ways that our UU culture can lead us to create our own systems of hierarchy?
 4. Reflect on and discuss some of the tensions between aspirational values and the desire to feel secure, chosen, and important.
 - What factors increase or decrease these tensions?
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Chapter 20 begins:

Through no fault of any individual born to it, a caste system centers the dominate caste as the sun around which all other castes revolve and defines it as the default-setting standard of normalcy, ...

and on page 275 we read:

It evoked a convention of the American caste system that often places the word of the dominate-caste person above the word of a subordinate-caste person even in matters that the subordinated person would be more likely to know about.

5. Think of an article, TV show, or news item that involved people from different castes.
 - Whose perspective was presented as central?
 - Whose perspective was presented as knowledgeable?
 - Imagine re-casting the story so that another perspective was presented as central / knowledgeable. Discuss how this would change your reaction to the story.
6. Consider and discuss instances where you have noticed an upper-caste person interrupting or questioning the perspective of a lower-caste person.
 - What societal factors might consciously or unconsciously influence the intent and the impact of such interactions?
 - What might you do if you notice yourself in one of these caste roles?
 - What might you do if you notice others in these caste roles?

7. After reading this chapter, reflect on whether you have any new insights into why Blacks may seek Black-only spaces, such as Black Lives of UU.

In Chapter 22, *The Stockholm Syndrome and the Survival of the Subordinate Caste*, we read on page 283:

Though the syndrome has no universally accepted definition or diagnosis, it is generally seen as a phenomenon of people bonding with those who abuse or hold them hostage. ... It is regarded as a survival mechanism in which people must become attuned to the people with power over them and learn to adjust themselves to their expectations to please them.

Wilkerson writes about the case of a dominate-caste judge who sentenced a black man to 10 days in jail for being late to jury duty, attributing the judge's action to "the one-way expectation of empathy from the powerless toward the empowered. On page 285 we read:

"This expectation feels fueled by a perverse need to see harmed people demonstrate nobility," the poet Hanif Abdurraqib wrote in *Pacific Standard*, "because that's how we can believe the myths that political suffering builds character, and that righteousness rather than power will inevitably triumph."

On page 290, we read:

Caste is more than a rank, it is a state of mind that holds everyone captive, the dominate imprisoned in an illusion of their own entitlement, the subordinate trapped in the purgatory of someone else's definition of who they are and who they should be.

Examples throughout this chapter show how certain behaviors and roles are expected based on caste. These expectations can hide truths, as in the case of the white women who adopted, abused, and eventually killed six black children and themselves. These expectations can prompt forgiveness in exchange for survival. These expectations can make people feel unworthy of taking up peoples' time.

8. Reflect on times in your own life when you have felt the need to be attuned to – and deferential toward – people with more power than you. How did this make you feel?
9. What were some cases over the past few years when harmed people demonstrated exceptional nobility? How did you feel about them?
10. What were some cases of the past few years when harmed people stood up and spoke out against the harm? How did you feel about them?
11. Reflect on what in your own life story may have influenced your feelings in these cases. Has reading and discussing Caste has given you any new insights regarding what you notice and how you feel?

In Chapter 23, *Shock Troops on the Borders of Hierarchy*, Wilkerson says (p. 292) "... historically, caste trumps class" and (p. 293) "... people who were lowest caste but who had managed somehow to rise above their station have been the shock troops on the front lines of hierarchy." She shares stories – most from recent history and many from her own life – of the indignities that upper-class Blacks have been subjected to.

12. Which, if any, of these stories surprised you?
13. If you had been present when any of these incidents took place, do you think you would have noticed the mistreatment as it took place?
14. Discuss different ways you might respond if you witness similar transgressions in the future. Discuss how some responses may maintain or reinforce traditional caste hierarchies. Discuss how some well-intentioned responses might have negative consequences.

In Chapter 24, *Cortisol, Telomeres, and the Lethality of Caste*, we learn about the effects of the caste hierarchy on a variety of health indicators.

15. Were you surprised by any of the findings presented in this chapter?
16. What are some of the changes – in ourselves and our institutions – that will need to occur to address the health disparities highlighted in this chapter?