Restorative Moment – April Board Meeting

I chose this reading because it occurred to me while reading this particular text how important the work of Lanark County Community Justice really is. In providing a safe space, welcoming and listening to both the accused and the victim – our dedicated Facilitators often have the challenge of working within the unspoken rules of racial, religious and gender prejudices – to draw participants out into the discussion.

Caste – The Origins of Our Discontents by Isabel Wilderson

Page 273-275

In the unspoken rules of caste, the people in the dominant caste are expected to be first or in the superior station. Historically, their job is to correct, direct, discipline, and police the people in the lowest caste. They are to be ever vigilant to any rise or breach on the part of those beneath them.

I had born witness to this in the American caste system, but the more time I spent among Indians, the more these caste rules became apparent to me, predictive even, in my interactions with people from the world’s original caste system. I learned to recognize almost immediately the differences between dominant-caste Indians and Dalits, even without the starker physical cues of dominant and subordinated castes in America.

Indians wondered how I, as an outsider from a completely different culture, was able to distinguish them so quickly….

…Caste is, in a way, a performance, and I could detect the caste positions of people in a group but not necessarily a single Indian by himself or herself. “There is never caste,” the Dalit leader Ambedkar once said, ‘Only castes.”

And so, at gatherings of Indians of different castes, I could see that the upper-caste people took positions of authority, were forthright, at ease with being in charge, correcting and talking over the lower-caste people. It echoed a similar dynamic in the United States, an expectation that an upper-caste person must assert superiority of knowledge and intellect in all things, having been socialized to be first and to be central, a pressure to be right and the need to remind the lower-caste person, subtly or not, of their historic, cultural, spatial, and familial inferiority.

At a panel or seminar, they were often the ones leading the discussion or doing most of the talking. They tended to speak more formally, giving direction, heads held high. On the other hand, the Dalits, as if trained not to bring attention to themselves, sat in the shadows, on the periphery at a conference seminar, asking few questions, daring not, it seemed, to intrude upon an upper-caste domain or conversation even if the discussion was about them, which in fact it was.

Even in the rarefied space of a scholarly presentation, when an upper-caste person was correcting a lower-caste person, the Dalit listened and took their admonishment without questioning, head often down or nodding that, *yes, you are correct, I will go back now and do what you have said*…

…For most of American history, African-Americans were not permitted to sit on juries, for example, or to testify against a white person. Even in more recent times, accusation of racial discrimination often carry more weight if a dominant-caste person vouches for it.