

Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father:* A Long Way to Myself

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In Chapter Two of his memoir *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995), Barack Obama tells the reader about his years growing up in Indonesia between the ages of six and ten. His American mother, a white woman from Kansas, divorced his biological father, a black man from Kenya, and remarried Lolo, an Indonesian man. Obama and his mother move from Hawaii to Indonesia to join Lolo in 1967.

At age nine, in the library in Djakarta, Obama has his first experience with racism, which he's not able to understand at the time because he's too young and he's afraid to ask his mother. He fears her answer might be too frightening and prefers to bury his head in the sand like an ostrich. Over time his understanding of racism changes because of the significant role of his mother. She does not want her young son to follow the example of Lolo who decides not to fight against injustice in Indonesia. She wants Obama instead to look to the example of his biological father because of his high principles. She encourages Obama to embrace his father's legacy and black people generally. In his adult life Obama understands that racism is not some scary thing one should carry as a "hidden enemy" throughout one's whole life. Only fighting against it can solve this terrible problem to make the world safe for our children.

Obama, as an adult, writes about his experience at age nine of discovering a photograph in *Life* magazine:

Eventually I came across a photograph of an older man in dark glasses and a raincoat walking down an empty road. I couldn't guess what this picture was about; there seemed nothing unusual about the subject. On the next page was another photograph, this one a close-up of the same man's hands. They had a strange, unnatural pallor, as if blood had been drawn from the flesh. Turning back to the first picture, I now saw that the man's crinkly hair, his heavy lips and broad, fleshy nose, all had this same uneven, ghostly hue. (29-30)

Obama is confused, so he decides to read the photograph's caption. He writes that he is shocked by the explanation. For the first time he confronts a very disturbing

image of discrimination based on the color of one's skin. Obama can't comprehend why this man seeks medical treatment in response to advertisements that promised happiness as a white person. Obama uses the words "ghostly hue" on purpose to describe the man's tragedy and to catch the reader's attention. As a child growing up in a good, loving family in Hawaii, in the world of paradise, as well as in Indonesia, Obama wants some explanation or assurance, and only his mother can ease his fear and trouble. Obama doesn't ask his mother about the disturbing photograph, however, because he is afraid that her answer can't help him understand his newborn fear.

Despite his refusal to ask his mother any questions, she was ready to help him. Obama points out the significant role of his mother in shaping his personality and character. He writes how she warned him about a tough and hostile world and how she saved his self-esteem from childhood's doubts. Obama reveals his mother's confidence in a faith which shapes thoughtful people's destiny. Obama compares two different worldviews: that of his biological father and that of his stepfather. He tries to understand the position of his stepfather who doesn't seem to have any options to fight against power and injustice upon returning to Indonesia in the mid 1960s. Obama recalls his mother's conversation with Lolo's cousin regarding his stepfather's return to Indonesia and his ordeal with the totalitarian government he discovered there. Obama writes:

Power had taken Lolo and yanked him back into line just when he thought he'd escaped, making him feel its weight, letting him know that his life wasn't his own. That's how things were; you couldn't change it, you could just live by the rules, so simple once you learned them. And so Lolo had made his peace with power, learned the wisdom of forgetting; just as his brother-in-law had done, making millions as a high official in the national oil company. (45-46)

Obama gives details of the cruel, harsh power which crushed and humiliated Lolo's dignity and soul, made him feel petty, and pushed him to accept the government's demands. Obama tries to understand Lolo's arrangement and his choice to make peace with, and even serve, power.

But thanks to his mother, Obama knows the opposite views, those of his biological father. Obama remembers his mother's words about the principles of his father and her decision regarding Obama's future: he should follow his father's footsteps. Obama writes about his mother's approach regarding his biological father's beliefs that promise, in her view, a "higher form of power":

She had only one ally in all this, and that was the distant authority of my father. Increasingly, she would remind me of his story, how he had grown up poor, in a poor country, in a poor continent, how his life had been hard, as hard as anything that Lolo might have known. He hadn't cut corners, though, or played all the

angles. He was diligent and honest, no matter what it cost him.
(50)

Obama praises his mother's vision of the right path in life. She wants him to be proud of African-Americans: Dr. King and Mahalia Jackson, Thurgood Marshall and Sidney Poitier, Fannie Lou Hamer and Lena Horne (50-51). Obama learns this lesson well and becomes a person who knows his heritage and destiny and who carries "glorious burdens" (51) with style.

At the end of the chapter, Obama returns to the memory of the disturbing photograph. Obama discovers a different world back in America where there are some boundaries which can't be crossed because one doesn't look like a particular neighbor, or because one has a different color of skin. Obama learns the tales of his ancestors' humiliation at the hands of an employer or a cop (51). Obama, as an adult, writes on his experience:

I know that seeing that article was violent for me, an ambush attack. My mother had warned me about bigots—they were ignorant, uneducated people one should avoid But that one photograph had told me something else: that there was a hidden enemy out there, one that could reach me without anyone's knowledge, not even my own. When I got home that night from the embassy library, I went into the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror with all my senses and limbs seemingly intact, looking as I had always looked, and wondered if something was wrong with me. The alternative seemed no less frightening—that the adults around me lived in the midst of madness. (51-52)

Obama tries to find answers by looking in the mirror, but the mirror can't help him because there is nothing wrong with the way he looks. What he is trying to find is invisible. The "hidden enemy" he refers to is racism. It is hidden because no one can reach it, or stop it, or touch it. Racism is inside our minds, and hurts our souls; it corrupts lives, communities, cultures and history. Obama talks about the power of racism: "In America, it had generally remained hidden from view until you dug beneath the surface of things. . . . But here [in Indonesia] power was undisguised, indiscriminate, naked, always fresh in the memory" (45). Young Obama can't comprehend racism at first, and his vision, in his own words, has been "permanently altered" (52) by discovering the photograph.

While reading this chapter I realized that I have had a shocking and frightening experience similar to the one Obama had. I recall one day back in my childhood when I was six years old. I was playing with several children in the backyard of our residential building. One boy approached us, looked intently at me and said: "Go away, you are a kike and we don't want to play with you." I was devastated and brokenhearted. I went home and asked my mother about this ordeal. My dear mother started to cry and said nothing to me. At that exact point I understood that there was something terrible, unspeakable in the adult world. Anti-

Semitism was a “hidden enemy” for me. Like black people in America, Jewish people in the USSR confronted anti-Semitism on all levels of their lives. My parents continued to keep their silence and never talked to me about anti-Semitism until a terrible incident happened. When I was nine years old I was invited to my girlfriend’s birthday and there I heard an awful conversation between her parents about Jews. They said terrible things about Jews and I couldn’t comprehend how badly people thought about us: me, my lovely parents, my beautiful grandparents. I left the party in tears and my parents, for the first time, talked to me about anti-Semitism in their lives, in the lives of living grandparents, and the grandparents and other relatives who were murdered during World War II. My family needed to hide our celebrations of Jewish holidays from our neighbors. My parents and grandparents spoke Yiddish in whispers and never taught me this language. From a young age I knew exactly what my options were when enrolling in particular colleges or applying for particular jobs. Jewish people were barred from becoming high level managers, commanders in the Army, and leaders in local and national government. It was dangerous to say anything good about Israel because the USSR had cut diplomatic relations with Israel. Jews who raised their voices in support of Israel could lose their job or even go to prison. But I understood a very important idea: as a person with different roots, culture and religion, I needed to deal with existing circumstances and try to sustain and keep my identity and heritage.

The same idea I find in Obama’s book. Obama’s book is interesting reading because it blends memoir and history. This memoir certainly gives us a precise look into the unique combination of circumstances, backgrounds, places and cultures that shaped Obama. Obama’s writing style gives us an opportunity to feel his intelligence and grace. I have enjoyed reading this memoir and realize that Obama defines the face of modern America and proves the basic principle of this country: out of many, one. This is a book for people of all races, political views and beliefs.

Reference

Obama, Barack. *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004.

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