SECTION FOUR:
THE MOVEMENT

(Chapter Six)

If Martin Luther King Jr. is right that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice, a new movement will arise; and if civil rights organizations fail to keep up with the times, they will be pushed to the side as another generation of advocates comes to the fore. Hopefully the new generation will be led by those who know best the brutality of the new caste system—a group with greater vision, courage, and determination than the old guard can muster, trapped as they may be in an outdated paradigm. This new generation of activists should not disrespect their elders or disparage their contributions or achievements; to the contrary, they should bow their heads in respect, for their forerunners have expended untold hours and made great sacrifices in an elusive quest for justice. But once respects have been paid, they should march right past them, emboldened, as King once said, by the fierce urgency of now.

(The New Jim Crow, p. 260).
Keeping company with the final chapter of *The New Jim Crow*, this section is devoted to the question of where we go from here. Michelle Alexander argues that we, as a nation, have reached a fork in the road. Likewise, here at the end of our journey with her book, we find ourselves at a critical point of decision. What is required of us at this moment in history, a time when millions are cycling in and out of our nation’s prisons and jails—trapped in a parallel social universe in which discrimination is perfectly legal? How do we show care and concern for the children who are born into communities where the majority of men and growing numbers of women can expect to spend time behind bars? What must we do, now that we know that the usual justifications do not hold water, and that a human rights nightmare is occurring on our watch?

*The New Jim Crow* begins and ends with the assertion that nothing short of a major social movement holds any hope of ending mass incarceration in the United States. If we were to return to the rates of incarceration we had in the 1970s—before the drug war and get tough movement gained steam—we would have to release four out of five people who are in prison today. More than a million people employed by the criminal justice system would lose their jobs. Private prison companies listed on the New York Stock Exchange would be forced to watch their profits vanish. This system has become so deeply rooted in our political, social, and economic structure that mere “tinkering with the machine” has no hope of bringing it down. While piecemeal policy reform efforts and colorblind cost-benefit approaches may seem pragmatic in the short run, they leave intact the racial attitudes, stereotypes, and anxieties that gave rise to the system in the first place. As long as
poor people of color are viewed as largely disposable, with the primary limiting principle being how much it costs to throw them away, caste-like systems will be a recurring, if not permanent, feature of American life.

Martin Luther King Jr. knew what it felt like to face what seemed to be an impassable barrier. And in such situations he understood all too well the tension between what appears politically feasible and what is morally right and necessary. As he observed:

Cowardice asks the question, "Is it safe?" Expediency asks the question, "Is it politic?" And Vanity comes along and asks the question, "Is it popular?" But Conscience asks the question, "Is it right?" And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must do it because Conscience tells him it is right. (From "A Proper Sense of Priorities," February 6, 1968).

In the face of mass incarceration and in light of *The New Jim Crow*'s call to action, what do we hear the voice of Conscience saying to us now, at this time, in this place?

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**DISCUSSION TOPICS AND QUESTIONS:**
1. *Reform or Transform?*

In chapter six, Alexander argues that "tinkering with the machine" will not be enough to end the cycle of caste in the United States. On page 259, arguing for what Dr. King described as a "radical restructuring of