**Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent**

**Book Review by Margaret Magee OSF**

Maya Angelou was an American poet, civil rights activist and a woman of wisdom. As I began reading *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent*, the following words of Maya Angelou came to mind, “Forgive yourself for not knowing what you didn't know before you learned it.”

As I began reading Caste I realized that I was stepping into a world and the stories of people’s lives that were not written or recorded in the history books that I read or learned from in school. Typically, hearing the word “caste” conjures thoughts and images of India and other Asian countries. Certainly not part of our American culture.

A caste system is a hierarchical social structure that people are born into which identifies their standing within the culture. Caste distinctions are based on the differences of inherited rank or privilege, wealth, profession or race and has clear social constructs sanctioned by custom, law, or religion. The system of caste pre-determines what is acceptable and customary in social interactions and allows for the oppression and exclusion of those in the lower ranks by those of the higher caste.

Interestingly, some caste definitions that I found on websites included the following statement. America prides itself on not having a caste system, because people can “pull themselves up by their bootstraps,” and janitors can go to Harvard. After reading Caste this statement is an example of the lessons that I need to keep learning and that we, white, Caucasian, North Americans of European origin need to address if we ever hope to uncover and deal with the roots of systemic racism in our country.

According to Wilkerson, caste is the basis of every other “ism”, belief, doctrine or cause upheld by a particular group that is often oppressive and discriminatory toward others. Often these unspoken cultural norms relegate people to lower and subordinate groups, jobs and education.

Wilkerson writes about the unspoken caste system in America making clear comparisons to the caste system in India as well as the experience of Nazi Germany in its discrimination and annihilation, the genocide, of six million of Jewish men, women, and children, as well as gypsies and homosexuals in its death camps. The mentality of caste was embedded in our history of the U.S. economy built on slavery, indentured servitude and the Jim Crowe laws which determined who was worthy and how some were labeled as sub-human or of no value what-so-ever. Our American caste system has deep roots in the unjust and deplorable treatment of African Americans as well as groups, such as the Native Americans, Muslims, those of Asian descent and people of other sexual orientations to name a few.

Given the recent experiences of police brutality and protests by Black Lives Matter and other groups throughout the country, this look into the depths of American systemic racism is likely to make for an uncomfortable journey for many Americans who feel we have moved well beyond racial bias and prejudice in this country. Reading Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent will definitely not be light and comfortable experience for many people, however if you are concerned about racial justice and equity, especially in the United States, it is a book that people should read.

Remember the words of Maya Angelou, “Forgive yourself for not knowing what you didn't know before you learned it.” Reading Caste will challenge us to change and to work for racial justice so that we do not recreate our past sins and mistakes.