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### The warmth of other suns: the epic story of America's great migration

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## BOOK REVIEW

**The warmth of other suns: the epic story of America's great migration**, by Isabel Wilkerson, New York, Random House, 2010, 640 pp., \$23.19 (hardback), \$13.24 (paperback), ISBN 978-0679444329

Have you ever looked at a situation and thought, there must be a better way? Is there injustice that compels you to act? These are corollaries to what Pulitzer Prize winning author Isabel Wilkerson describes as seeking *The Warmth of Other Suns*.

This compelling narrative non-fiction book provides an account of a great migration – the story of black America leaving the south from the 1920s through the 1970s, and seeking new opportunities in cities of the north. This historic event had a tremendous impact on community change and development. As we think about community development professionals' outreach and education today (particularly in urban areas), we must consider this history. But to consider it, we must first truly know it, and not simply memorize facts from history books. Wilkerson offers that chance through this book.

*The Warmth of Other Suns* reads like fiction; however, it is a true account filled with disturbing facts of what life was like for many African-Americans during one of the worst periods of their history. Through Wilkerson's three protagonists, George, Robert, and Ida Mae, you begin to understand what history actually means to real people and their families. Wilkerson interviewed more than 1200 people and invested nearly 10 years in the manuscript. This book adds depth to our understanding of who we are as a nation, and how we came to be. It completes an untold story in American history. And it must be considered as we go about our community development work today.

Though impossible to summarize, one passage does provide a snapshot from which we might imagine the fullness of Wilkerson's thesis:

Perhaps the most significant measure of the Great Migration was the act of leaving itself, regardless of the individual outcome. Despite the private disappointments and triumphs of any individual migrant, the Migration, in some ways, was its own point. The achievement was in making the decision to be free and acting on that decision, wherever that journey led them. (p. 535)

One could argue that we are all in need of "making a decision to be free." We see neighborhoods that need freedom from \_\_\_\_\_. (Fill in the blank: crime, isolation, gentrification, food poverty, housing devaluation, etc.) We see government that needs freedom from red tape. We see schools that need freedom from endless testing. And the list goes on. So what steps might we take? What decisions might we make to help free our partner communities? How might we jointly discover – concurrently construct – a greater understanding of what can be a movement toward positive action? This book can inspire a step in that journey.

For community development practitioners, this book will change your thinking about the communities with which you work. You will gain a deeper respect for people and

their stories. This book will compel you to dig deeper, to ask more questions, to be more inclusive of the varied voices and histories and personalities that are a community.

Wilkerson offers a treatise on *leaving* that is metaphoric for community development workers. Perhaps reassessing the traditional approach to clientele could help us *leave* some long-standing programs – the sacred cows – and give consideration to new ideas that are more inclusive in our culturally diverse society. This might help readers better identify and understand change that is occurring in their jobs, communities, clients, and their own lives. Thus, growth can result from gaining an understanding of differences by learning histories of others, leading to inspired action in communities worldwide.

In what may be an extraordinary coincidence or perhaps a divine appointment, I read much of this book while on vacation with family in southern Florida. I poured over several hundred pages, scribbling notes between tears. As we drove north toward home, I watched the orange, grapefruit, and tangerine orchards, their perfectly spaced, measured, manicured rows, brimming with fruit awaiting harvest – a harvest that I now saw in a new light having read accounts of how those orchards were developed. We crossed the border into Georgia, and I envisioned the mobs chasing black sharecroppers – vigilante forces seeking a perversion of justice for crimes that didn't exist. I looked over the map and made mental notes of things such as the massive Okefenokee Swamp, where secrets and painful memories had been indelibly tattooed in the minds of black Americans who lived there and in a thousand places like it. I looked at the Interstate Highway system and focused on the two-lane roads to California that would carry the lucky ones away. I felt as if I was living Wilkerson's story as we left the south behind and drove north.

At truckstops and hamburger joints, I looked at the faces of black Americans. I watched teen girls texting, laughing, fixing each other's hair as they waited, along with my family, for a table. I watched mothers and grandmothers attending young children. I watched and I smiled and nodded and looked into their eyes to say, "Hello." I hoped the genuineness of my greeting was felt. But I simultaneously felt shame. I wanted to apologize for 300 years of slavery, oppression, cultural hegemony, and structural exclusions that had been carried out by people whose ancestry I shared. I silently prayed for God to forgive us, and that we would never repeat this history.

The actions of the people in this book were both universal and distinctly American. They did what humans have done for centuries when life became untenable ... what the pilgrims did ... what the European Jews did. What binds these stories together was the back-against-the-wall, reluctant yet hopeful search for something better. (p. 14)

As you read this book, I hope you too will be moved to action in your community development work in "a hopeful search to create something better" in our world.

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