

“American Dreams and Dreaming America:

Barack Obama’s Search for Self”

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you for your generous introduction, Ms. Robb. It is a privilege and an honor to be invited here to speak. I wish to express my appreciation to all those who worked to make my visit possible. To all of you who braved the uncertainty of our weather, thank you as well. I must also acknowledge Mr. Roy Bird of the Kansas Center for the Book for organizing this state-wide initiative and for choosing *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, by Barack Obama, for this series.

We would be remiss if we didn’t remind everyone that this is Black History Month. Had its founder, Dr. Carter G. Woodson, lived to witness recent historical events, he certainly would have been proudest of the election of Barack Obama as the 44th president of these United States. In this magnificent story of President Obama’s life, we have simply a marvelous display of autobiographical writing. It has the feel of a friend unburdening himself in the intimacy of a quiet bar over a glass of wine or perhaps a cup of coffee at an equally quiet restaurant. Barack

Obama invites us to enjoy, almost confidentially, the unfolding of a man's quest for personal and racial identity. In fact, the kind of intimacy I feel this book encourages simply compels us to call him Barack. Please know that I **absolutely intend no disrespect** in dropping the formality of Mr. President. It is a well-deserved title!! But in sharing the details of *his* odyssey so personally, he provides *us* an opportunity to see something of ourselves in the story he reveals, if we listen and read carefully.

So, for today, let's put our politics on the shelf. This is not about being a Democrat, a Republican, or an Independent. Today, we're here to examine an artful representation of a man's life. That means putting aside for another time all discussions of the stimulus package, health care reform, Wall Street-Main Street bailouts, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and focus our attention on how Barack Obama presents his life story. In the few minutes I have, I'd like to discuss this story using the subject "American Dreams and Dreaming America: Barack Obama's Pursuit of Self."

TEXT

The edition of *Dreams from My Father* that most of us have read is actually the *revised* edition of this marvelously crafted life history. It was revised and reissued in time for his campaign for the junior U.S. Senator's seat to Congress

from the state of Illinois in 2004. However, it first appeared in 1995, after a few publishers courted Barack for being the first African American elected president of the *Harvard Law Review*. This very prestigious position piqued their interest because they felt his story was perhaps “an optimistic sign from the racial front---a morsel of proof that, after all, some progress has been made” (xiii). Supported with an advance on his royalties, he spent the year after law school organizing and writing what he intended to be an expose about the limits of civil rights law in bringing about equality and other such issues that would explore the shaping impact of race on the experiences of Americans and the resulting shifting modes of identity. Much to his surprise, the narrative that came from his pen was a “record of a personal, interior journey---a boy’s search for his father, and through that search a workable meaning for his life as a black American” (xvi). The result, he discovered, was an autobiography.

As a researcher interested in life history and how it is written, I should pause here to say that Barack’s stated purpose wonderfully defines the concept of autobiography. It is generally accepted that autobiography is rooted in three interrelated ideas. First, it has a creative or imaginative engagement with the past. Second, that as writers engage that past, they do more than *remember* previous events; they *discover* the significance of that past. In other words, they do more than recollect those events; they come to see their importance for the shaping

influence on their lives. Finally, in writing down those events, certain interconnections emerge among them, revealing a theme or an organizing principle of their life. This theme, in other words, arises from previously unrealized insights into the interconnections of these events. What is revealed often has the feel of a confession.

By focusing his writing on the father he barely knew, the book became a meditation on his absent parent. It required him to piece together the fragments of memory into a meaningful understanding and interpretation of his father, much the way novelist Toni Morrison did when she wrote her play, *Dreaming Emmett* (1986). Morrison's research had turned up many versions and contradictions of the story about Emmett Till, the fourteen year old boy who was brutally lynched in Mississippi in 1955 for allegedly whistling at a white woman. To bring some coherence to the stories of his tragic death, Morrison stitched together the various memories and recollections in an effort to preserve his life and legacy and his role in inciting the modern day civil rights movement. Thus when I refer to "dreaming" in my title, I'm suggesting the strategy that Barack used to explore the depths of his own memory and that of his own immediate and extended family members in an effort to make sense of his own feelings. To know himself and how he became the person he ultimately became, he had to explore his past. This act brought him to an understanding expressed by novelist William Faulkner: that "the past is never

dead and buried---it isn't even past" (x). For Barack, then, this pursuit was first of all what he calls an "interior, intimate effort" (xi) to understand himself. But the self he sought to understand is only part of this effort to attain self-knowledge. The other, larger, part was an effort to see how his personal struggle, as he said, "has converged with a broader public debate . . . one that will shape our lives and the lives of our children for many years to come" (xi).

"ORIGINS"

Let me illustrate what I mean by looking at specifics of *Dreams From My Father*. By structuring this book in sections titled "Origins," "Chicago," and "Kenya," Barack suggests an overall trajectory of his life from Kansas to Kenya. It opens with him receiving a phone call from his Aunt Jane in Kenya with word that his father has died. The narrative thus lays out the principal concern of this book with a question: What kind of man was my father and what have I inherited from him? How does the life of a man who left me when I was two years old and I saw only once again when I was ten years old have any meaning for me at age twenty-three years? To begin to put pieces of this puzzle together, Barack is forced back into his own bank of memories, beginning with his life in Hawaii.

Whether it was intentional, the name "Origins" for the opening section was certainly appropriate. It derives from the title of a collection of creation tales his

mother bought him. Such stories tell us about the beginnings of life itself, including stories of Genesis, Prometheus and the Gift of Fire, the tortoise of Hindu legend that floated in space, supporting the weight of the world on its back, etc. (10). For a boy of 5 or 6 years of age, these were mysteries that led to dreams substituting for reality. And as he later wrote this book, he found himself *creating* the narrative of his life.

His own origins, the knowledge of where he came from, were shaped by the memories of his father instilled in him by his grandparents and mother. Stanley and Madelyn (“Toots”) Dunham, his grandparents, had grown up less than 20 miles from each other—she in Augusta, Kansas, and he in El Dorado. Both were imbued with the values of small-town, Midwestern, Depression-era American values. Barack interpreted their move away from this region as an escape: an escape from the unspoken social codes and confinements that had something to do with “respectability.” Their life in Kansas was shaped by conformist attitudes. Those who refused to obey were subjected to the slings and arrows of being ostracized. Stanley refused to become just like everyone else, which he demonstrated by disdaining a traditional wedding and eloping with Madelyn. Their journey was an effort to allow Stanley to achieve his dreams. Thus they wandered from Kansas to Texas to Seattle before settling down in Honolulu. Consumed by his own dreams

of being an individual, Stanley sought his own sense of self in resisting the overwhelming pressure to be conventional, to be like everyone else.

It was this sort of freethinking, almost Bohemian set of beliefs that marked them as “liberals.” It’s these attitudes that later gave permission to their daughter, Stanley Ann, to bring a young African student home with her from the University of Hawaii. After their marriage and the birth of a son, Barack the husband/father left the paradise of Hawaii. For the son, who bore the same name, his “father became a prop in someone else’s narrative. An attractive prop---the alien figure with a heart of gold, the mysterious stranger who saved the town and wins the girl---but a prop nonetheless” (26).

In order to develop some understanding or possibly know his father, then, the young Barack had to see him through the eyes of others. Their perspectives gave him the lens through which to imagine. And the man he created, at times, became the mythic figure in the creation stories that framed his idea of the heroic. Nevertheless, the young Barack still developed a vacuum in his life, a void created by the lack of a live-in father. In so doing, he also developed a sense of alienation since he had no one to tell him about race and how race could indeed provide him a sense of belonging—to someone or some cause.

After her divorce from Barack, Ann married an Indonesian named Lolo. For a nine year old living in a foreign country beset with political intrigue and unrest,

life for the young Barack was an attempt to acculturate, to fit in. It occurred to his mother that acculturation would mean giving up being an American. Her solution was to supplement his education with American correspondence courses---forced to him from 4 to 7 a.m. His complaints were met with the rejoinder: “this is no picnic for me either, buster” (48). In retrospect, he came to understand the focus of her lessons with him to be: “If you want to grow into a human being, you’re going to need some values” (49). Out of her Midwestern past, she taught him “honesty,” “fairness,” “straight talk,” and “independent judgment” (49). But these values also reflected those of his birth father. It was her decision that he should follow his father’s example, for such values were “in the genes” (50). “Your brains, your character,” as she said, “you got from him” (50). As a consequence, he came away with the idea: “To be black was to be the beneficiary of a great inheritance, a special destiny, glorious burdens that only we were strong enough to bear” (51).

Part of his socialization into the American experience required a return to Hawaii. Now ten years old, he enrolled in the prestigious Punahou Academy, considered to be an incubator for island elites. Instead of feeling at home in such a prominent academic setting, the young Barry, as he was called, felt he didn’t belong and was keenly isolated. In the midst of this crushed, trampled-on feeling, Barry receives word that his father is returning for a visit. This visit proved to be pivotal in young Barry’s life. Not only did it put him in a position to make real the

image of a man who was more myth than actual, who had existed largely in the stories others had of him, but it also reinforced a set of values that the young Barry would have to struggle with and against. How much stock can a ten-year old place in a man who has reentered his life and, with a dominant personality, orders him to stop watching television and go study? Can this man assert or even insert himself into a young man's life? Is the fact of being a birth parent sufficient reason for according this man the respect due to someone who calls himself father?

With his father gone, his mother back in Indonesia to do field work for her anthropology degree, and even, in a sense, away from the grandparents with whom he lived, the 11 or 12 year old Barry engaged "in a fitful interior struggle" (77). As he said, he was "trying to raise [himself] to be a black man in America, and beyond the given of [his] appearance, no one around [him] seemed to know exactly what that meant" (76). The only exception, the only sympathetic voice was his grandfather's Black friend, a poet identified only as Frank.

From such clues as Frank living in a run-down section of Waikiki, a contemporary of Richard Wright and Langston Hughes, and life in Chicago--- readers can easily identify this poet as Frank Marshall Davis, a native of Arkansas City, KS. Leaving behind a volatile political scene in Chicago in 1948, Davis, along with his white wife, Helen, sought exile in Honolulu. By the time young Barry first met him, Davis was probably close to his late 70s. The relationship

between his grandfather and Davis left young Barry feeling, as he said, “uncomfortable” (77). It was as if this interracial friendship was “some complicated, unspoken transaction between the two men” (77), something he simply could not understand.

Three years after this introduction, Barry returned to visit Frank on his own. His grandmother had been aggressively panhandled by a man---a Black man---at her bus stop. The experience had completely unnerved her. For the first time, Barry saw how men of the race with whom he identified could instill fear into his grandparents. It is this kind of confusion the young Barry sought to disentangle.

Frank acknowledged the limits of Barry’s grandfather’s knowledge about such matters. Being born maybe 50 miles from each other in Kansas nevertheless instilled in them radically different views of the world. Davis, for example, in his own day and time would have had to yield the sidewalk to whites should he approach them. This example leads Frank to conclude that Stanley was a good man but one who didn’t really know Frank, the racial dynamics of Kansas, and Black people generally for that matter. The problem is that he *can’t* know him, not the way Frank says he has to know Stanley. Why? Because Stanley “will never know what that feels like” (90). As comfortable as Stanley might feel, coming to Frank’s house and drinking Frank’s whiskey, Frank feels that he himself must still remain vigilant, “for his own survival” (90).

In a final observation, Frank says: “What I’m trying to tell you is, your grandma’s right to be scared [of the Black panhandler]. She’s at least as right as Stanley is. She understands that black people have a reason to hate. That’s just how it is. For your sake, I wish it were otherwise. But it’s not. So you might as well get used to it” (91). Instead of clarity, instead of insight, instead of reassurance, young Barry emerged from this counseling session knowing, as he said, “for the first time that I was utterly alone” (91).

Barry sought out Davis once more before leaving the islands for Occidental College in Los Angeles. In another moment of startling reality, Davis asked the freshman-to-be what he expected to get out of college. To Barack’s response of “I don’t know,” Davis gave him a stern lecture on history. The problem is that young people don’t know, he said, and that the old people who fought so that young people would have a right to go are simply happy to see them in college. The older folks are so excited that they don’t tell the truth about the real cost of admission: that is, “Leaving your race at the door. . . .Leaving your people behind” (97). Davis’s vision is considerably less optimistic than those of us who value the teaching of critical reading, writing, and thinking. His view that college was simply “training” fostered the notion that one must indeed go to college *but* students of color needed to keep their eyes open. They must: “Stay awake.”

The campus life at Occidental College was seductive, making it possible to forget about revolt, about race, and racial dynamics. But Davis's words haunted him. Barack had to ask himself: "So why couldn't I let [race] go?" (98). Instead of retreating behind the safe designation of being "an individual" or "multiracial," he sought self-definition, sanctity, and security in the company of campus black radicalism---in an attempt to avoid the appearance of being a "sell-out." In making this alliance with other Black students, he confessed "a longing for place, and a fixed and definitive history" (104), "a bridge," if you will, "between [his] future and his past" (105). Becoming politically-engaged in such activities as divesting university funds from corporations with financial ties to South Africa's apartheid brought him to the discovery that made him "hungry for words. Not words to hide behind but words that could carry a message, support an idea" (105). And yet his first speech, an abbreviated one or two minute presentation, jerked him back into the realization that words conveying messages were complicated. He chided himself that the words he delivered at the anti-apartheid rally didn't make a difference. In a moment of self-recrimination, he even confessed that "Pretty words don't make it so" (108). Regina, one of his fellow radicals, called him on it. When he confessed that he felt he couldn't speak for Black people, she plumbed deeper into his self-recrimination to reveal his naivete and what she considered a source of self-loathing: "You're the one who seems to think he can run away from

himself. You're the one who thinks he can avoid what he feels. . . . You wanna know what your real problem is? You always think everything's about you. . . . Well, let me tell you something, Mr. Obama. It's not just about you. It's never just about you. It's about people who need your help" (108-109). This expose, if you will, not only haunts him through the next several years, but it poses a problem he seeks to resolve. What are his responsibilities to others? Could he continue in the crippling, constant fear that he didn't belong to some cause and was therefore an outsider? Could he rest comfortably with the idea that his identity might begin with the fact of his race, but did it or could it end there (111)?

A letter from his father read, in part, that it was important for the son to know his people and that "you know where you belong" (114). His fitful debate about where he belonged resulted in his need for a community. A transfer program that Occidental had with Columbia University enabled him to get to New York, where the questions of identity and self-definition increased. Guided by the need to eradicate such conditions, he struck out in 1983 for Chicago, after college, determined to be community organizer.

"CHICAGO"

The Chicago section of this book bears out the essential meaning of autobiography I started with. It contains many examples of confessional moments,

internal questioning, instances of self-discovery, and connections between recollected events. In searching for a sense of self, Barack further solidifies the foundation for merging the private concerns of personal identity with the obligations and responsibilities of the self in the public sphere. Through his work as a community organizer, he's brought face-to-face with the problems of less well-off African Americans, which requires him to step outside of his preoccupation with himself and to become immersed in his duties to others. Thus he learns quickly the lesson Regina, his fellow campus radical at Occidental, taunted him with: "It ain't about you. It's about the people who need you." It was only with the benefit of hindsight that he could express logically the importance of this decision to leave New York, the possible graduate school applications, and the fairly certain comfortable life of a prestigious job—for a position he could not really define. In retrospect, he could see "how becoming an organizer was a part of a larger narrative, starting with my father and his father before him, my mother and her parents, my memories of Indonesia with its beggars and farmers and the loss of [step-father] Lolo to power, on through Ray and Frank, Marcus and Regina; my move to New York; my father's death. I can see that my choices were never truly mine alone" (133-34). For him, then, community organizing required a special commitment; it involved a shared sacrifice; it meant that membership had to be earned. As he envisioned the African American community as part of the

larger American community, he came to see that his own destiny and the uniqueness of his life were tied to the success of his organizational efforts. For him, it “was a promise of redemption” (135).

In this section, I wish to focus on an instance that demonstrates how community organizing enabled him to develop more fully his abiding commitment to a populist tradition and, in so doing, brought him closer to race and the inheritance bequeathed to him by his father. At age 25 years, he learned to be an effective community organizer, which meant meeting a number of requirements. He had to form relationships with people, in order to get them involved. He had to “steer away from the peripheral stuff and go towards peoples’ centers” (158). It meant avoiding the abstract stuff, as if he were taking a survey or something. He had to identify issues, action, power, and self-interest (155). Issues “had to be made concrete, specific, and winnable” (162). He had to make people feel the relevance of the initiative to their own lives (169). That meant understanding that “well beyond the immediacy of issues, that beneath the small talk and sketchy biographies and received opinions, people carried within them some central explanation of themselves” (190). With these ideas realized, it is possible to see how their individual stories could be bound together into a common narrative and purpose, one that, as he said, “held out an offer of collective redemption” (158). For Barack, these stories, taken together, helped him bind his world together and

gave him “the sense of place and purpose [he had] been looking for” (190).

Simply stated, their words provided him a sense of community.

Take, for example, the Altgeld Gardens Public Housing Project, where, almost accidentally, the problem with asbestos was discovered. The tenant who discovered a legal notice published in the newspaper approached Barack about inquiring if their apartments, like the manager’s office, had asbestos. As a community organizer, Barack could not lead the tenants in seeking to resolve their issues, but he could certainly facilitate their efforts. Long story short. He organized a small tenants group, of whom one acted as the spokesperson. When she and Barack approached the manager of the Gardens, they immediately placed this administrator in a dilemma---whether to lie or not. He lied, claiming that tests had been done on the apartments and that no asbestos was found. On their way out, the spokesperson said, “By the way, could we get a copy of the test results?” The trap was sprung. The only way out for the manager was to say that copies of the results would have to be obtained from the Chicago Housing Authority office (the CHA). After 2 weeks and no copies and no responses to their letters to the CHA director, Obama’s Army, as one observer called them, made an unannounced trip downtown to request a meeting with the director, to be held at the Gardens. Unbeknownst to the Housing Authority, the press had been notified about this surprise protest. Just as the authorities were preparing to have the protesters

removed, the press came with cameras and questions, thus forcing the hand of CHA.

This trip changed Barack in fundamental ways. It was important not because it altered concretely the circumstances of the people. Instead, as he wrote, “because it hints at what might be possible and therefore spurs you on, beyond immediate exhilaration, beyond any subsequent disappointments, to retrieve that thing you once, ever so briefly, held in your hand. That bus ride [to CHA and back] kept me going. . . . Maybe it still does” (242). When the director finally came to the Gardens, the tenants experienced, at best, a partial victory. Ultimately they were forced to choose between removal of the asbestos and the lists of repairs they had prepared to give him. An initiative that had begun with such promise was finally considered a defeat.

In the midst of Barack’s Chicago period, there were other issues and causes. But there were other moments that were more personal engagements, moments that brought him starkly up against the question: “Who am I?”

For example, shortly after he receives word of his acceptance into Harvard Law School, he began meeting with ministers to form an organization for a youth counseling network, “a program that would provide at-risk teenagers with mentoring and tutorial services and involve parents in a long term planning process for reform” 261). Many pastors had recommended an energetic minister who had

successfully broken down class lines and took a church of two hundred members and increased it to four thousand members. Younger ministers saw his church as a model for them to aspire to. Older ministers more cautiously praised its rapid growth but were more envious of his success in attracting young black professionals---a key source of economic support for the church. He was a college graduate, a former marine, had studied at Howard University before taking a Ph.D. in the history of religion at the University of Chicago. His name was the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ.

This initial meeting yielded the names of Trinity members Rev. Wright thought might be useful to developing the tutorial program. In subsequent meetings with them, Barack found himself asking questions about his own faith. True. He found the blurring of class lines to be a foundational point at Trinity. But what claimed his attention was the story of those who had reached a spiritual dead-end, an emptiness that a paycheck just couldn't fill in. Barack generally played off their invitations to attend Sunday service. But in a conversation with himself, he had to "confess that [he] could no longer distinguish between faith and mere folly, between faith and endurance. . . [that he was] a skeptic of his own motives" (286).

But following his Harvard acceptance and the death of Mayor Harold Washington, he felt impelled to attend early morning worship at Trinity. The title of Rev. Wright's sermon that day was "The Audacity of Hope." Using a scripture

from the Book of Samuel, he related the story of the barren Hannah to a painting titled *Hope*. The harpist in the painting, dressed in tattered rags and playing a harp with one good string, nevertheless had the audacity to hold her head to the sky and dared to hope, to have the *audacity* to hope and praise God with her one-string instrument. In her story and the stories of so many others that merged personal experiences with Biblical texts, he experienced for the first time the meaning of survival, freedom, and hope and felt how they became, as he said, “our story, my story” (294). The audacity of hope!! It was only after the little boy in the next seated handed him a Kleenex that Barack discovered the tears running down his eyes. For the first time, he felt the walls of his spiritual unbelief breached, and he experienced the power to hope, despite dire circumstances.

By ending the “Chicago” section on this note, Barack foregrounds *not* a belief in a man (i.e., Rev. Wright) but in a tradition of religion that had thus far eluded him. On more than one occasion, he was asked: “Where does your faith come from?” Now, he had at least a provisional answer. It came from his racial inheritance of perseverance, struggle, endurance, and more. The church, as an institution, embodied that historical legacy. Having said this, I don’t believe his acknowledgement constitutes a conversion experience. But certainly, as he sought to find his way in the world, how he desperately sought to be part of something, and as he attempted to resolve his own confusion about race, this moment

represents an important turning point in his achieving self-knowledge. What remained for him to accomplish was to determine what it meant for him to be part of his father's family.

KENYA

“Kenya,” the third part of this autobiography, records what might be considered the end of Barack's quest for self-hood. The journey that started in Kansas finds its logical conclusion in Kenya. As he begins the round of introductions to brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and a grandmother, one aunt instructs Barack's sister to take good care of him. “Make sure,” she says, “he doesn't get lost again” (307). When Barack later asks his sister the meaning of his aunt's comment, the reply was like the answer to a proverb or an aphorism: “It's a common expression here. . . . Usually, it means the person hasn't seen you in a while. ‘You've been lost,’ they'll say. Or, ‘Don't get lost.’ Sometimes it has a more serious meaning. Let's say a son or husband moves to the city, or to the West, like our Uncle Omar, in Boston. They promise to return after completing school. They say they'll send for the family once they get settled. At first they write once a week. Then it's just once a month. Then they stop writing completely. No one sees them again. They've been lost, you see. Even if people know where they are” (307).

Barack now sees that even though this is his first visit to Kenya, he has always been part of his father's family. His visit is a return or restoration. The sense of belonging to someone or someplace had been there all along. It fell to him to recognize that and to reclaim his rightful place among those who loved him. To use the mantra from the old television series *Love Boat*: "Welcome aboard; we've been expecting you."

But even this answer gives Barack pause. After meeting a few more relatives, he still asks the question: "What is a family? Is it just a genetic chain, parents and offspring, people like me? Or is it a social construct, an economic unit, optimal for child rearing and divisions of labor? Or is it something else entirely: a store of shared memories, say? An ambit of love? A reach across the void?" (327). Arguably, Barack is best answered by his grandmother. When introduced to her, she says: "now you have finally come home" (374). He received a rather protracted introduction to his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, via the many stories told to him. Finally, he sees the circle closing. As he says, "I realized that who I was, what I cared about, was no longer just a matter of intellect or obligation, no longer a construct of words. I saw that my life in America---the black life, white life, the sense of abandonment I'd felt as a boy, the frustration and hope I'd witnessed in Chicago---all of it was connected with this small plot of earth an ocean away, connected by more than the accident of a name or the color of

my skin. The pain I felt was my father's pain. My questions were my brothers' questions. Their struggle, my birthright" (430).

CONCLUSION

I announced the title of this brief talk as "American Dreams and Dreaming America: Barack Obama's Search for Self." Having walked rather patiently through Barack's pursuit of self-identification, how does all this relate to American Dreams and dreaming America? What lessons can we who are assembled here today take away from this beautifully-written life story?

First, I feel this book offers a wonderful demonstration of American dreams. That is to say, many people have used the metaphor of dreams to set forth their personal relationship to the governing documents that supposedly guarantee all people the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Dr. Martin Luther King took this idea to new heights when he presented his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Before Dr. King's glorious declaration in 1963, though, poet Langston Hughes asked a question intended to present the consequences of *not* sharing those benefits with everyone. He asked: "what happens to a dream deferred?" The answer could be one of several possibilities, including accepting the status quo or detonating the causes that denied access to the dream. Barack's life story takes us through a number of alternatives to democracy for all. In the

end, democracy wins out. In principle and in practice, this political goal contains the most hopeful possibility for achieving full self-hood. Socialism, communism, Black nationalism—all those “-isms”—come with chains or restraints on individuality. His story rejects all encumbrances on our ability to strive to be our best—to be all we can become. Education is one way to understand the broader challenges we face. For it is only through a knowledgeable, an aware, and a critically-astute people that we can hope to create social change that’s beneficial for us as individuals and us as a people.

Second, to accomplish what is good for us individually and collectively, we must also become visionaries. We must learn to be imaginative and creative. His life story tells us that we must dream the America we want. Langston Hughes once wrote a poem titled “Let America Be American Again.” No, it’s not a contradiction. It’s not that American values and principles once existed for everyone, only to be lost somewhere. The poem tells us: “Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed.” Let it be, in other words, a land that can achieve its fullest potential. It means a land of inclusion, not exclusion. No one should be denied opportunity. Nor should anyone be forced to assimilate or acculturate into a set of values that would deny his or her personhood. We are a diverse nation. We are made of many parts. But “E Pluribus Unum” means “out of many we become one.” It does not mean we give up that which makes us different. It merely says

that collectively we march forward together. The journey requires imagination and creativity. It requires vision. But it can be done. Barack tells us this when, as a community organizer, he came to appreciate that his own life was inextricably tied to those whose lives he sought to improve. That was the real meaning of community.

Finally, from *Dreams from My Father*, we can take hope. Barack was quite clear that hope was an important motivator for the people he served as community organizer. Even when circumstances seemed aligned to discourage their most enthusiastic efforts, the people found the strength to persevere, to keep on keeping on just when success seemed about to elude them. It's the same motive an 18th century poet wrote about. He said: "Hope springs eternal in the human breast / Man never is but always to be blest" (Pope, "An Essay on Man," 95-96). Even in the face of overwhelming odds, people always hope for the best because this is what makes us human beings, not mere animals. This recalls my earlier discussion of the harpist, who, with one string left on her instrument, dared to raise her head heavenward and play to the glory of God. From the midst of her tattered rags and impoverished condition, she had the audacity to hope. Like Barack, we too can walk away from his story filled with hope. Despite whatever challenges us, individually or collectively, we too can hope for a more promising future, in which our needs, wants, and desires will be met.

If nothing else, as we leave this place today, please take with you these thoughts: that *Dreams from My Father* tells us that, as individuals, each of us is important, and that which makes us different is to be valued. But also, as a group, we can do marvelous things. The challenge is for us to be united in ways that permit us to love one another, not smother or divide each other. The feminist writer June Jordan once wrote that as she sought “to evaluate the potentiality, the life-supportive commitment/possibilities of anyone or anything, the decisive question is always, *where is the love?*” (*Civil Wars* 141). Barack’s quest for his racial identity and place in the world brought him face-to-face with this very reality. The dreams he had of his father led him to a new place. It was one that enabled him to make American dreams real for himself by dreaming an America for everyone. Thank you.