

plex economic, political, and psychological forces render health care difficult to fix. A single piece of legislation will not solve the problem: Like life itself, a health system requires adjusting to changing needs and technologies. Universal health care is no panacea, and it will add to our deficit spending unless we are able to cap many of the expenditures associated with the fee for service system. Health care is about warding off our greatest fears—loss of autonomy, dependency, helplessness, illness, and ultimately death—all enormously anxiety producing. ▢

Psychohistory of Barack Obama

The Transformations of Barack Obama

Ken Fuchsman—University of Connecticut

If you read about a child whose parents had a shotgun wedding, whose mother and father separated before the child was a year old, each of whom later had a second divorce, and he hardly ever saw his father, you probably would not expect that such a youngster would be elected President. Barack Obama overcame these odds and is now our Commander in Chief.

Children from divorced, single-parent, and blended families are likely to have short-term and long-term behavioral problems. As a child, Barack Obama experienced all these family structures. Yet, he has emerged as a disciplined, often inspiring, figure. What transpired that enabled this often-troubled young man to be a model for others? I will discuss four factors in Obama's background, biography, and character that helped him transcend his family background.

The first factor to consider is class. Except for a few periods, Barack Obama, Jr. remained middle-class for much of his childhood. Without financial support from his father after the first year, and his mother often being a student, his maternal grandparents, with whom he lived for much of his childhood, regularly provided an economic base. Both of them worked full-time and sacrificed for their grandson. If poverty and ghetto living had been Obama's life, his prospects would have been much different. Instead, except for four years in Indonesia, he grew up in the relatively tolerant environment of multiracial Hawaii, and from the age of ten on, attended a school with middle-class and upper-class children.

The second factor to consider is education. Barack Obama is the first President both of whose parents earned graduate degrees. At the age of 19, his mother returned to college and eventually earned her doctorate in anthropology, while his father had a master's degree in economics from Harvard. When young Barry lived in Indonesia between the ages of six and ten, his mother would wake him up at 4:00 or 4:30 AM and teach him for three hours each morning before he went to school and she to work. Barry was sent back to Hawaii at the age of ten after being admitted to a prestigious private school, from which he eventually graduated. He began college at Occidental College in Los Angeles, but he transferred to an Ivy League school, Columbia, as a junior. Later, he earned a law degree at Harvard. His excellent formal and self-education allowed Obama to integrate the disparate parts of his disjointed background into a disciplined identity. He says: "the only reason Michelle and I are where we are today is because the country we love gave us the chance at an education" (Barack Obama, *The American Promise: Speeches 2007 + 2008*, 2008, p. 505).

The third factor is both genetic and cultural. Obama is outstanding intellectually. Those who knew Barack Obama

Sr. in Hawaii praise his intellect, showing what the son has inherited. The senior Obama, according to his Kenyan mother-in-law, "was extremely brilliant" (quoted in David Mendell, *Obama: From Promise to Power* [New York: Amistad, 2007], p. 29). Hawaiian Congressman Neil Abercrombie, who befriended Obama Sr. in college, describes his friend as having a "brilliant, brilliant mind" (quoted in Jon Meacham, "On His Own," *Newsweek*, September 1, 2008, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/155173/output/print>). According to David Mendell, Barry's self-deprecating mother told her son that he inherited his intellect from his father (Mendell, *Obama*, p. 34). She had brains herself, loved learning, and was admitted to the University of Chicago as an undergraduate. Both his parents, then, were endowed with intelligence, and their careers were connected to their academic opportunities and achievements.

The fourth factor is his temperament, which also involves both inheritance and experience. Even a casual observer, such as I, watching Obama at a campaign rally noticed how cocky he is. This extraordinary self-esteem has been noticed by many. In 2008, reporter Steve Kroft asked Obama where he got his confidence. The candidate replied: "My wife asks me that all the time. I think it's as a consequence of having grown up in a lot of different kinds of circumstances...My upbringing was unconventional. I had to—I was tested, I think, in a lot of different environments and...over time, I came to be confident about my capacity to connect with other people...you were asking earlier where I get my confidence from. I think if you ask a lot of children where do you get your confidence from, it's the love of your mother...She was one of the—one of the finest people that I've ever known. And a lot of what I do reflects the values she instilled in me" (<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0901/30/acd.01.html>).

As a young adult, President Obama's father was not

lacking in self-confidence either, so maybe this trait also has a genetic base. Obama Sr.'s friend at the University of Hawaii, Neil Abercrombie, told David Maraniss that Obama Sr. was very opinionated and "never hesitated to tell you what he thought," and had no mercy with people who were not at his level (David Maraniss "Though Obama Had to Leave to Find Himself, It Is Hawaii That Made His Rise Possible," *Washington Post*, 12/22/2008, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/08/22/AR2008082201679_pf.html).

Obama's self-esteem is a character trait, and so is another part of his temperament: his restlessness. A variation on this comes out in the very beginning of both his books. On the first page of his *first book*, describing himself at the age of 21, he wrote: "I was impatient in those days, busy with work and unrealized plans" (Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father* [New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995], p. 3). Toward the end of this volume, the 33-year-old Obama stated he had "learned to be more patient these past few years" (Obama, *Dreams*, p. 439). In the opening paragraph of his second book, he characterized himself at the age of 35 as "generally impatient with life" (Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* [New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006], p. 1). Evidence for a hereditary basis may be that Obama's mother and his maternal grandfather both were restless souls. His mother never stayed in one residence very long, and until moving to Hawaii in 1960, his grandfather Stanley Dunham took his family from one locale to another, including Kansas, California, Texas, and Washington. His opinionated father was not known for being a patient soul.

Obama would probably attribute his impatience with life to a few other factors: not living with a father, his mother's rootlessness, and his biracial heritage, leaving him between both white and black populations. What happens to a person can be less influential than how that individual inter-

nalizes and transforms events. Obama has written of the shock of finding his father was a bitter drunk rather than the heroic character he had been raised to imagine. Obama worried that his father's failures would haunt his own life. "I would find myself...feeling as if I was living out a preordained script, as if I were...a captive to his tragedy." The result was that "I now felt as if I had to make up for all his mistakes" (Obama, *Dreams*, p. 227). Obama's ambition and his being driven to succeed were, in part, a reaction to his father's wreck of a life. Obama admitted to Jon Meacham that to endure the rigors of running for President something's "got to be driving you, and in my case if you have somebody that is absent, maybe you feel like you've got something to prove...in my case, the stories I heard about my father painted him as larger than life, which also meant that I felt I had something to live up to...if the pattern sets in pretty early on where you're pushing your comfort level it probably has to do with those very early influences, and that can come from either the absence or the presence of a father who ends up motivating you in some way" (quoted in Jon Meacham, "On His Own," <http://www.newsweek.com/id/155173/output/print>).

He was also trying to make up for what he did not get from his beloved, demanding, and idealistic mother. The "sense of abandonment I'd felt as a boy" derived not only from his disappearing father, but from his mother who did not regularly provide him with a stable environment (Obama, *Dreams*, p. 430). What he did not get from his ambitious parents, he received, in part, from his maternal grandparents, and in part from himself. Obama's turning inward has a great deal to do with his self-development. He said: "At some level I had to raise myself...I had to learn to trust my own judgment; I had to learn to fight for what I wanted" (quoted in Meacham, "On His Own," <http://www.newsweek.com/id/155173/output/print>). Given his bi-

racial makeup as a teenager, Obama felt that no one in his world could understand his dilemmas. He admitted to feeling “utterly alone.” He wrote that he “decided to keep my own counsel...to disguise my feverish mood” (Obama, *Dreams*, p. 91, 87). His lack of trust meant that he confided in himself; his friends at the time were not aware of his inner turmoil. Outwardly he was social and friendly, but retained an inner shell that only he penetrated.

This duality between sociability and introspection continued at college. His Columbia University roommate, Phil Boerner, who also knew him at Occidental, remembers Barack as “very generous.” The two of them would “get pretty emotional about sports, food and injustice.” They would also walk around the city and go to museums and bookstores. Boerner says of Barack that “everyone seemed to like him pretty well” (Phil Boerner, “Barack Obama ’83, My Columbia College Roommate,” *Columbia College Today*, Volume 36, Number 3, January/February 2009, p. 72).

Yet at Columbia he continued, even accentuated, his self-reliance. Obama described his time there as “my ascetic phase...I literally went to class, came home, read books, took long walks, wrote...during those two years, I had to look inward and gather myself” (quoted in Richard Wolffe, *Renegade: The Making of A President* [New York, Crown 2009], pp. 30-31). He told David Mendell, this was “the period when I grew as much as I have ever grown intellectually. But it was a very internal growth” (Mendell, *Obama*, p. 59). He came out of Columbia a self-disciplined man, knowing he did not want a life of money making but of assisting others, of service. The young Obama wanted to do for others what he had started to do for himself.

After graduation from Columbia, Obama began to move from self-reliance to a mixture of keeping his own counsel and connecting more to others. After an interlude in the private sector, the biracial Barack Obama, Jr. solidified

his African-American identity by finding employment as a community organizer in a decidedly black section of Chicago. As he embraced the ideal of a beloved community and worked toward change, he described himself in this period as having "wounds to heal, and could not heal myself" (Obama, *Dreams*, p. 138). Obama in Chicago became the paradoxical individual he still is today: highly confident and self-questioning; deeply engaged and yet detached; reflective and passionate; impatient with life but with a cool, steady demeanor; self-disciplined yet beginning to rely on others.

A crucial event occurred during his initial time in Chicago: he met his African half-sister, Auma, and learned the sad details of his father's adult life in Kenya. How a once-promising career collapsed after his arrogance led the nation's ruler to blackball the senior Obama, who subsequently became an alcoholic, dying in an automobile accident at the age of 46. The Kenyan's American son then wanted to avoid his father's tragic mistakes. After the shock of knowing about his father's dissolute life, the younger Obama's restless self-examination led him to feel something was missing. He lacked a certain kind of belief. Obama wrote: "I had faith in myself. But faith in one's self was never enough" (Obama, *Dreams*, p. 279). The black Christian church provided something for him that helped give him an emotional foundation; a wider faith, a bridge from self to community. It was another step in his evolving identity as an African-American. In embracing this black heritage, Obama also developed a deeper belief in community and transformation. The rhetoric of change that is so much a part of Obama's political rise and his own personal development came out of the black Christian church. The emptiness he had felt within himself was somewhat being healed by what he found in religion.

His personal and spiritual sojourn to Kenya also helped him recover the black side of his heritage. As he con-

fronted the past of his male paternal ancestors while at their Kenyan gravesites, Obama wished that his grandfather had told his father that “he could never escape himself, or recreate himself alone.” It was an emotional, cathartic moment, a movement away from his distrustful self-reliance. “I sat between the two graves and wept. When my tears were finally spent, I felt a calmness wash over me. I felt the circle finally close.” Obama found in Africa a connection with the pain of his paternal grandfather and father, and recognized that their “struggle” had become “my birthright” (Obama, *Dreams*, pp. 429-430). He was no longer utterly alone. In subsequent years, Obama’s political message includes that we do not save ourselves alone but as a democratic community; salvation is not just individual, it is social. Social redemption engages him. Obama became immersed in political issues because the struggle for achievement, security, and excellence are inseparable, because individual and social renewal go hand in hand for him. Obama may not have relinquished the invisible shield distancing him from others, but he was leaning toward recognizing that interpersonal connection is vital.

The last, crucial step in Obama’s transformation from emotional abandonment to belonging comes from his relationship with Michelle Robinson Obama. Here is a woman who combines the idealism of his mother and the realism of his maternal grandmother. He wrote that “she reminds me... a little of Toot,” his grandmother’s nickname. Obama credited “several improvements in my character...to my wife, Michelle” (Obama, *Dreams*, p. 439). She is both affirming and critical; she supports him and tries to ground him. Our current President retains the restless ambition of both his parents. Michelle allows him to go on his wanderings, but also demands place and support for her and their family. There has been tension between them over his commitment to his political career. Yet more than anything, she has removed

from him that sense of being an orphan. He can trust her; she may criticize him, but she will be beside him. Obama said: "My choosing to...marry a woman who is rooted in one place probably indicates a desire for stability that I was missing" (quoted in Amanda Ripley, "The Story of Barack Obama's Mother, *Time*, April 9, 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1729524,00.html>).

It is here that the circle is completed, that the emotional wounds he endured as a child without a father and a mother who was not always available have mostly healed.

Struggle will remain his birthright, internal divisions will characterize his identity; he is both self-contained and interdependent. His personal struggle is entwined with the community of others who struggle. Obama brings the same determination, self-discipline, intellectual ability, vision, and practicality to confronting the social wounds as he does to his internal struggles, for to him the personal and the collective are bound together. He not only inspires, he organizes. His confidence and competency have enabled him to gain support from much of the American public. His remarkable personal, social, and political identity disguises his many contradictions. Still imperfect as his faith is, it has helped him to move from emotional isolation to becoming the persuasive preacher of collective hope. He has risen from feeling like an orphan to the nations' leader. His remarkable journey is still ongoing.

Kenneth Fuchsman, EdD, is a historian who teaches interdisciplinary studies at the University of Connecticut, where he has served as both faculty and an administrator. Dr. Fuchsman writes on the history of psychoanalysis, the nature of the Oedipus complex, interdisciplinary studies, and a variety of subjects in modern American history. He may be reached at ken.fuchsman@uconn.edu. □