

Excerpts from **Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance**, by Barack Obama, Three Rivers Press, 1995, 2004

This summary contains selected illustrative points. We recommend that you read the book itself to get the complete chronology of events and insights.

Part One – Origins

Chapter 1 – [*knowledge of father*] p. 5 At the time of his death, my father remained a myth to me, both more and less than a man. He had left Hawaii back in 1963, when I was only two years old, so that as a child I knew him only through the stories that my mother and grandparents told. They all had their favorites, each one seamless, burnished smooth from repeated use.

Chapter 2 – [*upbringing*] p. 47 [*My mother*] had always encouraged my rapid acculturation in Indonesia: It had made me relatively self-sufficient, undemanding on a tight budget, and extremely well mannered when compared to other American children. She had taught me to disdain the blend of ignorance and arrogance that too often characterized Americans abroad. But she now had learned... the chasm that separated the life chances of an American from those of an Indonesian. She knew which side of the divide she wanted her child to be on. I was an American, she decided, and my true life lay elsewhere.

Chapter 3 – [*back in Hawaii - Father's only visit*] p. 66 A month. That's how long we would have together... There was so much to tell in that single month, so much explaining to do; and yet when I reach back into my memory for the words of my father, the small interactions or conversations we might have had, they seem irretrievably lost.... My wife offers a simpler explanation – that boys and their fathers don't always have much to say to each other unless and until they trust – and this may come closer to the mark, for I often felt mute before him, and he never pushed me to speak.

Chapter 4 – [*youth*] p. 75 Sometimes, when I brought friends home after school, my mother would overhear them remark about the lack of food in the fridge or the less-than-perfect housekeeping, and she would pull me aside and let me know that she was a single mother going to school again and raising two kids, so that baking cookies wasn't exactly at the top of her priority list, and while she appreciated the fine education I was receiving at Punahou, she wasn't planning on putting up with any snotty attitudes from me or anyone else, was that understood?

Chapter 5 – [*at Occidental College*] p. 105 It was around that time that I got involved in the divestment campaign. It had started as something of a lark, I suppose, part of the radical pose my friends and I sought to maintain... But as the months passed and I found myself drawn into a larger role – contacting representatives of the African National Congress to speak on campus, drafting letters to the faculty, printing up flyers, arguing strategy – I noticed that people had begun to listen to my opinions. It was a discovery that made me hungry for words. Not words to hide behind but words that could carry a message, support an idea.

Chapter 6 – [*in NYC at Columbia University*] p. 120 I had seen worse poverty in Indonesia and glimpsed the violent mood of inner-city kids in L.A.; I had grown accustomed, everywhere, to suspicion between the races. But whether because of New York's density or because of its scale, it was only now that I began to grasp the almost mathematical precision with which America's race and class problems joined; the depth, the ferocity, of resulting tribal wars; the bile that flowed freely not just out on the streets but in the stalls of Columbia's bathrooms as well, where, no matter how many times the administration tried to paint them over, the walls remained scratched with blunt correspondence between niggers and kikes.

Part Two – Chicago

Chapter 7 – [*post-college, early pull of change*] p. 133 In 1983, I decided to become a community organizer. There wasn't much detail to the idea; I didn't know anyone making a living that way. When classmates in college asked me just what it was that a community organizer did, I couldn't answer them directly. Instead, I'd pronounce on the need for change.... Change won't come from the top, I would say. Change will come from a mobilized grass roots.

Chapter 8 – [*observing the impact of the election of black Chicago Mayor Harold Washington*] p. 148 And their faith had been rewarded. Smitty said, “The night Harold won, let me tell you, people just ran the streets. It was like the day Joe Louis knocked out Schmeling. Same feeling. People weren’t just proud of Harold. They were proud of themselves....”

[*getting started as an organizer, listening to people*] p. 155 The day after the rally, Marty [*Kaufman, boss in Chicago*] decided it was time for me to do some real work, and he handed me a long list of people to interview. Find out their self-interest, he said. That’s why people become involved in organizing – because they think they’ll get something out of it. Once I found an issue enough people cared about, I could take them into action. With enough actions, I could start to build power.

Chapter 9 – [*toughening up*] p. 168 And then, seeing the still-fretful look on my face, he [*Marty*] added, “If you’re going to do this work, Barack, you’ve got to stop worrying about whether people like you. They won’t.” [*taking action and learning*] p. 184 As soon as we got back to the Gardens, we drafted a letter to Ms. Cynthia Alvarez, the city-wide director of MET [*Mayor’s Office of Employment and Training*]. Two weeks later, she agreed to meet with us out in the Gardens. Determined not to repeat my mistakes, I drove both myself and the leadership to exhaustion: preparing a script for the meeting, pushing hard for the other churches to send their people, developing a clear demand – a job intake and training center in the Far South Side – that we thought MET could deliver.

Chapter 10 – [*becoming close to ordinary people*] p. 188 When I wasn’t working, the weekends would usually find me alone in an empty apartment, making do with the company of books.... As the bonds between myself and the [*community*] leadership grew stronger, I found them offering more than simple friendship. After meetings, I might go with one of the men to a local tavern to watch the news or listen to oldies... On Sunday, I’d visit the various church services and let the women tease me over my confusion with communion and prayer. At a Christmas party in the Gardens, I danced with Angela, Mona, and Shirley under a globe that sent sparkling beads across the room; I swapped sports stories over stale cheese puffs and meatballs with husbands... I counseled sons or daughters on their college applications, and played with grandchildren who sat on my knee. It was during such times, when familiarity or weariness dissolved the lines between organizer and leader, that I began to understand what Marty had meant when he insisted that I move toward the centers of people’s lives.

Chapter 11 – [*first visit from Kenyan sister Auma and information about father*] p. 220 All my life, I had carried a single image of my father, one that I had sometimes rebelled against but had never questioned, one that I had later tried to take as my own. The brilliant scholar, the generous friend, the upstanding leader – my father had been all those things.... Now, as I sat in the glow of a single light bulb, rocking slightly on a hard-backed chair, that image had suddenly vanished. Replaced by... what? A bitter drunk? An abusive husband? A defeated, lonely bureaucrat? To think that all my life I had been wrestling with nothing more than a ghost?... The night wore on; I tried to regain my balance, sensing that there was little satisfaction to be had from my newfound liberation. What stood in the way of my succumbing to the same defeat that had brought down the Old Man? Who might protect me from doubt or warn me against all the traps that seem laid in a black man’s soul?

Chapter 12 – [*traveling back from a successful action on asbestos at the housing authority*] p. 242 I changed as a result of that bus trip, in a fundamental way. It was the sort of change that’s important not because it alters your concrete circumstances in some way (wealth, security, fame) but because it hints at what might be possible and therefore spurs you on, beyond the immediate exhilaration, beyond any subsequent disappointments, to retrieve that thing that you once, ever so briefly, held in your hand. That bus ride kept me going, I think. Maybe it still does.

Chapter 14 – [*decided to go to law school, concerned about selling out*] p. 278 That was one of the lessons I’d learned in these past two and a half years, wasn’t it? – that most black folks weren’t like the father of my dreams, the man in my mother’s stories, full of high-blown ideals and quick to pass judgment. They were more like my stepfather, Lolo, practical people who knew life was too hard to judge each other’s choices, too messy to live according to abstract ideals. No one expected self-sacrifice from me....

[*uncertainty of faith, prior to joining Reverend Wright's church*] p. 286 You have some good ideas, they would tell me. Maybe if you joined the church you could help us start a community program. Why don't you come by on Sunday? And I would shrug and play the question off, unable to confess that I could no longer distinguish between faith and mere folly, between faith and simple endurance; that while I believed in the sincerity I heard in their voices, I remained a reluctant skeptic, doubtful of my own motives, wary of expedient conversion, having too many quarrels with God to accept a salvation too easily won.

Part Three – Kenya

Chapter 15 – [*between Chicago and Harvard Law School*] p. 302 I had been forced to look inside myself and had found only a great emptiness there. Would this trip to Kenya finally fill that emptiness? The folks back in Chicago thought so. It'll be just like *Roots*, Will had said at my going-away party. A pilgrimage, Asante had called it. For them, as for me, Africa had become an idea more than an actual place, a new promised land, full of ancient traditions and sweeping vistas, noble struggles and talking drums.

Chapter 16 – [*meeting the extended family, their expectations*] p. 329 Now I was family, I reminded myself; now I had responsibilities. But what did that mean exactly? Back in the States, I'd been able to translate such feelings into politics, organizing, a certain self-denial. In Kenya, these strategies seemed hopelessly abstract, even self-indulgent. A commitment to black empowerment couldn't help find Bernard a job. A faith in participatory democracy couldn't buy Jane a new set of sheets. For the first time in my life, I found myself thinking deeply about money: my own lack of it, the pursuit of it, the crude but undeniable peace it could buy. A part of me wished I could live up to the image that my new relatives imagined for me: a corporate lawyer, an American businessman, my hand poised on the spigot, ready to rain down like manna the largesse of the Western world.

p. 330 But of course I wasn't either of those things. Even in the States, wealth involved trade-offs for those who weren't born to it, the same sorts of trade-offs that I could see Auma [*sister*] now making as she tried, in her own way, to fulfill the family's expectations.... She had plans, schedules, budgets, and deadlines – all the things she'd learned were required to negotiate a modern world. The problem was that her schedules also meant begging off from family affairs; her budgets meant saying no to the constant requests for money that came her way. And when this happened... the looks of unspoken hurt, barely distinguishable from resentment, would flash across the room. Her restlessness, her independence, her constant willingness to project into the future – all of this struck the family as unnatural somehow. Unnatural... and un-African.

Chapter 19 – [*father's letters to universities requesting scholarships*] p. 427 This was it, I thought to myself. My inheritance. I rearranged the letters in a neat stack and set them under the registry book. Then I went out into the backyard. Standing before the two graves [*grandfather and father*], I felt everything around me – the cornfields, the mango tree, the sky – closing in, until I was left with only a series of mental images, Granny's stories come to life.

[*reacting to tale of conflict between father and grandfather, both ambitious in a changing African world*] p. 429 Oh, Father, I cried. There was no shame in your confusion. Just as there had been no shame in your father's before you. No shame in the fear, or in the fear of his father before him. There was only shame in the silence fear had produced. It was the silence that betrayed us.... For a long time 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. 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, the 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.

Epilogue – [*post law school, post marriage*] p. 437 It's been six years since that first trip to Kenya, and much in the world has changed.... p. 438 What is our community, and how might that community be reconciled with our freedom? How far do our obligations reach? How do we transform mere power into justice, mere sentiment into love?... I find myself modestly encouraged, believing that so long as the questions are still being asked, what binds us together might somehow, ultimately, prevail.