SECTION THREE:
RACIAL INDIFFERENCE AND
THE UNDERCASTE

(Chapters Four and Five)

Criminals, it turns out, are the one social group in America we have permission to hate... Like the "coloreds" in the years following emancipation, criminals today are deemed a characterless and purposeless people, deserving of our collective scorn and contempt. When we say someone was "treated like a criminal," what we mean to say is that he or she was treated as less than human, like a shameful creature. Hundreds of years ago, our nation put those who were considered less than human in shackles; less than one hundred years ago, we relegated them to the other side of town; today we put them in cages. Once released, they find that a heavy and cruel hand has been laid upon them.

(The New Jim Crow, p. 141).

The system of mass incarceration has birthed a vast new undercaste—a permanent second-class status occupied by millions. In this section, we will explore the way
that we as human beings find it disturbingly easy to treat others as disposable or unworthy of care and concern once they are labeled blameworthy or inferior in some fundamental respect. Once people are labeled in a way that makes them seem less like "us," a predictable set of beliefs, attitudes, policies, and practices begins to emerge.

These chapters of *The New Jim Crow* illustrate that overt racial hostility is not the most insidious attribute of this process of otherization. Racial indifference, the book contends, is the much more powerful foe facing us down. The immoral legal systems developed to govern those viewed as "less than" in our society only exist and endure because of the extreme racial indifference in our society. The War on Drugs and the system of mass incarceration not only reflect our collective racial anxieties and our tendency to treat the "other" as unworthy and disposable, they reflect a deep, very basic lack of care and attention. The absence of such care and attention makes awareness and change impossible.

Martin Luther King Jr. and his co-workers were obviously all too well acquainted with patterns of otherization and the insidious power of racial indifference. King's frustration with the "lukewarm acceptance" of "the white moderate" of his time bears this out with force:

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens' Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly
says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection. (From "Letter from Birmingham Jail," 1963).

Black shame and complicity play a significant role in this process as well. As explained in these chapters, fear, self-hatred, and resignation lead many to remain silent about their suffering and to tolerate the severe injustice leveled at those consigned to our nation's undercaste. Such silence not only shores up the racial indifference in our society, it deadens the spirit of those trapped by it. As Dr. King once put it, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

King and his co-workers risked their lives to defeat the lie that some lives are worth more than others. Their struggle was rooted in the reclamation and assertion of personal dignity—the inestimable value of every human life, even the lives of our oppressors. Their movement was not merely a political or social struggle for civil rights; its core values were deeply moral and spiritual, urging us to move beyond blame, cruelty, self-interest, and division. We were called upon, and continue to be called upon, to choose the road less traveled—a path of forgiveness, compassion, service, and oneness.
DISCUSSION TOPICS AND QUESTIONS:

1. Dehumanization
   Re-read the quotation from chapter four at the beginning of this section. What happens when we begin to view people as less than human, as shameful or characterless? Are there parallels to the treatment of those thought to be “illegal aliens”? Many of the same human rights—such as access to education, food, and work—are denied to people who have committed the “crime” of entering the country without proper documentation. What are the parallels between the “get tough” movement aimed at immigrants and the “get tough” laws aimed at African Americans?

2. Human Rights
   Laws that authorize discrimination in employment, housing, education, and public benefits make it difficult, if not impossible, for people to find work in the legal economy, and greatly increase the likelihood that they will be arrested again. But are any of these laws necessary? Do you agree with Dr. King that everyone has basic human rights to work, food, education, and shelter? Should employers and housing officials ever have the right to discriminate against people with criminal records? Under some circumstances? In certain professions? For how long? Are community safety, human dignity, and racial justice advanced or undermined by the positions you take on these questions?