

Obama Dreams

As I write, the election for President of the United States is a little more than a month away. At the Dream Institute in Berkeley, we've been collecting dreams about the candidates, especially Barack Obama, and have put together a dream play based on them that will have three public performances in the last weeks before the election. At least two websites, notably Sheila Heti's *Metaphysical Poll*, have been collecting such dreams on the Internet. I don't recall ever hearing as many dreams about political candidates as I have during this election season. I can think of many reasons why this is so, including the dire circumstances we find ourselves in, and the deep significance for the American psyche of an African-American man running for President.

I find it interesting and appropriate that so many of the dreams are about Obama, because he has described himself as "something of a dreamer." Although his primary meaning was the Martin Luther King sense of daring to dream about a better future, I think he also meant "dreamer" literally, for clearly he takes night dreams seriously. In his autobiography, *Dreams from my Father*, he shared two big dreams that were among the important experiences of his life.

The first of these came when he was a student at Columbia University, about a year after his father's death, and marked a turning point in

his relationship to his father. This dream gains additional cultural importance in the context of recent American political history, for George W. Bush's conflict with *his* father is well known. Some commentators, for example, suggest that it helps explain his determination—against his father's counsel—to wage war on Iraq. (Our dream play, by the way, opens with a Bush dream, that depicts him held captive by his rage at his father.)

In Obama's dream, he is riding on a bus with many other people, "men and women with different journeys to make." An old man sitting next to him is reading a book that says "our treatment of the old tests our souls." Obama's journey leads him to "a cold cell, in a chamber of my dreams," and a meeting with his dead father—who'd abandoned him when he was two and was "more of a myth than a man" to the young Barack.

I woke up to find everyone gone. The bus came to a halt, and I got off and sat down on the curb. Inside a building made of rough stone, a lawyer spoke to a judge. The judge suggested that my father had spent enough time in his jail, that it was time to release him, but the lawyer objected vigorously. . . . We cannot, of course, understand the meaning of this dream without the dreamer's participation — but one approach might be to view the lawyer and the judge as inner aspects of the dreamer's psyche, a "lawyer" part that still

wants to find his father guilty, and a wiser "judge" part that knows it's time for the son to move beyond the imprisonment of his relationship with his father. The dream seems to address this point as the scene shifts and Obama finds himself standing before his father's prison cell. He removes the padlock and enters the cell.

My father was before me, with only a cloth wrapped around his waist. . . . He looked pale, his black eyes luminous against an ashen face. . . . I walked up to him and we embraced. I began to weep. . . . "Barack, I always wanted to tell you how much I loved you," he said. He seemed small in my arms now, the size of a boy. Then it was time for Barack to go. When I whispered to him that we might leave together, he shook his head and told me it would be best if I left.

Ultimately, the son must move beyond what was possible for the father, or remain imprisoned by the past, but this liberation is not without deep sadness. That Obama understood the dream as an inner drama is confirmed by his own words: "I awoke still weeping, my first real tears for him—and for me, his jailor, his judge, his son."

Two details of this dream, the waistcloth and the father's shrinking to the size of a boy, resonate in an interesting way with the other big dream that Obama relates in his book, suggesting that they be read together. He had this dream, a nightmare, during his trip to Africa, back to his family's village in Kenya. In the dream, he is running, with everyone



else in the village, from something big and scary. Finally, exhausted, he falls to his knees in a clearing and turns around to see "a giant figure looming as tall as the trees, wearing only a loincloth and a ghostly mask." Thus, in contrast to the smaller father in a loincloth, in Africa he encounters a frightening giant in a loincloth.

Again, as outsiders, we can only speculate on the meaning of this dream for Obama—but taken in conjunction with the earlier dream, one possible level of meaning is that, though the hold of his father over him may be diminishing, the significance of his ancestral roots in Africa is looming large.

As I re-read these dreams, I keep coming back to the pivotal moment of the first dream, the hinge on which the dream turns: when the father, having expressed his love, suddenly diminishes in size. This reversal is a striking visual representation of the shift in power from father to son. The son, with his father's blessing, comes into his own, and is free to continue on his own journey. One can only wonder how history might have been different had George W. Bush reached a similar resolution with his dad.