

Building a bigger table to repair systems that perpetuate injustices

By Laura D. Hill
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Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Isabel Wilkerson gave the keynote address at William & Mary's Women's Weekend, which was held Sept. 16-18. (Skip Rowland/William & Mary) (Skip Rowland/Skip Rowland)

Recently I attended William & Mary's Women's Weekend, where more than 300 alumni and friends gathered to celebrate, support and empower women.

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Isabel Wilkerson gave a powerful keynote address that focused on our responsibility to repair broken social systems that are based upon centuries-old racial hierarchies, which determined who had access to community resources and whether people were valued or devalued.

In her New York Times-bestselling book, “Caste: The Origins of our Discontent,” Wilkerson chronicled hierarchy systems based on race, ethnicity or religion that were designed to create stratified societies where everyone was assigned a “place” and people were restricted from moving beyond a predetermined station in life.



In 17th-century Virginia, this ideology was used to position Europeans and their descendants as superior, while indigenous and people of African ancestry were viewed as subordinate. Four hundred years later, this flawed way of thinking is still impacting our lives.

Wilkerson illustrated this point by sharing a story about her father, who graduated from Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) and served as a distinguished Tuskegee Airman during World War II. After the war, he and his fellow airmen were denied opportunities to work as pilots. According to America's racial hierarchy system, Black men could not be pilots because they lacked the necessary intelligence, leadership or coordination.

Another glaring example of a racial hierarchy system existed in the National Football League. Growing up in the 1970s, my Sunday afternoon ritual was watching football games with my older brothers. I often found myself wondering why there were no Black NFL quarterbacks. I would later learn that it was due to the misguided belief that Black athletes lacked intellectual and leadership qualities to succeed as quarterbacks. Sound familiar?

The first time I saw a Black NFL quarterback was in 1984 when the Houston Oilers signed Warren Moon. He went on to become a nine-time Pro Bowler and was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2006. By 2017 all 32 NFL teams had started a Black quarterback. In 2020, NFL history was made when 10 of the 32 NFL starting quarterbacks were Black. Today, the highest paid player in the NFL is Patrick Mahomes, a Black quarterback who has led his team to four AFC championships and a Super Bowl victory in 2020.

Hierarchies to keep people in their "place" can also be based upon gender. The story of women at William & Mary is a fitting example. For its first 225 years William & Mary was an all-male school. For centuries American women were viewed as second class citizens and denied the right to vote. But in 1918, amidst financial struggles, the women's suffrage movement and the global Spanish flu pandemic, William & Mary opened its doors to women. Today William & Mary has its first woman president, Katherine Rowe, and 58% of the undergraduate student population are women.

While we can not change what has happened in the past, we can analyze and repair the systems that continue to perpetuate injustices. Wilkerson

compared this to taking responsibility for repairing an old house. “We may not have built the house, but when the basement is flooded with water, we have to fix what’s broken.”

For communities nationwide, “fixing what’s broken” has led to establishing truth and reconciliation committees to uncover and address their racial histories and to make amends. In 2021, Williamsburg established its first-ever Truth and Reconciliation Committee, which I am honored to serve on.

When we come together to create more truthful and just communities, we all win!

Laura D. Hill is the founder and director of Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle, a program of the Virginia Racial Healing Institute. Learn more about her work at [Comingtothetable-historictriangle.org](https://comingtothetable-historictriangle.org).