What is caste? How is the concept of caste related to race? Listen to the episode America’s Caste System on NPR’s Throughline. This podcast is an interview with Isabel Wilkerson, former Chicago Bureau Chief of the New York Times and Pulitzer Prize winner, about her book Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents. As you listen to the podcast, use this guide created by Julie Johnson, who works in the Office of Teacher Education at UNI. The guide will help you process the information, engage in discussion with others, and apply the concepts to the Cedar Valley.

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The inability of American society to defuse its racial tensions, or even to make any progress toward that end, may be because we are focusing on the wrong level: we are fighting about the color (race) of American society’s house instead of inspecting the structure—the pillars—that holds up that house. Painting the house a different color isn’t going to repair the shaky framework (a caste system) that the house sits on. Caste, rather than race, gives us a better framework for understanding and healing the American society we live in today.

“Racism” is a loaded word that halts conversation before it even gets started. It’s connected to the emotions of hate, hostility, disliking, and prejudice. But the word ‘caste” takes away the emotion because it’s not about feelings. It’s about structure. It's about the invisible (but pervasive and flawed) social infrastructure that we have inherited. How would conversations change if we talked about caste systems—instead of race—in the Cedar Valley?

Caste is about power: which groups have it and which do not. It is about resources: which caste is seen as worthy of them and which are not, who gets to acquire and control them and who does not. It is about respect, authority, and assumptions of competence: who is accorded these and who is not. What are the Cedar Valley’s caste systems? Which one(s) has the power, and which one(s) does not? How do the castes affect the quality of life in the Cedar Valley?
Isabel Wilkerson says: “If you think about the cast in a play, everyone in the cast has a set and specific role to play. Everyone knows what their role is. They know their lines. And they go about the production with an understanding of who will be where.” She continues this analogy in her book Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents: “The costumes were handed out at birth and can never be removed. The costumes cue everyone in the cast to the roles each character is to play and to each character’s place on the stage” (39). But what if you feel you’ve been miscast? What if you see the leading role as a better fit for you instead of the one you’ve been assigned? What if the costume you’ve been handed does not fit? Do you have to follow the script that someone else wrote for you? Who has assigned the casting roles in the Cedar Valley?

The American caste system originally was founded with two tiers of hierarchy: Western Europeans made up the dominant caste, and blacks made up the subdominant one. Anyone who didn’t fit into these pre-made boxes had to figure out where they belonged, and in most cases that meant they had to learn how to be white. Where do the Cedar Valley’s immigrants fit in the caste system they find here? Do they choose to assimilate or to remain outside the area’s caste system?

Isabel Wilkerson states in the podcast: “When we use the same language long enough, we stop even hearing ourselves....Using language that we're not accustomed to but that still accurately portrays what our circumstances [are] maybe helps us to see things differently.” She reinforces this thought in Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents when she states: “To achieve a truly egalitarian world requires looking deeper than what we think we see” (70). She continues that there are eight pillars of caste in American society that require us to look deeper:

1. Divine Will and the Laws of Nature
2. Heritability
3. Endogamy and the Control of Marriage and Mating
4. Purity versus Pollution
5. Occupational Hierarchy: The Jatis and the Mudsill
6. Dehumanization and Stigma
7. Terror as Enforcement, Cruelty as a Means of Control
8. Inherent Superiority versus Inherent Inferiority

We should not be fooled into thinking that the American caste system has no impact on us. Isabel Wilkerson points out in Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents, “Modern-day caste protocols...are like the wind, powerful enough to knock you down but invisible as they go about their work” (212). The dominant caste sees as one of its roles the responsibility to police the subordinate caste—based upon what they look like—and to make sure members of the subordinate caste remain within their boundaries. We know this is true. What happens, though, to the conversation if we reframe this in terms of caste instead of race? Does it allow us to get to the foundation—the pillar—of the problem? How would looking at policing, whether by law enforcement or by civilians, as a function of caste rather than race change the conversation in the Cedar Valley?

So does Isabel Wilkerson leave us without any hope? No, but we have to acknowledge that an inherited toxic caste system is at the root of our social discontent. We need to understand that the assignment of “race” is arbitrary: “race as we have come to know it is not real. It is a fiction told by modern humans for so long that it has come to be seen as a sacred truth” (66).
She admonishes us, “A caste system persists in part because we, each and every one of us, allow it to exist....We can be born to the dominant caste but choose not to dominate. We can be born to a subordinated caste but resist the box others force upon us” (380). “None of us chose the circumstances of our birth. We had nothing to do with having been born into privilege or under stigma. We have everything to do with what we do with our God-given talents and how we treat others in our species from this day forward” (387).

So change is up to us. It’s up to us how we look at the problems in the Cedar Valley: as ones based in a structural (systemic) caste system, that affect all of us, or as racial color that affects only some of us. What will you choose? What will the Cedar Valley, as a community, choose?