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## The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream

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# Book Review

Jerry Robicheau

## The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream

*Barack Obama. (2006). The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream. New York, NY: Crown Publishers. 362 pages.*

Political figure, Barack Obama, shares his beliefs and political foundation in *Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. Obama was cast into the national spotlight when asked to deliver a keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic Presidential Convention. Before the convention he was not well known outside of the Illinois political circle. This book consists of a litany of his fundamental beliefs that have contributed to his personal and political values.

Reviews about *Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* are easy to locate. Many tend to be from pundits who think critically of aspiring political figures. So what does *Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* provide for those interested in women's leadership? Perhaps the answer lies in a statement shared in the Epilogue:

The audacity of hope. That was the best of the American spirit, I thought, having the audacity to believe despite all the evidence to the contrary that we could restore a sense of community to a nation torn by conflict: . . . [W]e have control and therefore *responsibility* over our own fate. (Italics added) p. 356.

There are lessons to be learned from the book's basic premises. It is the "audacity of hope" that leads us to believe that we can do better. It is the "audacity of hope" that allows us to take charge of our own fate. It is the "audacity of hope" that instills in us the desire for strong leadership. No more evident is this "audacity of hope" than in the leadership of women committed to creating a better place.

The fundamental beliefs Obama shares reflect those noted in women leadership literature. The beliefs include (a) staying true to core values, (b) selecting role models and mentors, (c) establishing a support system, (d) learning to compete in an unfamiliar environment, (e) overcoming stereotypes, and (f) maintaining political rightness.

## About the Author

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### Core Values

Obama consistently connects his core values to his experiences and to his views. His values have shaped who he is and the type of leader he is and wants to be:

[A]t the core of the American experience are a set of ideals that continue to stir our collective conscience; a common set of values that bind us together despite our differences; a running thread of hope that makes our improbable experiment in democracy work. These values and ideals find expression not just in the marble slabs of monuments or in the recitation of history books. They remain alive in the hearts and minds of most Americans—and can inspire us to pride, duty and sacrifice. (p. 8)

Perhaps this explains why we long for that most elusive quality in our leaders—the quality of authenticity, of being who you are, of possessing a truthfulness that goes beyond words. My friend the late U. S. senator Paul Simon had that quality... people also sensed that he lived out his values: that he was honest, and that he stood up for what he believed in, and perhaps most of all that he cared about them and what they were going through. (p. 66)

We hang on to our values even if they seem at times tarnished and worn; even if, as a nation and in our own lives, we have betrayed them more often than we care to remember. What else do we have to guide us?

Those are our inheritance, what makes us who we are as people. . . . We can make claims on their behalf, so long as we understand that our values must be tested against fact and experience, so long as we recall that they demand deeds not just words. To do otherwise would be to relinquish our best selves. (p. 69)

It is possible to see how this grounding in values mirrors women's leadership. Grogan (2000) describes how black women have advanced from the 50's to the 90's through the guidance of their values. Murtadha-Watts (2000) notes that districts in perpetual conflict have hired black female superintendents because they bring with them their values, their passion and their compassion. Wesson (1998) contends that successful women leaders know themselves, know their values, and are true to both. Through the experiences of two female principals who relied on their values to address change, Haar (2002) shares, "It is women who intuitively know not only

what is required to create and maintain a learning organization but also how to do it” (p. 22).

### **Role Models and Mentors**

The importance of role models and mentors is another theme evident in the book. When Obama became a member of the Senate, there were three Latinos and two Asian members; he was the only African American. He contends that the racial attitudes do play a part in the disparities (p. 233). Although Obama did not have the opportunity to observe a person of color advance in position, he did see in Senator Simon, a Caucasian, former Senator from Illinois, attributes and characteristics that he appreciated and wished to model. He saw in Senator Simon a sense of empathy “one that I find myself appreciating more and more as I get older. It is the heart of my moral code” (p. 66).

Women too can benefit from connecting with a person who they recognize as having similar values. They will, more than likely, encounter the same challenges Obama did with identifying a role model or mentor with a common background. For instance, in K–12 education, there remains a 2:1 ratio of men to women in most leadership positions (Haar & Robicheau, 2006). There is even less representation of women of color (Brunner & Caire, 2000).

However, as Minnesota State University Mankato Assistant to the Vice President for Institutional Planning and an African American woman, Johnson (2007) contends that a mentor does not need to be a person of the same race or ethnicity but rather needs to be a person who can help someone maneuver through the system (2007). Sherman (2005) supports that statement and advocates that what is needed is a concerted effort to change the status quo and offer more purposeful mentorships and internships for women. Women can and have succeeded in spite of limited role models and mentors. Just as Obama did not let the absence of minorities in the U.S. Senate deter him from finding role models and mentors, women should do the same.

### **Support Systems**

Obama relies heavily on a support system. His first support system was his mother—a person from whom he learned a basic principle that has served as the foundation for his political life. That principle is to always ask, “How would that make you feel?”

His family continues to serve as a solid support system; he believes they keep him grounded. He shares a story of having just come from what he believed was a very successful Senate hearing involving a bill he and a fellow Senator had sponsored. He called his wife to share the good news. Instead of congratulating him, she proceeds to tell him he needed to pick up ant traps on his way home as they have ants in the house. Obama reflects that it has been and continues to be women who instilled the values he lives by and who provide him with the support he needs to remain focused.

Women leaders also need an established support system—be that family, faith, friends or whomever to keep them grounded and encourage them to move to the next level. Women must seek out that support system (Eckman, 2003). As was the case for Obama the support system serves as a source of encouragement—encouragement that is especially important when faced with obstacles and doubts.

### **Unfamiliar Environments**

Obama campaigned in a mostly white environment. As was noted by the ethnic make up of the Senate, there is a significant under-representation of minorities in the field of politics. Obama approaches this not as an obstacle to overcome but rather as a distinct advantage. The situation has placed him in a position to build his bases. He notes his achievement was due to his willingness to understand “this quintessentially American path of upward mobility that the black middle class has grown fourfold in a generation, and that the black poverty rate was cut in half” (p. 242). And, he acknowledges the role that race has played in his life:

I am a prisoner of my own biography: I can't help but view the American experience through the lens of a black man of mixed heritage, forever mindful of how generations of people who looked like me were subjugated and stigmatized and the subtle and not so subtle ways that race and class continue to shape our lives. (p 10)

Much of what Obama writes about concerning competing in an environment not like his own is true for women leaders as well. They often compete in an environment that is unlike their own and in an environment where their skills are not fully recognized. For instance, Ortiz (2000) argues that the succession of women is limited because the decision-making power, school board, search committees and superintendents incumbents are predominantly white males. Kalbus (2000) describes the discrimination a black female superintendent candidate faced as she attempted to advance and move into the superintendency. Alson (2000) notes that women occupied less than 5% of the more than 15,000 superintendent positions. White men hold the vast majority of school leadership positions. Northouse (2007) reports that women are at cross-pressures—as leaders, they are expected to be masculine and tough, but as women they should not be too manly (p. 277).

Women should be encouraged to address this issue as Obama has by recognizing the blatant discrimination yet moving in the direction of their core values, beliefs and compassion. He attributes much of his passion to the issues he had to face as a minority. There is, as Rusch (2004) advocates, a need to move beyond the rhetoric and into a meaningful discourse on equity, race and leadership. It is critical to remove the issues of power and privilege that interfere with the succession of women into leadership positions and establish an equitable environment.

## Stereotypes

As an African American Obama experienced many of the stereotypes and discriminations that minorities endure. Although he admits to being isolated from many of the trials of the average black man, he states, "I can recite the usual litany of petty slights that during my forty-five years have been directed my way;" (p 233). "To think clearly about race (stereotypes), then, requires us to see the world on a split screen-to maintain in our sights the kind of America we want"(p 233).

Obama came to believe during his Senate campaign that whatever preconceived notions white America may continue to hold, the overwhelming majority are able—if given the time—to look beyond race in making judgments about people (p. 233). And yet he recognized that prejudice is still very much alive in America. "It's unrealistic to believe that these stereotypes don't have some cumulative impact on who's promoted, on who's arrested and who is prosecuted, on how you feel about the customer who just walked into your store or about the demographics of your children's school." (p 236).

Women also face stereotypes. Northouse (2007) argues that the stereotypes of women influence decision makers and can directly affect the selection of women for leadership positions. "Women face a double standard in leadership roles; they must come across as extremely competent but also be seen as appropriately female" (p. 280). Stereotypes, as Obama would argue, are easily activated and they lead to biased judgments. Such is the case of stereotypes of women. Common stereotypes for women include being viewed as not strong enough, unable to take charge, or trying to be too masculine. In addition, Latino women face the ill-conceived stereotype that they are subservient to their husbands (Morse, 2000). First (2003) emphasizes the need to address the stereotypical expectations and eliminate them from decisions made about women and leadership. Stereotypes cannot stand in the way and be viewed as an obstacle. Women must move beyond them.

## Political Rightness

Throughout *Audacity of Hope* Obama asserts the need to do what is right. He clarifies the role of government, the struggles of the family, the conflicts that still persist in race relations, the need to adhere to a set of fundamental principles (Constitution) and the refreshing belief in opportunity. The common thread through all this is the desire to be engaged in political rightness. Obama states the desire for developing a process to address the health care gap, the loss of jobs, the under funding of schools and the burden placed on middle-class America.

Maintaining a political rightness is evident in women in leadership as well. In order to be engaged in political rightness, women leaders must examine and understand who they are (First, 2003). Especially in education,

women leaders can lead schools in that political rightness. They can focus the schools on the expanded concept of family and how that new definition of family impacts education. It is women who can bring the issue of political rightness to reform schools and create an environment that is student focused.

## Conclusion

*Audacity of Hope* brings a sense of hope that our environments can be better. The salient points of the book are lessons for women in leadership positions or women who aspire to move into leadership. However, as Obama notes, it is not a task for one individual. It takes a collective effort. Women need to build coalitions much the same way as Obama did for political campaigns. Women need to present their greatest skills in delivering change. They need to maintain their core values, select role models and mentors, establish a support system, learn how to compete in an environment that is unlike their own, learn how to overcome stereotypes, and maintain a political rightness. These are daunting tasks for all leaders. However, these are lessons that can be learned from an aspiring political figure.

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