

Lessons from Barack and Michelle about Marriage

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Trying to assess people's marriages or family dynamics is not easy. What we may see as outsiders and qualify as healthy or unhealthy might not necessarily be the reality. This applies in particular to public figures that are forced to live in a fishbowl with all the eyes of the world strained on their every interaction. Their words and actions towards each other are often scrutinized for nuances as they try their best to negotiate both their public and private lives. Despite this being the case, there is a lot that can also be said about the value of human chemistry and genuineness of spirit. Neither one can be faked. It becomes obvious, even to "outsiders" when a couple does not have chemistry or when their interaction is not genuine. Their movements around and towards each other seem scripted and almost mechanical.

One only has to see the way Michelle looks at her husband and the way Barack looks at his wife to know that there is something deeply beautiful going on between them. The way he hugs her, his hands on her hip or posterior, his constant adulation for her in private or public are clear evidence that this man loves this wife. Furthermore, the ease with which their children relate to them is another giveaway of the Obama's marital dynamics. The two girls still hug both their parents and allow themselves to be hugged by them both, a sign that while Sasha and Malia are in that pre-adolescent and teenage stage, they definitely feel secure within their parents love for each other. These genuine and spontaneous shows of affection are perhaps the greatest lessons Barak and Michelle are giving America about marriage.

Throughout the course of time the black family in America has suffered a major breakdown. Ever since slaveholders kidnapped Africans from the Motherland, black families have been brutally separated from each other. The alienation took an even more sinister role when our

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men were not allowed to be the defenders and protectors of their women and children. A black man was emotionally and spiritually castrated by the 'massa' who had the right to do whatever he pleased with a black man's family. 'Massa' could physically, emotionally and sexually abuse his family and if that were not enough he could arbitrarily choose to separate them. Dividing the black family was used as a tool of domination with the end goal of breaking its power. Is it any wonder that some of our greatest social ills begin in the womb of the family? Separation, rejection, abandonment, violence, disaffection, disrespect are at the heart of some of the black family's deepest emotional ills today. We are repeating a cycle that was designed to control us, break us and keep us alienated from each other.

Marriage was created to be the most important nucleus in the family structure. In marriage there is a commitment to loyalty. A marriage should guarantee an individual's human need for solidarity, love and affection. Marriage is supposed to be the binding institution that keeps families together. In the twenty-first century this ideal has shifted and marriage seems to be on its way to becoming extinct in the black community. Statistics have lead many social observers to comment that blacks have become the most uncoupled people in America today. In fact, in the article "Marriage is for Whites" written by Joy Jones for The Washington Post, Sociologist Andrew J. Carlin points out that a black child was more likely to grow up living with both parents during slavery than today.

As the first black family of the United States Barack and Michelle have experienced some of the social ills that impact black families in their own families of origin. The president's father, Barack Sr. had several wives, was estranged from them all and most of his children. Michelle's maternal grandparents separated without ever getting an official divorce and her paternal grandparents were separated for 11 years. Despite these familial realities, both Michelle and Barack are striving to break the cycle.

In November 2009, one year after being voted in as president, in an interview with Jobi Kantor,

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Michelle Obama retold that it was necessary for her to emphasize to Barack that she needed him to be present physically and emotionally for her and the girls. She spoke of talking to him, after the kids were born, about the importance of his sheer physical presence, which wasn't something he was really used to and how important it was for them as a couple to at least talk every day.

Barack, while not having had a model in his life of a father's presence, got it. In the interview they went on to share how he helped her as much as possible: on top of juggling jobs, he paid the household bills and did the grocery shopping, often wandering supermarket aisles late at night. When business was done for the week, he always drove home that same night, sometimes arriving past midnight.

But, the first lady concedes that it was sort of an eye-opener for her that marriage is hard. She added, "But going into it, no one ever tells you that. They just tell you, 'Do you love him?' 'What's the dress look like?' "

About to celebrate their 20th wedding anniversary on October 3rd, Michelle and Barack have officially raised the bar for all marriages in America. They are two of the most recognizable figures in the world and two of the most influential people in America; yet, within the challenges of living in the fishbowl and holding the highest office in the land they have shown us that the most important values of a good marriage: love, affection, and commitment, do not have to be sacrificed, they are not old-fashioned and they are certainly not impossible. Their example says that we can have genuinely loving marital relationships and that our children will benefit immensely from living under the shadow of their parents' love. Besides politics and policy, perhaps Barack and Michelle's greatest contribution to the American society is that they have genuinely modeled a good marriage. Their marriage is a testament that once two people are genuinely committed to loving each, until death to them part, the possibilities are endless.

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