

CRITICAL

CONVERSATIONS

Event transcript featuring **Isabel Wilkerson**

GRAPPLING WITH THE PERSISTENCE OF SYSTEMIC RACISM AND STEPS TO ADVANCE EQUITY

Hosted by New Roads School

in partnership with

Concord Academy, Echo Horizon School, Francis W. Parker School (Chicago),
Los Angeles Preschool Partnership (LAPP), Los Encinos School, SMMUSD,
Turning Point School, UCLA Lab School, Westside Neighborhood School

March 11th, 2021

Critical Conversations Speaker Series

Featuring Professor Isabel Wilkerson

TRANSCRIPT



Guest
Isabel Wilkerson



Moderator
Luthern Williams
Head of School
New Roads School



Moderator
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MARIO JOHONSON

Good evening friends. Welcome to the Critical Conversations Speaker Series. My name is Mario Johanson and I will serve as this evening's event moderator. I'd like to welcome our esteemed featured guests Ms Isabel Wilkerson, New Roads head of school, Luthern Williams. Our partner schools, Concord Academy, Echo Horizon School, Francis W. Parker School, Los Angeles Preschool Partnership, Los Encinos School, Santa-Monica Malibu Unified School District, Turning Point School, UCLA Lab School, Westside Neighborhood School, and last, but certainly not least New Roads Spanish language instructor and interpreter, Carmen Anders, who teaches Spanish six, race and class in Latin-America and beyond and Spanish seven, power and gender in Latin-America and beyond.

MARIO JOHONSON

Isabel Wilkerson, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in the National Humanities Medal, is the author of the critically acclaimed New York Times' Bestseller, *The Warmth of Other Suns* and *Caste, The Origins of Our Discontents*. "Wilkerson's work," *The words of the American prospect magazine is, "The missing puzzle piece of our country's history."* *The Warmth of Other Suns* won the National Book Critics Circle Award among other honors, and was named to more than 30 Best of the Year Lists, including the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, the New Yorker and the Washington Post. Time Magazine named it one of the "10 Best Non-Fiction Books of the decade"

The New York Times Magazine named *Warmth*, to his list of the best non-fiction books of all time. Her new book *Caste, The Origin* [inaudible 00:05:03] she has ever selected." Wilkerson won the Pulitzer Prize for her deeply humane narrative writing style while serving as Chicago Bureau Chief of the New York Times in 1994, making her the first black woman in the history of American journalism to win a Pulitzer Prize and the first African-American

to win for individual reporting in 2016. President Barack Obama awarded Wilkerson the National Humanities Award for, “Championing the stories of an unsung history.” As the historian Jill Lepore observed in the *New Yorker*, “What Wilkerson urges isn’t an argument at all. It’s compassion, hunch, and listen.” Please join me in welcoming Ms. Isabel Wilkerson.

ISABEL WILKERSON

Thank you so much for inviting me to be with you today. It’s such an honor to be joining so many schools. I didn’t realize how many schools were combined for this. I’m just overjoyed. I so wish that I could see people in person. And this is one of those reminders of all that we’ve sacrificed in that current era. I want to focus my remarks today on sort of where we are right now and how caste can help us to better understand the moment that we’re in. That’s the combination of many moments that have gotten us to this point, and I’m really looking forward to a conversation about this.

But I wanted to start with some of the phrases that we’ve heard a lot in the last few years and last few weeks and months, and we’ve heard people say time and time again, with all the things that we’ve seen I don’t recognize this country. I don’t recognize my country. This is not the America I know. This is not what America stands for. And whenever I hear that given the work that I do and the time that I spent diving into the history, it just tells me that not enough of us know our country’s true history, because if you know our countries true history, you would be jarred. You would be saddened. You would be stricken by what you see, but you wouldn’t be surprised by what you would see, because this is actually our country and how it has been for far longer than it has not.

And I’d like to... In the book, I have a lot of metaphors, anybody’s read the book knows that I have a lot of metaphors, and I’m going to throw another metaphor at you right now. And that has to do with, if you imagine, you have a patient with a long standing, imagining our country as being like a patient that has a long-standing condition, pre-existing condition like heart disease. So you know that the pre-existing condition is there, so you were not surprised when the person has a heart attack. You might be jarred, you are worried, you are anxious. There are many, many things you would experience, but you wouldn’t be surprised because the patient has a long-standing, pre-existing condition that without intervention would end up in a heart attack.

And so that’s how it is with our country, is that we should not be surprised and really few Americans, and all Americans should be as surprised, and that’s the reason why we need to understand the history all the more. This book has been out for about six months, a little over that and I do these events on Zoom. This is how we communicate now. And at one of the events someone said to me, “We know we’re in the midst of a global pandemic. We’re in the midst of a really tough election season. We have so much going on. And then in August you drop Caste on us.” And he said it in good tier, “He was being kind about it, just describing the situation.” And I said, “I did not drop Caste on anybody. I didn’t drop Caste on anyone.” Caste is here, whether we choose to recognize it or not, it is working in our lives, whether we’re aware of it or not.

And that was the reason why I decided to delve into it because I could perceive that it was here partly on the basis of the first book that I did, *The Warmth for Other Suns*, in which I was writing about and researching the experiences of six million African-Americans who fled the Jim Crow South seeking political asylum within the borders of their own country. So I was having to describe what was it that they were leaving? What was it that would propel six million black southerners to flee the land of their birth and to seek refuge in the rest of the country. And it turned out that what they were leaving was a world that was so restricted, so confined and actually so dangerous for any breach of the protocols that were in place and the laws that were in place.

That is actually against the law for a black person and a white person to merely play checkers together in Birmingham, you can go to jail if you were caught playing checkers with a person of a different race. It was a world in which it was so arcane and so specific, the things that you could and couldn't do that are in courtrooms throughout the South. There was actually a black Bible and an altogether separate white Bible to swear to tell the truth on in court. That means that one of the primary pillars of Caste, meaning pollution versus purity, purity of the dominant group against the presumably against the possible pollution of the subordinated group was so carefully policed that the same sacred object could not be touched by hands of different races.

The very word of God was segregated in that world of the Jim Crow South, and that was what I was describing to tell the story of *The Warmth of Other Suns*. And I came to use the word caste because it out that anthropologists who had gone to the Jim Crow South to study it and to live among the people, they were spending all this time there, they were doing field work there, and they emerged from their field work using the word caste, using the language of caste. And I know that's language that a lot of us are not accustomed to. It's something that we think of, other countries India in particular, but it's language that has been used off and on throughout our country's history. And now is the time that we can really learn from how that language can help us to see what we otherwise might not see.

Now, Dr. Martin Luther King came to this same recognition. He was, as we know, he had led the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He had risen to great fame actually as a result of his leadership. And then it was in 1959 that he made a historic trip to India. He'd always wanted to go to India, because India was the place where Mohandas K. Gandhi had been exercising his principle of non-violent protest. And that inspired Dr. King in his work, and so he'd always wanted to get to India. So he made this historic trip in the winter of 1959 and upon arrival, he was treated as a visiting dignitary because it turns out that people in India were watching very closely deliberation movement of African-Americans in this country.

Now he made a trip while he was there to the Southern part of India to visit a community that was populated by people who were from what was then known as the Untouchables, now known as Dalit, but he wanted to meet with the people there. So he made the trip and visited a school while he was there. And the principal of the school was very excited to greet him. And he gathered the students together, and he said, "Young people, I wish to introduce you to a fellow Untouchable from the United States of America." When Dr. King heard that language applied to him, he bristled at first, he was not happy with this language being applied to him.

He was a bit peeved to be seen by the people as an Untouchable. He didn't see himself that way. Of course, he had a PhD from Boston University. He was the leader of the liberation movement of African Americans in the United States. He didn't see himself in this way at all. In fact, when he was in India, he had a dinner with the prime minister. He was perceived as a visiting dignitary. So all of this was very surprising, in fact, shocking him, but then he thought about it. He thought about what was then 20 million black people in the United States, a good portion of them at that very moment were being restricted, prohibited from being able to participate in basic actions of citizens.

They prohibited from being able to vote, prohibited from being able to get access to public accommodations and their efforts at reaching equality, reaching for recognition rather for their citizenship that they had been presumably guaranteed back in the 19th century. Those efforts to be recognized as citizens were being met with tremendous hostility and in fact violence. And so he thought about that and he said to himself, I am an Untouchable. And every black person in the United States is an Untouchable too.

In that moment, Dr. King came to the recognition that the people who knew caste best, those people who were there in India watching what was going on in the United States and greeting him there, these were the people who knew caste best. And the people who knew caste best, recognize the caste system when they saw it, they recognized the United States had a system similar to their own or what they saw similar to their own. And more specifically, they recognized who was at the bottom, who had been assigned rather to the bottom of that caste system that existed and that they recognized in the United States. As I said, we think about caste, we don't think about our country.

And yet one way to make that connection is to recognize that a caste system, anywhere that it might arise can use any number of metrics to determine and to assign a rank and positioning to an individual in that caste system. Essentially, a caste system is an artificial, arbitrary, graded ranking of human value in a society. It is what determines one standing, respect, benefit of the doubt, access to resources or the denial of access to resources, assumptions of competence and intelligence, beauty and worthiness. All of the things that become the standard for that society are set by those who are in it and who position themselves on top, assumed dominance over the society and then set the standards for what we might consider the default setting for a human being.

And that essentially is what a caste system is. It's the artificial braided ranking of human value. Now, as I said, any number of metrics could be used to determine who is ranked where in a society, such things as religion, place of origin, language that a person speaks, ethnicity, any number of things could be used to determine the ranking or the metric that's used to determine who fits where in the hierarchy. And in our society, what the early colonists along the Chesapeake chose to use as the determining factor of one's rank in the society was what we now recognize and call the social construct known as race.

Race meaning, essentially what people look like, which was then assumed to be the indicator of one's lineage was used as the metric to determine who could own property and who could be property in setting up a system that was based on the economic, political and social structure of slavery, which was the founding institution upon which

our country was built. This was in place for before there was a United States of America. And it set in motion, the hierarchies that we live with to this very day, it is what determined who could do what in the society.

And it determined who would profit from the labor extracted from others and who could be reduced to a commodity and who could have total and absolute control over that commodity. Thus slavery became the foundation system. The foundation of a hierarchy built on greed and exploitation and was succeeded by Jim Crow, apartheid and cast a shadow over the country to this very day. We all remember in May of 2020, that we saw a man killed before our very eyes, George Floyd, no one to save him, no one to help him, his life taken from him. And people around the world saw this with our very own eyes. And what was the reason, he putatively was killed in that way.

What had he done that put him in that situation where he was killed before our very eyes? As it turned out that he had been accused of having presumably attempted to pass a counterfeit \$20 bill, for that his life was taken from him, no one to help him, no one to save him. And we all throughout the world witnessed that with without very eyes. And then just two months ago, on January 6th, 2021, we then saw a different scene. We saw a mob rampage through the Citadel of democracy itself. We saw a mob rampage through Statuary Hall and through the Rotunda of the United States Capitol.

We saw a mob rampage through the halls of the Capitol to take the belongings of the lawmakers. We saw the lawmakers reduced to barricading themselves, to protect themselves from the rampaging mob. We saw them attack police officers. We saw them attack police officers with our very eyes, and we know that their officers who died as a result of that insurrection on January 6th, but that day we also saw something else. We saw the people who had rampaged through the halls of the Capitol, confiscating the belongings of lawmakers and of the American people in the Capitol. And we saw those people walk out of the Capitol, down the Capitol steps with their lives, something that had not been afforded, George Floyd.

Because, not enough of us know our country's true history, too many people speak of slavery as a sad dark chapter in our country's history, when in fact it was the foundation of the United States of America. Slavery lasted for so long, it lasted for 246 years. That is 12 generations. How many greats do we have to add to the word grandparents to begin to try to capture how long slavery lasted in this country? Another way of looking at it is slavery lasted for so long, it was so foundational that it will not be until next year 2022, that the United States will have been a free and independent nation for as long as slavery lasted on this soil.

That is how long slavery lasted here. One other way of looking at it, is that slavery lasted for so long that no adult alive today will be arrive at the point at which African-Americans will have been free for as long as African-Americans were enslaved. That will not happen until the year 2111, a year we can't even imagine. It won't be until the year 2111, that African-Americans will have been free for as long as African-Americans were enslaved. And so that means that we have not addressed, much less reconcile what we are facing as a nation.

No one was held to account for those 246 years of enslavement. No one was held to account for the rupture of succession and civil war. Instead, there are monuments to these men, because we have not addressed much less reconciled history in this country. We saw rioters. We saw a Confederate flag in the United States Capitol, because

we have not reconciled this history. We saw a mob of rioter carrying the Confederate flag, delivering the Confederate flag farther than Robert E. Lee himself. That is what we have seen with our very eyes in this day and age, something that we will have to find a way to reconcile and explain to succeeding generations.

What we are witnessing 50 years after Dr. Martin Luther King, walked this earth are the consequences of this unaddressed history. We're witnessing the unheated voices of black and brown people, the marginalized people. Unheated voices of black women in particular, who have been sounding the alarm for decades. We might call such people the silence Cassandra's of our era who saw this come. We're witnessing the ongoing consequences of our racial caste system and its response to threats towards its existence, or more specifically, those who see dominance as their birthright, and also we'll often be desperate to protect it at all costs.

We saw the pictures of the people who were riding and rampaging through the halls of Congress. And we saw people climbing the walls to get into the Capitol, to assert what they perceive to be their birthright. But later there was a video that circulated that told a different story that is just essential to understanding our caste system. And that was a video that circulated after the capital had been cleared of the mob. And there we saw a crew of janitors who were brought in to clean up after the rampage. They labored in their uniforms, bent over with mops and brooms, and with masks over their faces.

They were to a person, all black. There was a white police officer there. He stood over them. He was the only one bare faced without a mask. I instantly saw the people assigned to the subordinated caste for 400 years, still consigned to their historic role of serving, cleaning up after those program to see themselves as dominance superior Supreme. Had the people who look like the janitors and this crew seeing working late into the night, deigned to burst through police barricades and to break into the United States Capitol. Well, we know it would've come to that. It's inconceivable. It is unthinkable. They would not have lived to tell. This is the enduring nature of hierarchy that exists in our current day that we can see with our very eyes.

The scenes of siege of our Nation's Capitol may have looked like another country, but it is ours. It may have looked like a different century, but it is our century. This may have looked like a long ago battle over justice and division ways, and presumably one back in another era, but it is our era. This is the country's karmic moment of truth. Will it follow the path of darkness and division, of hate and hierarchy that have driven it for centuries, or will it rise to what Dr. King has called the heights of the majestic and live up to its cream, become and defend true democracy with liberty and justice for every single one of us. What we have seen has made wrenchingly clear that Dr King's mission and those who walked with him have not been completed. It will be up to all of us, but particularly to those who are the prime beneficiaries of our country's 400 year old social order to make itself, not only for our communities, our children and our country, but for the species and for the planet itself. I look forward to our conversation and discussion. And thank you so much for having me.

MARIO JOHONSON

I'm just giving myself a moment to take all of that in as quick. It was certainly a lot, and it was incredible. Thank you so much for that. In recognition of our time limitation, I'm going to jump right into the heart of this, because I really am fascinated by this conversation that's about to ensue. This interview will be centered around three questions that correspond to three separate sections of Ms. Wilkerson's work. Let us begin with the first question, the Tentacles of Caste. Ms. Wilkerson, part four of *Caste* is entitled the Tentacles of Caste and focuses on the wide ranging socio-cultural influence of the dominant groups power over marginalized groups ranked by their placement in the caste system.

Chapter 15 speaks to, "The urgent necessity of a bottom rung." You referenced the state's effort to delay implementation of the court's ruling in the *Brown vs Board of Education* case. In that context, you discuss all the shape-shifting that occurred to maintain the social hierarchy, despite the court's intervention. The failure to implement *Brown* is what gave rise to the creation of new roads. Our question is, to what extent do you think that shape-shifting still occurs in education today? What does it look like?

That is such a central question, because education could be said to be the... It too, is the foundation for ultimate change in our society. We have to get on the same page about what has happened in our country, and it begins with education, it's foundational. And we know how important education is because that was the one thing black people, people of African descent in this country are the only group of people in the United States who were denied and prohibited by law from being able to learn, to read and write. That there were laws that would... It was made a crime to teach this one group, the subordinated group to be able to learn, to read and write.

That's how dangerous it was seeing, because how can you keep people in a fixed place if they can see past the restrictions. If they actually proved themselves to be once equal, that would be the evidence against the very foundation, that very justification for the caste system and for the hierarchy itself. And so it is within the structures of education that you can almost see the greatest resistance. And I just want to give an example of resistance that I think is always useful to think about. And that is Prince Edward County, Virginia, that speaking of *Brown* rather than to implement *Brown*, they chose to shut down the entire school system.

The entire school system was shut down for five years with everybody, essentially excluded from what had been the standard of education for five whole years. And what ended up happening was that the white students were put in these private schools, they created schools for them and then let the African Americans fend for themselves. So I say all that to say that if we fast forward to the current era, the things that I'm looking at that I find so disturbing is the... First of all, the disinvestment and under investment in schools, where the students are from subordinated groups. But then also once inside those groups, even when you're inside the schools, even when you have a diversity within the school, we know that black students are more likely to be the ones who are suspended.

They're more likely to be the ones who are more harshly punished. They're the ones who are being essentially being punished for being children, for being children they're being punished. And we recognize too that we've seen the videos. We've seen evidence of young people, children. Children being dragged by the security in those schools

of being harshly treated. We know that there's a system that you might consider a hierarchy and a caste system within the school systems themselves in which there's less of a latitude and understanding and recognition of what children need.

And so what I am saying is that the assumptions and dehumanization that applied to the entire group of African-Americans, any subordinated group gets attached to the children so that they're not even seen as children. And I don't know if this is getting exactly to your question, but I want to say that the continuing through line is the dehumanization and restrictions on a group of people merely because they are born to the subordinated caste. And that the idea of dehumanizing them, means that you don't even recognize children for who they are and what their needs are.

ISABEL WILKERSON

In other words, there was the recent video that showed a young girl who was tased by police officers rather than being helped as she needed to. I see this as the policing and restriction and dehumanization of young people in the subordinated group wherever they may be, such that from the school to prison pipeline, to the over-policing, both in the school and outside of the school mean that black children are subject to dangers that their white counterparts and other counterparts are not exposed to.

And I believe that this creates a world in which clearly it is harder for children subjected to these things to be able to learn and to thrive as they should be able to. And this is one of the ways that a caste system keeps the subordinated group in its place by starving it of the resources, over policing, over enforcing such that the children, even at the very earliest ages don't get a chance that others might have.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Well, I'm wondering, Mr. Wilkerson, I actually had the wonderful opportunity to speak to her for a few minutes and she's somebody you want to speak to forever. It's interesting because I think you gave us such an incredible view of their perspective on the history. And when I think about this on a very personal level, I think about my own mother who grew up in Louisiana in a segregated system and she went to a segregated school, separate and unequal. And one of her great dreams when she got to California was to make sure her children had access to a high quality education that would allow them to determine their own dreams.

So finally, my parents sort of got me into a private school and at this private school, there's one moment that sort of reminds that I think of all the time and it's... Being the only African-American in my AP calculus class and being in that class and feeling sensing that I didn't belong there and I didn't know that it was necessarily anyone saying anything to me or it was in my mind. And I remember having to go to my parents and say, I don't think I want to be in this class. And my dad's like, "Well, boy, you don't have a choice. You're going to be in this class." And I'm wondering if you cast some light on this in terms of this lens of helping us understand, because at that point I was

in an integrated school, a private school. And I guess I'm asking, to what extent do you think the caste system is still operating within that environment and can help us understand that moment that I experienced?

ISABEL WILKERSON

Oh, absolutely. It calls to mind this phrase that I actually do not like, but it's the phrase that comes up. I wish we could just abolish the phrase, but it does. It is part of what gets underneath. I think the subconscious of people assigned to the subordinated group and that's this term called imposter syndrome. In which, people born to the subordinated group are made to feel that they don't belong, that it is not their place. That it is not natural, this is not the assigned role. It gets underneath the sense of self esteem and confidence. And there are many studies that actually show that it's obviously has nothing to do with the DNA of a given black person, but it has to do with the circumstances in which a person is seeking to learn.

And then with the studies that they've done, they can take people who are not black and then insert these assumptions and stereotypes, flood them with stereotypes and assumptions to say that people like you don't do well in that. Or people like you are not good in science. And then they give them a test on that very thing. And of course they won't do well. And these are people who would otherwise do well, but they do worse when they're told that they will not do well. So imagine, I mean, what you're speaking about is what all of us born to the subordinated caste have had to deal with, which is these stereotypes assumptions and unconscious biases that can work their way into the classroom because they work their way into society at large.

And by the time a child is five or six years old, they've already been exposed to the messaging from serial commercials to, there is something today that I just saw about how some of these old Disney movies are being pulled because they're all these stereotypes of subliminal stereotypes, that they weren't subliminal. They were pretty obvious, but they work their way into the subconscious of children from the very earliest age. So by the time you get to school, you already even absorb the messaging of who is presumably superior, and who is presumably inferior, who is smart, and who's capable and to do well on a particular subject and who is less likely to.

And so all of that has worked its way into our society, and then of course, it shows up in the classroom. And it's one of, to me, one of the cruelest aspects of a caste system, because it tells people before they even have a chance to try that they don't belong in a particular place. Caste has to do with restrictions and boundaries as to who should be doing what, who should be where, if you think about the term cast without an E cast, like the apparatus which would put on an arm, a limb, because there's a broken bone to hold the bones in place, a cast.

When you think about the cast in a play where there's someone stage right, stage left in the foreground and in the background and that those people are supposed to stay in their places. They have lines to speak. They're supposed to say their lines in the foreground. You're saying different lines for the people who are in the background, someone in the background starts shouting the lines and someone in the front supposed to be saying the whole production is thrown off. And everybody knows that this person's not supposed to be the one saying that or doing this or being in that position. And so that's what we've all inherited. And that's why I think the idea of caste allows us to see how

this seeps into the subconscious, having less to do with even someone saying a racist thing to you. It's ever present, the assumptions and stereotypes and how we've this has gone into our bones.

MARIO JOHNSON

I'm going to transition to the next question, because that's a fascinating conversation. And I know when I saw Lutheran get ready to jump in, I said, I better get in there right now. So let me transition you to the next question. And you can pick up on the other side. So moving onto our second question, we now turn our attention to part five entitled, the Consequences of Caste, which focuses on the lived impacts of marginalized groups within a hierarchical caste system. Chapter 24, specifically addresses, "Cortisol, telomere, and the lethality of caste."

Ms. Wilkerson, can you discuss caste as a public health issue? That is one of the health impacts of a caste system on mental, emotional, physical health, and overall wellbeing in both the dominant and the marginalized groups. How do you think these impacts affect the academic and life outcomes of people of color?

ISABEL WILKERSON

Wow, that's a big question. I mean, that's a big question. Let me just say, first of all that at this very moment, as we know, we are living in a country that is the wealthiest country on the planet. We're living in a country that is in the forefront of technology and innovation in the world. And yet we are also living in a country that has the highest death rate from COVID in the world. We have more people in this country who have died from COVID-19 than in any other country in the world. That's irrespective of the population...

It's not the biggest, it's not the most populous country, and yet it still has the highest COVID death rate that to me, death numbers actually. And that means that, that says to us that, that is an example of how the entire country has suffered as a result of the disinvestment and lack of feeling of connection, a fellow feeling, goodwill, not having a stake in the wellbeing of one's fellow citizen. That's what a caste system does, it makes people feel that they have no interest, no stake, and whatever happens to someone else because they feel that they're fundamentally different on some cellular level, just totally different, almost a different species.

And that does damage to the entire society. And interestingly enough, when it comes to COVID cases, the country that has the... The United States has the highest number of COVID cases, as well by far, 28 million by far, and then the next highest rated COVID country with COVID cases is India. Literally, the blueprint forecast, it is the old world's oldest caste system. So you have a country that is deeply, deeply hierarchical is the United States in the ways that we don't often think of it having the highest number of deaths and the highest number of COVID cases.

And despite of its well, and then we have India, which is a much larger country with very high numbers, but they're number two in terms of COVID cases, even though they have far more people. But what ties them together from my perspective is deeply hierarchical, which means that people have very little in the way of vested interest in their fellow citizens. So I want to say overarching me, that's one way that as a country, I think we're harmed by it. When

it comes to people in the subordinated caste, I mean, I am haunted by a Nigerian man that I had the chance to meet, who was describing to me that here he was, he happened have been in his, I think he was maybe in his early '50s. And he said, "Here I am. I just came from the doctor." And he said, "I just have been told that I have high blood pressure. I have diabetes. I have the makings of heart disease." And my father who lived to be in his '90s back in Nigeria, never had any of those things. It doesn't run in the family. These are not things that are related to them, "Race, as we think of it." In other words, it's not that black people are more likely, genetically to have high blood pressure and diabetes, the various conditions that have been associated with black people, but it has to do with what this man said. He said, "Living all of these decades as a black man in the United States has made me sicker than my 90 year old father back home in Nigeria, who does not have to deal with the same challenges and obstacles that I have to deal with."

That was an astounding thing for me to hear. And then it turned out that there are many studies that have shown that there are health consequences to being in the system that tells you that you are in this fixed place. And that if you ever depart from that fixed role of where you're supposed to be, you will be in contention with the assumptions that the caste system has created for you. And that's where we have such experience, the phenomenon called weathering, in which for people who are exposed to continual restrictions and discriminations that keep them or present challenges and obstacles. As they seek to make their way through life, particularly if they are going beyond the expectations of their group. Then they are experiencing, what's called weathering, which is the shortening of the telomeres. The ends of the cells which are the basis for one's health overall, thus exposing people in the subordinated group who are having to constantly chafe against the restrictions and the boundaries that are set by the assumptions that society creates for us, that it ends up, actually endangering their lives by those shortened telomeres, the weathering that then puts them at greater risk for other elements like cancer and other diseases, so in auto-immune diseases and other diseases. So this is literally a matter of life and death beyond over policing, also affecting the health of each individual person.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

I'm curious about the... Thinking about how this may play into cognitive attention in terms of, we talk about the achievement gap. And to what extent do you think that caste can actually illuminate to some extent what's going on with this achievement gap and particularly for African-Americans?

ISABEL WILKERSON

Well, I think that it's a combination of things. Whenever you have something as massive as the chasm in almost every sphere in our society. One of the things, why I want to speak about caste as a way of my understanding it is because it takes away from the personal. The research that I've done, and the perspective that I take is one that this is not about some genetic defects in an entire group of people. This has to do with human responses to the inputs and the pressures that are placed upon them in a society that is far too often hostile to their dreams and their actual abilities.

And so, I would put all of these things together to say that it would be no surprise that there would be challenges in terms of attention, challenges in terms of being able to focus, challenges in terms of being able to even perform, because we've been told from the very beginning, as I said, from five or six square people have been able to... Human beings absorbed the messaging about what their place is at a very, very early age. So I view it as a continuum. I don't know if that answers your question.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

It does answer my question... we have a lot of schools out there, private schools and public schools. And a lot of them are frustrated because they're saying we're hiring diverse teachers. We are having these more equitable policies. And yet still we have students of color who are saying, I'm suffering in these places.

MARIO JOHONSON

So our final question revolves around part seven entitled Awakening, which speaks to the effects of social and racial hierarchy on our culture and politics, while also pointing forward to ways in which we might move beyond the artificial separation of human divisions toward hope for the recognition of our common humanity.

Ms. Wilkerson, what did you envision as the call to action both individually and institutionally when you wrote this book. Also, what steps do you believe are most effective in dismantling and mitigating the effects of the caste system? I think this is the area that Luthern was venturing into. I actually would love to hear what you have to say about education, because as I was saying, there's a lot of frustration about... We are diversifying, we're bringing in more diverse students, we're bringing in more diverse teachers. We're trying to be more equitable and still we have students like I graduated in 1986. And some of these students in 2020, who've written blackouts about their experience that has been very painful at these independent schools or they failed in silence. They felt not enough. And I could have written the same thing in 1986. And so what can you tell us about this? What hope can you give us about how we can move forward?

ISABEL WILKERSON

And eight seconds of laughter.

MARIO JOHONSON

Precisely.

ISABEL WILKERSON

I know. Let me go back to the history and why I believe that knowing that somehow disrupting all of these assumptions and stereotypes with actual facts of our history and of how we got to where we are as part of the answer to that. And let me put it this way. There's a study out of University of North Carolina that found that, young people, black and brown people do better and they fare better in school. Their performance improves when they know history, but not just History with a capital H actually when they know and understand and hear the stories about how people in their families survive.

In other words, when they are able to make a personal connection within their family of ways to survive, ways to thrive, ways to succeed, knowing their family's history and knowing not just the vague notion of people, a whole group of people like immigrant migration, but knowing what did our grandmother experience, what did they do? How did they get there? What did our grandfather do? How did they make it? In other words, knowing, and having a sense of groundedness in one's own family and in one's own route, which often people are not getting.

So it's my belief that students are arriving to the schools, first of all, getting a toxic immersion in the assumptions stereotypes, and programming that then dismantle or disrupt or destroy their sense of self. And then when they come into a system, a school system because the school system is part of the largest system that also by default carries those same assumptions because it's made up of people who have also programmed. And then when you combine that with unconscious biases, then you combine that with the normal everyday doubts of anybody who might be coming and saying, I don't know if I really want to take physics.

Do I really want to take physics? Do I really want to take physics? I mean, all the various things that any human being might experience, and it would be no surprise that people would have a challenging experiences when they go into a system that brings together all these people who've also been programmed. The goal of this is to say that no one escapes the programming that we all have been exposed to. We have all been exposed to the hierarchy. I might write this, but I've written this book that lays out for you. It's like an x-ray of a country, but we're all living it. We all are aware of these things, because it's beyond the videos, we move about in spaces where we can...

There's names for some of these things that didn't have names before microaggressions, whites explaining all the various words that are now used to describe the everyday gestures that can make a person feel other, that make a person feel marginalized that would be affecting anyone, but especially, the most vulnerable people in any group of any society, which will be children and young people. How can you not feel that sense of being somehow isolated when that is how the society is set up. The idea that there is an in-group and an out-group that no one even chose to be in, but everyone is almost, like I said, about that stage. Everyone is acting out a role on the stage.

And when you try to push against your assigned role, there will be consequences. There'll be pushed back. There may be penalties for even doing that. And so, what I am saying is, it's so important I think for us to set the record straight on our country's history on the whole. But the contributions of everybody in that society, we need to balance out the storyline. We need to recast the narrative of our country so that we have an accurate portrayal of how we got

to where we are, meaning the contributions of African Americans, and many other groups of indigenous people and of the new immigrants.

We need to tell the full story of our country. The thing about it is people often say, well, what's the problem of having a stereotype about this particular group out there? What's the problem. And people are too sensitive, but the fact of the matter is when you're in the dominant group, there's every range of possibility portrayed in the general media, general manifestation of how they can be. There's the hero, there's the sidekick, there's the comic, there's everything. But for a marginalized group, there are stereotypes assumptions that are designed. Remember these were designed to keep people in a fixed place until the civil rights movement, the majority of African Americans worked in those still predictable assigned roles that go all the way back to slavery.

Meaning the majority of people working as either domestic work, doing farm work, or when they went to the North in particular working the dirtiest jobs, which would be in some type of factories. Those are the kinds of things, not all, but a disproportionate number. We're still doing that. So we're only a few generations out from truly being able to be mainstreamed into our society. The idea of freedom and equality for African-Americans is still very, very new. We're talking, going back to the 1960s, anyone who knows someone was born before 1965, know someone was born before America was even a democracy. So this is all very, very new when it comes to that. So we're in the moment now of finally retelling an accurate portrayal of our society. If we had an accurate portrayal of our society, if our textbooks reflected who we actually are as a country, what each group has contributed to making this country what it is, then there would be improved respect for each group. So you could walk in with a sense of pride. The children of the subordinated group should be walking into any classroom with a sense of pride, a sense of belonging, because they are descended from people who actually had to find a way to survive the unimaginable, which is what we know, which is enslavement. Not to mention, even before that, the middle passage.

MARIO JOHNSON

Phenomenal.

ISABEL WILKERSON

I just wanted to say this in the middle passage. I have to say that I was just asked the other day, what is it that inspires me to do the work that I do? One thing that I think about constantly when I'm in the midst of doing this work, and sometimes the books that I write have things that are really difficult aspects of our country's history that human beings had to actually endure. It's unbelievable that people can endure what was hurled at an entire group of people, indigenous people in particular, and African-Americans in particular. Unbelievable that these two groups of people could survive what was thrown at them. Legally, none of this was viewed as legal. This was part of the country's jurisprudence.

MARIO JOHONSON

Phenomenal.

ISABEL WILKERSON

And he had to imagine what the people who survived the middle passage. I think personally about the ancestors, the unknown, unseen, unrecognized ancestors in my own lineage, who had to have crossed and made that unimaginable horror of crossing the Atlantic in the middle passage. I think about that on a regular basis, as an inspiration for what I do, because if they could survive that, then the entire group of people can survive almost anything. We should not have to, but we can. People who were descended from those who survived that should walk tall, should be recognized for the force contribution of building the country out of wilderness for 246 years. Followed by another 100 years of formal legal Jim Crow apartheid segregation in this country.

So I wish for the young people who are entering these spaces and still have bearing this tragic sense of burden and uncertainty and not belonging. I just wish I could wave a magic wand and have everyone think about what people survive. A lot of people call this say, well, I don't want to deal with struggle literature. I don't want to think about the struggle, but the thing is it's that struggle, that shows you the strength of our people. It isn't, I mean, if you read frame it and think about what the people have endured and what they've survived, and the people are still here.

After the end of the civil war, one of the things that some of the Confederates or former Confederates told themselves, don't worry they won't even survive. They have no food. They have no resources, no money. Of course, they hadn't been paid, never worked. They can't read, they're going to die off. I mean, the assumption was that the people who survived enslavement after the end of the civil war, we're then going to die off, that has not happened. That has not happened. And for all of these reasons, I wish there was a way that if we could gather the strength together to recognize the idea that this is a group of young people who has every reason to stand tall and can do what any group of people anywhere on the planet can do.

And I want to leave with one other thing and say that I actually follow on Twitter, this group of people who are black physicists. And so, they tweet and I actually am not active on Twitter, but I might on occasion check and I'll see, they're tweeting something about photons or whatever they're doing. I have no idea what they're saying. I mean, I can say, I'm not a STEM person. My father was, I'm not a STEM person. He wanted me very much to be, but I'm not. So when I look at it, I don't know what they're talking about. I have no idea what they're saying, but it pleases me to know that here we have black people who are physicists, many of them astrophysicist, nano physicists, whatever kind of physicists they are, and they can go and talk and say, and tweet these things. I have no idea what they're saying, but it pleases me to know that they're saying, because that shows that there's not anything that people in the subordinated group can't do. There's nothing that any group anywhere can't do. And I think that we all should recognize the beauty of that.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

I just wanted to say that you are magnificent. Thank you so much for all of the wisdom and the hope. It's really interesting. We had a student, an African-American young man who came to us, after middle school or during middle school and his graduation speech. He said that he realized that he could do anything he thinks he wanted when he saw that black people weren't learning out loud. And I thought how powerful that is. And the fact that you have said that one of the keys is the stories, is the history and how it is reframed and look at that history and find strength and inspiration in that history that was painful. As well as thinking about the fact that we've all been programmed in this caste system and we have to unprogrammed ourselves and that work is going to be hard. So-

ISABEL WILKERSON

I would say one other thing is that, it's obviously to the good of those who suffer as targets of the caste system, but it will free everyone because everyone needs to know the true history of what has happened and how we got to where we are. Everyone needs to know the true history of what each group has contributed to this country. We're not getting the full picture and therefore we don't know how to process people as we come across them because we don't know the full history. And if we knew the full history, I truly, truly believe that we should at least give it a chance because we have not given it a chance. But I truly believe that it could begin the hard work of recasting, how each of us is seeing what each of us can do with our God given talents.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

So are you seeing that as it's interesting that maybe we'd all be liberated?

ISABEL WILKERSON

Absolutely.

MARIO JOHONSON

Wow. Indeed, a phenomenal, phenomenal conversation, inspiring, insightful, engaging. Thank you so much, Ms. Wilkerson and Luthern Williams. This has been a truly special evening.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS

Thank you.

MARIO JOHONSON

We would like to invite you all to join New Roads and its partner schools, particularly Mirman school, who I missed during our opening. Please forgive me for that, Mirman. To a debrief of this dynamic discussion with Pulitzer Prize winning author, Mr. Isabel Wilkerson on her New York times Bestseller, Caste, The Origins of Our Discontents. This event will take place a week from today on March 18th, at 5:00 PM. Invitations will be sent out via email. And again, I would just like to say, we've had a host of speakers come through. I've been at the school for a very long time, so I've seen a host of speakers.

This is one of the most memorable exchanges, and I cannot believe the energy that's generated on a screen. I feel so invigorated and energized. It does show you, despite COVID the power of technology and its ability to bring us all together because of my whole body feels what took place in this space this evening. And so thank you so much for your presence and joining us this evening.

ISABEL WILKERSON

Thank you.

MARIO JOHONSON

Have a wonderful evening, everyone, and we will see you next week.

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