

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Genevieve Ahearne
Genevieve Ahearne
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Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt
Total Running Time: 1 hour and 15 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

(Crosstalk)

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Genevieve Ahearne

AD:
And we're rolling

Genevieve's intro

01:00:12:19

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

I'm Genevieve Cook and I knew Barack in 1983, 1984. We spent a fair bit of time together as lovers, and I was asked to participate in this documentary in order to offer what many people see as a little bit of a black hole in his life for

some reason. Yeah, so it's been interesting reviewing that time I spent with him and thinking about him and us.

Meeting Obama

01:00:49:12

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

I met Barack when he had recently graduated from Columbia. I was going to—I was getting a Masters in early childhood education at Bank Street, also up on the upper west side, and living at home with my parents, briefly having shared a flat in Brooklyn with a roommate who was also going to Bank Street. So, living temporarily at home, and uh we met at a Christmas party. I actually didn't figure out why he was there until years later when a biography of him was written. But his friend was the older brother of a young man that I worked with in the first job I had when I moved to New York fresh out of university and I—I—I don't know why I went to that party, because I wasn't—I didn't often—I didn't have much of a social life. I was a student and had friends at college, but I was not a New York nightlife person, so the fact I went to that party was quite unusual, and as my diary tells it, I met Barack in the kitchen shortly after I got there and we exchanged a few words. What he said later was that he was interested by me and in me and I was being, I think, a little bit extravagant at the party, sort of a bit chatty and flitting from here to there, and was about to go home when he nabbed me and we ended up having an extremely long conversation, sitting down while I think a lot of people had left already, actually. And we were both really elated to discover randomly, in such a random, unexpected way somebody who was so—we're

both different so we both grew up moving around and in other countries and just instantly had a lot in common. It was really bizarre when we both realized we lived in Indonesia as children at the same time. That was very—it felt extraordinary. And his mother was an anthropologist, and I was an anthropology major at uni. And um, just that whole conversation about—without needing to explain anything, just allowed us to be very quickly, very deeply, on some kind of same page, which if you grow up moving around and feeling like an outsider is not at all a common experience. And he—you know, he’s incredibly bright, and- and it was just so interesting, being able to sink straight into a very profoundly deep conversation about who we were and who we felt we were and what we were doing with our lives and what our values were. And um – Everything just was zing, zing, zing. It was all very much on the same page.

01:04:28:20

And much more since he strode into the limelight, his sense of -- he’s got a really good sense of humor, Barack, but he was a lot more serious in those days, more often, but that sense of humor is there. So that’s—I’m sure that was something that—I can also be very serious, but also have a good sense of humor. So I—there was a light heartedness to it as much as an intensity. It felt very—it certainly—like in New York, there’s a lot of coming and going and you meet people, and lives crisscross easily in a big city, but it definitely—you know, there was no question that—there was never any question of not following up on this chance meeting in a dingy, dark 14th street apartment on the lower--lower east side.

Living in Indonesia

01:05:31:04

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

We both lived in Indonesia in 1960—whatever it was, 1967? So I moved there in the February and he moved there with his mother in the November or October. We both went to Catholic schools when we first got there, although not the same one. But that just seemed—apart from the people that I went to international schools with later in Jakarta, because I moved back again a second time who—it's really common to meet people who've gone to school in foreign countries and—or who may even have gone to the same school you did and they've come back or whatever. But to meet someone so randomly at a New York Christmas party who was in Indonesia in 1960—'67 was just like wow, what are the chances?

A shared love of writing

01:06:30:09

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

I- I like to write. So that was something else we had in common. We both spent a lot of time writing and thinking about writing, talking about writing. He used his writing as a—as he used just about everything I think, as a muse, as a way of constructing more thoughtfully how he was going to navigate his way through the world, also as practice. Like, I think he had always thought quite seriously about writing fiction. You know, developing a narrative voice that was appealing and readable to others. I used my diary to explore my

feelings and to describe. I've been rereading it lately. And um – So there's a lot in there that you know, where I talk about New York and being on the subway and writing about my day. But chiefly my journals were always about writing how I was feeling about something so they are quite honestly excruciating to go back through.

A second date with Obama

01:07:44:12

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

Well, I think one of us rang the other one up and we had dinner at his place, and then I stayed. Which, you know, it was whatever it was, the 70's? It's like no big deal. But it did—it did feel like that was just—it wasn't anything that either one of us, I think, put too much thought into. That first meeting had just been so exciting as far as meeting a person who—we just shared such a similar history and such a similar sensibility about what we were doing in New York and what we—how we saw ourselves as actors in a world where we cared a lot about what we were either choosing to do or about to choose to do. But more that, you know, there was just this really underlying sense of familiarity, which you have—or which I have always experienced when I meet somebody who grew up moving around from country to country. There is an immediate, underlying bond where you don't have to explain yourself and you don't feel odd, you don't feel like you don't belong, like you're playing a catch up game.

Fitting in

01:09:12:01

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

Sounding as though you've been many places and can speak more than one language and you know—you know about the buildings in this city or that city. To other people that sounds sophisticated. Not so much. If you've spent your life like that, it's no big deal. It's not really—you don't feel sophisticated. You don't— Well I didn't anyway. That's stuff you just take for granted. And you know, there's millions and millions of people who have multinational lives. So it's not so unusual, but I think if you grow up that way, the thing that you are mostly focused on is how any time you ever meet anyone and certainly anytime you walk into a room where there's a group of people, you are busy trying to unconsciously figure out how to fit in because—because you don't fit in. It's you know, people all my life have--normal people who grow up in one place if they're open about it will very quickly get around to telling me how odd I am. The common language felt more like the intellectual page that we were both on but yes, presumably the emotional sense of connectedness and excitement had a lot to do with just not needing to explain all sorts of things about being multicultural, sophisticated outsiders, something like that.

01:10:48:15

I do think that I had thought a lot about being an outsider and what that does to you. My thesis was about that, my anthropology thesis I—so I think I did a lot more talking about that than he was used to and possibly than he himself had really thought about. Maybe partly because as others have written and maybe he himself has written, that growing up in Hawaii, which is such a

multi-ethnic mix to begin with, and maybe because of his story too, that he hadn't really identified being cross cultural as—as having as much to do with his personality or the way he fit into groups of people as I had. So he—I think he might have been able to answer some of his own questions just by listening to me rabbit on about that—my pet, you know, thing at the time.

Obama's work at Business International

01:12:00:17

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

He did it because he needed to earn the money to pay the rent, and maybe when he got the job, he figured he might learn something that was useful, but basically he didn't like the job and it was very boring and he—you know, he did it conscientiously so he didn't go on and on about it but yeah, it was definitely an unpleasant step to somewhere else so he could pay the rent. He didn't talk much except about how it was a slog. Which is typical of him, you know, he's not—he's not somebody who needed to—unlike me, needed to endlessly workshop whatever it was he might have been wrestling with or having trouble with or being annoyed by or—

Genevieve Ahearne's thesis

01:12:56:06

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

So dancing through doorways—dancing through doorways, I think the reason I chose that title was as a kind of anodyne to my experience of growing up moving around was actually really painful. It was really—you

know, I was extremely self-conscious and very uncertain about everything. I also have other components to my character which balance that out, but at the time, I was very lost but also really—because it was—ya know, I went to Swarthmore at the very end of the 60's, 70's sensibility and so was surrounded by people at Swarthmore—my friends at Swarthmore were marginal characters. We weren't all, you know, in the library from dawn to dusk as so many Swarthmore students were. We all lived off campus, we were all hippies maybe you would call it. I don't know, you know, we bought food at the co-op and we—and so I was very taken by this image I had of—how not growing up mainstream and not growing up with really deeply embedded structure around you does offer a certain sort of unfettered freedom to break norms or stand outside convention in a way that often to me felt beautiful, graceful, or— And I would literally—you know, one of the things I really liked to do a lot was put music on and dance when I was alone in the house, and I did actually spend a lot of time actually, literally in doorways kind of doing this thing with that side and this side and the frame of the door and the—the—some of the source material I used in my thesis was material written by Victor Turner, who was an anthropologist, ritual—whole school of anthropology coming out of Britain where he talked about the liminal space that's created in cultures where say, you know, this kind of reverse of social roles. So there are cultures where the people in charge and in power will spend the day—the Romans also did this, will spend the day being dictated to by people in lower social status situations, who for that day get to wear the crown and get to wear the power and this whole idea that it's really important to—if you want to have a refreshed, engaged, made new

whole and healthy community, sense of community, you must do something about how roles get stultified and power gets entrenched and this is the sort of conversation that we would have had on that beanbag, and that—that there's something very valuable to be able—in being able to throw off your whole identity. Just throw off everything that you know to be you that grounds you in your history and inner ego— that there is something refreshing about that, something really spiritually nourishing and important about that.

Dreams from My Father

01:16:55:16

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

When Barack wrote that book, a lot of people jumped on the bandwagon, his autobiography, jumped on this bandwagon that he himself set up about ya know, am I black, or am I white? This whole notion—he didn't really—that was not something that ever seemed to be an issue with him at the time as I remember it. So, I think he had already done a great deal more thinking about where he was headed than he actually articulated, and I think because of the thinking that he had already done and the planning and the classes and the degree that he already had, which I'm pretty sure he—he was a political science major. I think he probably did that as a major because he was already trying to set himself up with information and a way of looking at how people in the political world operated. So the fact that he was black and not white but didn't—wasn't a member of a black community was an issue but when he—for him.

01:18:05:14

Yes, sitting outside and looking in. See, that would've been much more—the bitterness of race and being black or being white was not really a deep conversation. I learned a lot about him that I did not know before. You know, about Hawaii and his friends and all the rest of it. But I—what I was most aware of was the care with which he crafted the impression he was trying to create through the writing. So—and then when it got to—even though there's an apology at the front of the book about composite characters, it really, really annoyed me that he portrayed me as someone who couldn't understand why black people were angry. That just made—I found that very, very upsetting. You know, claims about sorry about the composite character, guys, notwithstanding, that just really really irked me. I felt there was a really huge betrayal actually of everything that our relationship was all about. I mean, any of my close friends would've known that that was a ridiculous remark to make about me and the fact that he was obviously portraying a composite girlfriend meant that people who knew me would not mistake that snippet for me but—so yes. Ya know, I don't know who I thought out there I needed to protect my reputation in front of, but it just really hurt that he was happy to sacrifice who I really was for creating a certain, you know, narrative that he sustained throughout that book about choosing. I have written him several letters to which I have received no reply. I don't know if he even ever got them. And I think for the purposes of narrative, he chose to—yeah, this whole business of white and black, white and black, I hones—I think that he must have identified somewhere along the way that if he were to run for office, obviously the fact that he was black would be a huge issue and he

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would need to explain in some way how he had moved out of a white world and into a black world. There was a purpose, it was crafted for an effect, for an end.

Being an outsider

01:20:36:19

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

It was more like something to be hurdled to figure out how to navigate so that things remained authentic and legitimate. But I don't know to what extent he recognized that his tendency to be--he did though. We must have had conversations and there are a few allusions in my diary to the extent to which being an outsider and one's tendency to just quietly observe, observe, observe, observe and stand back with that observation is something that I think he already saw, could get in the--in the way as far as being able to draw groups of people together, which is I think you know, getting into that community organizing that he did was very much where he hoped to be heading even when I knew him and wasn't yet talking about it at the beginning when I first met him.

Race and legitimacy

01:21:52:17

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

This whole idea of searching as a black man, no, I don't think so. It wasn't as a black man. It was as a human being who wanted to be effective in the world and because we were both people who were extremely aware of the

disenfranchised and in New York—in America, the disenfranchised is anyone who's not white and you know, maybe just the poor generally who also are white. But we happened to have, you know—there was a very strong bond there. He respected me because—presumably because I was passionate about working with inner city black and Hispanic children. I was on a crusade, a knighted crusade. So I think—so we both talked. It was very—so as an anthropology major, one of the thing that anthropologists often do is to get into third world aid organizations. And I had already decided by the time that I graduated that I did not want to go there for a variety of reasons. It would be—yeah, for a variety of reasons. So then, the issue for a white woman very quickly becomes, what are you doing in this black community? You know, who do you think you are? But he saw that—I think he saw that if a white person could be so fiercely—wrap her whole life so fiercely up in these issues that had to do with race and politics, then he surely, you know, like he had the skin to step into that world, but he didn't have the cultural background. So that was what concerned him, is how can I walk into a community, not only as an outsider, but also as a person who ought to have legitimacy if it's in the black community because I wear the skin of a black person but without any of the cultural linguistic fluency? You know, he stood out like a sore thumb as far as being at home in that world because he didn't talk like he'd grown up in a black community because he hadn't. But I think I was also very interested in what was going on in the black community, and I think what he saw was, if this white girl can be so invested in what's going on in the black community, well then surely I could be also.

The influence of Obama's mother

01:24:35:02

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

Barack's mother had a huge amount to do with how early on he felt that it was important to lead a right minded, good life. And I think he also happened to have a personality which instinctively thought about greatness, not from an egotistical point of view but just, he is a person whose vision and understanding of things is just on a very embracing, large scale. And he is just—you know, he's a really good—he's a good person with a really kind heart and I think his mother was quite—I never met his mother and he didn't talk about her that much either, but I think—you know, I've been exposed to a lot of the writing that people have done about his whole family and she clearly supported him and guided him and championed him in a way that gave him an extremely robust foundation despite all the moving and the absences and the growing up with the grandparents. He had a moral foundation that came very deeply from his family as well as his own personality from forever.

01:26:18:16

He almost never talked about her. He did talk about the way it was when they lived in Indonesia and how she would get up very early in the morning and teach him from books that she had. and he talked very rarely about her, but I did hear enough about her that I got the impression that she was—that she had been a very guiding force. I don't think he talked that much about growing up with his grandparents instead of with his mother. He did talk a lot about his grandparents, a lot more about his grandparents than he did

about his mother to me. And I also—I got the sense that he, for whatever—I mean you know, I was doing the same thing. I was still living at home with my parents and chafing at the fact that I was—it felt like stuck at home, which any parent who’s footing the bill would be annoyed to hear, but you know, I was definitely trying to move very far away from the world that my parents lived in. And that was my sense more than anything that whatever he was doing at that point in his life to some extent involved redefining himself away from the context of his mother, in his case his mother because his parents weren’t together.

What Obama thought about Genevieve

01:27:56:18

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

I’m kind. I’m kind and I’m smart and I’m funny and I think um yeah, just unfortunately I was really emotionally very immature. I think when he met me too, he have a feeling that he was already looking for somebody who could present themselves to the world if he ever got that far. And my- my pedigree was good. I don’t know how consciously he thought about this but you know, as the daughter of a diplomat—so I was the daughter of a man who was in politics. Who—so I was coming out of a world that I think much more than he ever revealed to me consciously. I’m very observant and I’m very intuitive. He is also but you know, so a lot of stuff that I knew about him I picked up from the un—not necessarily said out loud by him. But he would have liked the fact that I—he felt I might have come from a family that was politically fluent or whatever.

The end of their relationship

01:29:05:06

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

It was just all incredibly exciting and—for three months and we were together for a year and a half. And I think a lot of that was just for—I think in my diary the day I met him, I wrote he is not the man for me. So I'm not quite sure what I was on about there, exactly what I thought I saw in him or us together or why I wrote that. I mean it's definitely—in hindsight it's definitely true. He needed a partner who could be with him in the way that the woman he chose to marry was and is for him. And really, the fact that I was so emotionally insecure just ruined—it probably didn't as much as I think cause I'm reading my diaries which are all a swash in.

Obama's personality

01:30:04:08

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

He was very mature. Not only was he very—because he is such an instinctively thoughtful person, he was extremely comfortable talking about emotions. To a cer—certainly comfortable listening—encouraging women to talk about the way they were feeling, so not at all uncomfortable in that arena. Still a lot withheld as far as his deepest, deepest feelings and thoughts but very comfortable, very comfortable talking the language of emotions and feelings in a way that most men I knew anyway, well maybe the men who were buddies of mine knew how to talk that way but not lovers, not about

what was going on, you know, in the way that you talk about when you're intimate with somebody sexually. Yeah, well that's because he was unnaturally or unusually mature for somebody his age, but then now and again—now and again I—I would see or realize that he was less robust in who he felt himself to be and where he was headed. You know, little glimpses of vulnerability and what seemed like an extremely purposeful, well put together plan for being who he wanted to be in the world. And a confidence—you know, nothing like what you see now where he jogs up those airplane steps looking, you know, just like he's so fabulously at home in that role. So he was much more serious and hung back in those days, but definitely had a very long range plan already cooking.

When Obama met her parents

01:32:02:04

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

I don't remember if I'd asked him to come and meet my parents but take—that weekend going to Norfolk was also about meeting my parents. He wasn't super—super enthusiastic about this. I'm pretty sure he came fairly unwillingly. Just 'cause he couldn't get away any more with not doing it. And Norfolk to my family was you know, a big deal. It was somewhere we went a lot to spend time together. And—but it—so it was just a weekend away and you know, we went and had dinner with my parents. I don't think they remembered particularly meeting that weekend until all the hoopla rose to the fore. Yeah, and the way he writes about it in the book was not—you know, he probably did experience that. My step grandfather was an

extremely interesting man, and the library was full of evidence of his interesting life but it—yeah, I—he chose to—he chose to use going to Norfolk that weekend as a device for describing almost as though there was a turning point where he realized, you know, he had to go and go to Chicago and be a community organizer and be very involved in a world you know that—and that he would—that I represented this kind of white world that he couldn't afford to get drawn into. And he may well have felt that way on that weekend, but the way he wrote about it in the book really annoyed me because that was my step family and not my family and I was just as much an outsider to that world as he was.

Obama's ambition

01:34:04:16

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

I think he had a very considered awareness of all the things that he would need to experience, and garner, and keep— remain open to, and um be aware of, and know how to articulate if he wanted to move forward in a way where what—much more than he was ever really moved to say out loud. I think he understood that he had certain personal emotional talents, as far as being— being sensitive and open and caring and also very smart and very able to keep some overview, vision, picture. And he was very concerned with the nitty gritty. That was a lot of, I think, what he was doing in New York, which is a very nitty gritty city, or certainly was in the 80's. So what he might have seen in Norfolk when it was like, oh, you know, maybe this white world is a little bit too polished, a little bit too cocooned, a little bit too—no matter what

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the political democratic sensibilities of the people who live here are, it's still the very white established—take many, many things for granted world. And he did not want to be seduced by people or groups that took things for granted, and had removed themselves in some way from the nitty gritty, the down and dirty, the real—you know, as poverty and unfairness is, not having access to political power.

Obama's nature

01:36:05:06

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

Barack is- is by nature a very warm, loving, kind, insightful person, who's—has a very strong instinct for responding to someone else's vulnerability by building them up. He does that with everybody, he does it a lot and he did it a lot with me. So—and that's—that's not common. It's not—even if you've got men who are friends, who are pals, this instinct towards building someone up is not that common. And he's warm. I mean, he's just genuinely a warm person, but—so he was disarming. I found he was disarming. He'd certainly become a great deal more disarming than he was generally back then in the 80's. And maybe it was just that period. He describes himself as a bit of a monk during that period, so maybe at Occidental he was a bit more of a sort of outgoing, I don't know—and he just retreated during that period. But the coolness, he is—he has, and you see this, I think it really affected his presidency. He has this incredibly deep-seated dispassion, a way of not being involved and of standing back and just looking and not getting involved emotionally with any of it.

01:37:55:06

And I—I was so young. Ya know, like my notions, even though I wrote endlessly about what is love and ya know, not wanting to go down some hackneyed path of love and relationship. I was desperately looking for the kinds of things that people in young relationships are looking for. You know, the knight—knight in shining armor. He wanted to be warm and engaged, but he also saw a bit of a morass. You know, like I would have just you know, pulled him into some kind of murky pond which had no good answers as soon as you pulled someone else there to fix it all for you. So that's that—you know, as far as the personal relationship went with, I think that's why from the beginning also he stood back a bit. 'Cause there was something about who we were together that he really was plugged into very legitimately, but there was this other part in him which could see that there was no good end to this particular love story.

01:38:57:01

That goes with that capacity he's got to—or inclination he has by temperament and character to endlessly assess a complex range of factors and never lose sight of the bigger picture. To never get bogged down by being partisan or emotionally reactive or yeah. So yes, that outsider, that—that without even knowing you're doing it, there is this cloak of, it's just automatic. You don't belong and your first job is just to stand back and observe so you can fit in. And so smooth, yeah he's very smooth. He's very smooth. He's learned to use that to his advantage. He's quick, you know, he's very—he's quick and he's funny. He's smooth, he's also guarded but not because he's hiding things. Just because that is his process. It's his process to

stand back and look at complicated things that probably a lot of people can't hold those complexities in their mind with wanting to package it and pronounce and carry on.

Talking about politics

01:40:20:17

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

Because I didn't write down blow-by-blow what we were talking about, it's not there but I can only assume that we did talk a lot about politics and wanting to affect change on a massive scale, not just community organizing. I had already decided that personal is political by then, which was like a feminist mantra in the early 80's. So I had already decided that—and—and—and that is true, it is more suited to my personality. So in the profession I have, the fact that I can do one-on-one's to a deep level with people is what floats my boat. That's what I'm good at, that's my comfort zone, that's personal is maybe not political but, you know, personal is the way you can affect very deep change for one person anyway and that has a ripple out effect. Whereas it was clear that for him the large platform was where he was headed and he clearly felt he had the wherewithal for that. He just wasn't quite sure how to fit the pieces together.

Obama as an outsider

01:41:39:08

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

It's definitely a big part of who he is, yes. Remote and an outsider. I think

that's the thing about growing up moving around. I don't think you can ever completely move away from that as being very much who you are in a very fundamental way, being an outsider. And on top of that, he has a certain kind of way, the way his mind and his emotions work together, he is just the sort of person who would never jump into the fray impulsively without considering everything, and I mean I married somebody who also is the same way, who—everything is the long game. Everything is seeing—is assuming that—that a lot of problems arise when people knee jerk react to stuff and want to jump in there and ya know, fix—fix that bit that they've cottoned onto as being whatever. Yeah, very—so that's his talent. I think also it must have been very hard to play politics and have that as your main way. I think yes at the time I was very frustrated by what felt like a veil was what I came to talk about to myself or think to myself and it was just this—this constant dispassion, this constant standing back and not being drawn into and I think—ya know, I'm very impulsive and I- I don't handle frustration well, I don't.

Obama's father

01:43:45:17

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

His father, it seemed to me, was a complete unknown to him. I would have liked, you know, to hear him talk more about what that all meant to him but I think it was something that even within himself was not at all clear. Yes, he did wake up one morning and talk about a dream that he'd had, the details of which I don't remember, but it was about visiting his father in jail I think? Or

I just assumed that it was—that the scene in the dream was his father in jail or him in jail and encountering the father, because there's somewhere else in my journal where I wrote a poem where I suggested that instead of doing what he did in the dream, he should have asked his father for the key. I re-read the page in my diary where I wrote about that and what he said to me and which I wrote down was that the—that he cried when that McDonald's massacre hit the news and—but what's—and I really—not quite—in hindsight, not quite sure how to unpack it, but what he said was that his experience of that, of responding to the trauma of the McDonald's incident in his mind had something to do with—with being loathed, to- to feel proscribed emotions about things. So really looking back I'm not quite sure how to interpret that, but--except maybe to say that, you know, when it comes to deep seated griefs about loss, that that was a remark more about his father and the—not so much about McDonalds, because obviously you're gonna cry about something like that. But I think, you know, like he did pretty well growing up without a father in terms of being an incredibly robust, integrated person, and he did have his grandfather so he had a man in his life and he had a stepfather. So yes, I think that was an allusion to exactly what had he missed? How much of what he missed out on by not having a father was a boy's imagination, how much was real, I don't know.

The importance of finding a place to call home

01:46:29:12

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

Maybe as I became—as I became more of an adult in my 40’s and 50’s and had children of my own and saw the effect on them of not having roots and not belonging anywhere and how that filtered through to my children, I’ve become more and more aware of how important it is for me to have found a place to have called home. But when I re-read Maraniss’s book, which I did a couple of weeks ago, I felt along with the idea that Barack was always endlessly trying to get out of a trap, I felt that the idea of Barack always looking for home and also avoiding traps was a projection of David Maraniss’ and no doubt there are elements of what David saw that are true and that he’s spoken insightfully about something but I—I—I—much more in Barack’s mind I think was a desire to be effective and to be effective in a really tangible and authentic way. And to do that, you can’t be rotating in some external position. You’ve got to be plugged into something. Grounded in a community where people know you and you know people and you can be effective.

Obama’s greatest qualities

01:48:01:21

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

His intelligence. I know what I found incredibly exciting were the conversations we had. So, he was intelligent and is intelligent, and thoughtful and versatile. And Barack is a person who’s able to speak. I know he’s criticized for being an intellectual, but to me he was somebody who married inseparably a sensibility that was both intellectual, articulate, even academic with never losing sight of the more metaphysical, poetical, nebulous facets of

what it is when humans are trying to explore their experience as a human being on the planet. You know, he was always to me an intoxicating mix of those two things.

Obama's childhood

01:49:04:07

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

He really didn't reminisce and muse about his childhood much at all. That's not—those weren't the conversations we were having. He—he must have from time to time alluded to being a kid. But I think that— that was probably the conversation we had on the beanbag the first day that we met. I think there was just this—ya know, fast and furious conversation about who we were and where we'd come from and we had that conversation and then we never really went back to who are you, where did you grow up, you know, what's your story from being a kid? He did talk a lot about his grandparents. Why they were important and even more so what he—what he was instructed by their lives not to give up on or not to get stuck in or bogged down in. So I think maybe he wrestled a lot with feeling disloyal to his grandparents because I think he recognized everything they had given him and yet probably he felt that their lives were very small. Respectable, absolutely, but small. And he wanted to live a very large life, and I think he wrestled with feeling disloyal.

Obama's move to Chicago

01:50:38:18

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

I think he was reluctant to talk about--a lot about how that was shaping up to be the next move because it also meant conversations about breaking up or not, which was happening anyway but I knew I—he talked a lot more about the voter enrollment stuff that he was doing with the NYPIRG mob before he did that interview. I don't think he told me he was gonna do the interview and if he did, I don't remember.

Michelle contributed to Obama's success

01:51:13:02

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

Absolutely, beyond a shadow of a doubt, she's fabulous. She is. God was kind. God was so massively kind when he introduced them to each other. Without her I don't think he would have—I mean I think he—yeah, absolutely integral. And clearly ya know, a great love story.

Barack Obama's 2004 DNC Speech

01:51:37:18

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

Well, before he was elected president, that speech at the Democratic Convention, that was when really everybody's awareness of him—and I was, as so many people were, very caught up in the charisma of that event. And impressed and astonished that he had this side to his character which was so very at home in being, you know, the king of the crowd and the orator and I—I was proud of him for that. But also a little worried about—I think maybe

we had had conversations about things like charisma and how it is that you move groups of people to want to act together towards something better, and so I was very swept up in that. Such that being the naïve cynic that I am, such that when he became president and life got real, my first reaction was to feel enormously disappointed by how that charismatic thing, how it gets lost.

01:53:08:08

In the end when I look at what function or purpose did he serve in the wider scope of history, it is almost like he was—he was just the right person in the right time in a move orchestrated by the universe or history unfolding where a toe got put in the water about America as a nation and you know, that toe in the water has just had so many probably predictable backlashes and Barack very deeply—very deeply in his own way is really very naïve and—and not. You know, he's very well schooled in all things not naïve, all things reality based, so smart that he can talk numbers and details, but probably naïve about the inherent goodness in people. And I think probably couldn't help but rely on his desire for people to be their better selves. And yeah, so that coupled with working in a situation where there were a lot of people who really did not want to cooperate and wanted him to fail and wanted to shoot him down and you know, republicans versus democrats and the republican—all of that.

Navigating the race

01:54:56:03

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

When people criticized him for being black as though somehow he was an

imposter because he didn't grow up in a black community, which is what happens when you're an outsider. You are always left with this uncomfortable feeling that you're opposing or posturing in order to fit in, and I think because of his natural—Barack's natural tendency to step back and review things endlessly, as he himself has said several times, people love to project things onto him. When you stand back and you've got a bit of that veneer, people want to somehow undo you or project things. I think he once said, you know, "I'm like a Rorschach test. What people are saying about me is completely their own thing, it's not true about me." And I—and looking back on it, you know, whether he—just to what extent the fact that he was black would get in his way because he didn't want to run on the platform of I'm black, elect me to be so excitingly the first black African president in the US. It was always, you know, how can I as an—he's such an individualist. How can I as an individual do what I dream of doing? And clearly I'm living in a country where being black is just such an issue for everyone else. Not for me but for everyone else. And I think—what I did feel sad about was a lot of black people in America who are of course—were just so excited that America got to that point where they did elect a black president, were hoping like I probably might have been hoping, that he could do something about the disenfranchised. And—but no. He's an individualist, he's not a—you know, so he seemed to walk very, very neutral lines about race throughout his presidency, which was probably quite smart but I think almost uncertainly very disappointing to a lot of people. He's a politician. He didn't back down, he didn't bow out. He remained gracious. I mean there are lots of things that I—you know, if I'd been there I would have done differently but you know, I

do think that he—he was—that part of his character, which is the outside observing and able to be dispassionate and withdraw, was very criticized.

Barack and Michelle made it work

01:58:00:02

GENEVIEVE AHEARNE:

You know, what Michelle has already done and what she's doing, you know, what a fabulous platform. And definitely as a couple, they're very interested in using their prominence as a platform from which they can do good. And I really think you know, that whole presidential thing was a bit of a—you know, blip, possibly—not an unfortunate but it was a—ya know, he—Barack was playing out some very, very grandiose vision of what he personally knew always, he had the goods. He had the personal character and ambition and the wherewithal and look, he got there. He got there. And I—and I think you know, there's something deep in his character that wanted to check it out, wanted to see if he really could, you know, get as far as he got. And Michelle talks a bit about the price that they paid as a family that he didn't get to be around and watch his girls grow up as much as perhaps if he hadn't been—which you know, but it does sound like they did a remarkable job as a family keeping that in perspective, and he was very available and has said, the office was upstairs or next door to the—where they lived. So I—I think that probably you know, out of that limelight and away from those pressures that—and having achieved what he was so driven to achieve, that now hopefully he can relax and just get more—I don't know, right sized with who he is and what he wants to do and how he wants to... do good in the world.

I'm sure he's a little bit envious that Michelle picked him to the post with the book, but he got—'cause I think he has probably more complicated ideas about how he got to where they got together and where to go from here.

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