



MICHELLE OBAMA

THE LIGHT WE CARRY

OVERCOMING
IN
UNCERTAIN
TIMES

BY MICHELLE OBAMA

American Grown

Becoming

The Light We Carry

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OVERCOMING IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

MICHELLE
OBAMA

 CROWN
NEW YORK

The Light We Carry is a work of nonfiction. Names and identifying details of certain individuals mentioned in this book have been changed in order to protect their privacy.

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Hardback ISBN 9780593237465

Ebook ISBN 9780593237472

crownpublishing.com

Book design by Elizabeth Rendfleisch, adapted for ebook

ep_prh_6.0_141966093_c0_r0

To all those who use their light to make sure that others feel seen

This book is dedicated to my mom and dad, Marian and Fraser, who instilled in me the values I've long used to navigate the world. Their commonsense wisdom made our home a space where I felt seen and heard, where I could practice making my own decisions, where I could become the kind of person I wanted to be. They were consistently there for me, and their unconditional love taught me that I had a voice very early on in my life. I am so grateful to them for igniting my light.

If someone in your family tree was trouble,
A hundred were not:

The bad do not win—not finally,
No matter how loud they are.

We simply would not be here
If that were so.

You are made, fundamentally, from the good.
With this knowledge, you never march alone.

You are the breaking news of the century.
You are the good who has come forward

Through it all, even if so many days
Feel otherwise.

—ALBERTO RÍOS, FROM “A HOUSE CALLED TOMORROW”

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Here's my dad helping me cool off during a hot South Side summer.

INTRODUCTION

AT SOME POINT when I was a child, my father started using a cane to keep himself balanced when he walked. I don't remember exactly when it showed up in our home on the South Side of Chicago—I was maybe four or five years old at the time—but suddenly it was there, slim and sturdy and made of a smooth dark wood. The cane was an early concession to multiple sclerosis, the disease that had given my father a severe left-legged limp. Slowly and silently and probably long before he received a formal diagnosis, MS was undermining his body, eating away at his central nervous system and weakening his legs as he went about his everyday business: working at the city's water filtration plant, running a household with my mom, trying to raise good kids.

The cane helped my dad get himself up the stairs to our apartment or down a city block. In the evenings, he would set it against the arm of his recliner and seemingly forget about it as he watched sports on TV, or listened to jazz on the stereo, or pulled me onto his lap to ask about my day at school. I was fascinated by the cane's curved handle, the black rubber tip at its end, the hollow clatter it made when it fell to the floor. Sometimes I'd try to use it, imitating my father's motions as I hobbled around our living room, hoping to feel what it was like to walk in his shoes. But I was too small and the cane was too big, and so instead I would incorporate it as a stage prop in my games of pretending.

As we saw it in my family, that cane symbolized nothing. It was just a tool, the same way my mother's spatula was a tool in the kitchen, or my grandfather's hammer got used any time he came over to fix a broken shelf or curtain rod. It was utilitarian, protective, something to lean on when needed.

What we didn't really want to acknowledge was the fact that my father's condition was gradually growing worse, his body quietly turning

on itself. Dad knew it. Mom knew it. My older brother, Craig, and I were just kids at the time, but kids are no dummies, and so even as our father still played catch with us in the backyard and showed up at our piano recitals and Little League games, we knew it, too. We were starting to understand that Dad's illness left us more vulnerable as a family, less protected. In an emergency, it'd be harder for him to leap into action and save us from a fire or an intruder. We were learning that life was not in our control.

Every so often, too, the cane would fail our father. He would misjudge a step, or his foot would catch a lump in the rug, and suddenly he'd stumble and fall. And in that single freeze-frame instant, with his body in midair, we would catch sight of everything we were hoping not to see—his vulnerability, our helplessness, the uncertainty and harder times ahead.

The sound of a full-grown man hitting the floor is thunderous—a thing you never forget. It shook our tiny apartment like an earthquake, sending us rushing to his aid.

“Fraser, be careful!” my mom would say, as if her words could undo what had happened. Craig and I would leverage our young bodies to help our dad back to his feet, scrambling to retrieve his cane and eyeglasses from wherever they'd flown, as if our speed in getting him upright might erase the image of his fall. As if any one of us could fix anything. These moments left me feeling worried and afraid, realizing what we stood to lose and how easily it could happen.

Usually, my father would just laugh the whole thing off, downplaying the fall, signaling that it was okay to smile or crack a joke. There seemed to be an unspoken pact between us: We needed to let these moments go. In our home, laughter was yet another well-worked tool.

Now that I'm an adult, what I understand about multiple sclerosis is this: The disease impacts millions of people worldwide. MS trips up the immune system in such a way that it starts attacking from within, mistaking friend for foe, self for other. It disrupts the central nervous system, stripping away the protective casing from neural fibers called axons, leaving their delicate strands exposed.

If MS caused my father pain, he didn't talk about it. If the indignities of his disability dimmed his spirit, he rarely showed it. I don't know if he

ever took falls when we weren't around—at the water-filtration plant, or walking in or out of the barbershop—though it stands to reason he did, at least occasionally. Nonetheless, years passed. My dad went to work, came home, kept smiling. Maybe this was a form of denial. Maybe it was simply the code he chose to live by. *You fall, you get up, you carry on.*

I realize now that my father's disability gave me an early and important lesson about what it feels like to be different, to move through this world marked by something you can't much control. Even if we weren't dwelling on it, that differentness was always there. My family carried it. We worried about things that other families didn't seem to worry about. We were watchful in ways it seemed others didn't need to be. Going out, we quietly sized up the obstacles, calculating the energy it would take for my father to cross a parking lot or navigate his way through the bleachers at Craig's basketball games. We measured distance and elevation differently. We viewed sets of stairs, icy sidewalks, and high curbs differently. We assessed parks and museums for how many benches they had, places where a tired body could rest. Everywhere we went, we weighed the risks and looked for small efficiencies for my dad. We counted every step.

And when one tool stopped working for him, its utility dwarfed by the strength of his disease, we'd go out and find another—the cane replaced by a pair of forearm crutches, the crutches replaced eventually by a motorized cart and a specially equipped van that was packed with levers and hydraulics to help make up for what his body could no longer do.

Did my father love any of these things, or think they solved all his problems? Not at all. But did he need them? Yes, absolutely. That's what tools are for. They help keep us upright and balanced, better able to coexist with uncertainty. They help us deal with flux, to manage when life feels out of control. And they help us continue onward, even while in discomfort, even as we live with our strands exposed.

I have been thinking a lot about these things—about what we carry, what keeps us upright in the face of uncertainty, and how we locate and lean on our tools, especially during times of chaos. I've been thinking, too, about what it means to be different. I'm struck by how so many of us wrestle with feeling different, and by how central our perceptions of

differentness continue to be in our broader conversations about what sort of world we want to live in, who we trust, who we elevate, and who we leave behind.

These are complicated questions, of course, with complicated answers. And “being different” can be defined in many ways. But it’s worth saying on behalf of those who feel it: There’s nothing easy about finding your way through a world loaded with obstacles that others can’t or don’t see. When you are different, you can feel as if you’re operating with a different map, a different set of navigational challenges, than those around you. Sometimes, you feel like you have no map at all. Your differentness will often precede you into a room; people see *it* before they see *you*. Which leaves you with the task of overcoming. And overcoming is, almost by definition, draining.

As a result—as a matter of survival, really—you learn, as my family did, to be watchful. You figure out how to guard your energy, to count every step. And at the heart of this lies a head-spinning paradox: Being different conditions you toward cautiousness, even as it demands that you be bold.



I AM BEGINNING work on this new book from exactly that place, feeling both cautious and bold. When I published *Becoming* in 2018, I was surprised—floored, honestly—by the response. I’d poured myself into it, as a means of processing not just my time as First Lady of the United States, but my life more generally. I shared not just the joyful and glamorous parts, but also the harder stuff I’d been through—my father’s death when I was twenty-seven, the loss of my best friend from college, the struggles Barack and I had in getting pregnant. I revisited certain undermining experiences I’d had as a young person of color. I spoke candidly about the pain I felt when leaving the White House—a home we’d come to love—and the legacy of my husband’s hard work as president in the hands of a reckless and uncaring successor.

Giving voice to all this felt a bit risky, but it was also relieving. For eight years as First Lady, I’d been vigilant and cautious, deeply aware that Barack and I and our two daughters had the eyes of the nation upon us, and

that as Black people in a historically white house, we could not afford a single screwup. I had to make sure I was using my platform to make a meaningful difference, that the issues I worked on were well-executed and also complemented the president's agenda. I had to protect our kids and help them live with a small level of normalcy, and support Barack as he carried what sometimes felt like the weight of the world. I made each decision with extreme care, considering every risk, evaluating every obstacle, doing everything I could to optimize my family's chances at growing as people and not merely as symbols of what others either loved or hated about our country. The tension was real and pressing, but it was not unfamiliar. Once again, I was counting the steps.

Writing *Becoming* felt like an exhale. It marked the start of my next phase of life, even as I had no idea how any of it would go. This was also the first project that was mine alone—not tied to Barack or his administration or the lives of our kids or to some part of my previous career. I loved the independence, but I also felt myself far out on a new limb, vulnerable in ways I'd never been before. One night, just before the book was released, I lay awake in bed in our post-White House home in Washington, imagining this most honest version of my story landing on shelves in bookstores and libraries, translated into dozens of different languages, scrutinized by critics around the world. I was scheduled to fly the next morning to Chicago to launch an international arena tour that would take me to thirty-one different cities over the course of the next year or so, putting myself in front of audiences of up to twenty thousand people at a time. I stared hard at the bedroom ceiling, feeling the anxiety rise like a tide in my chest, the doubts looping through my head. *Have I said too much? Can I pull this off? Will I blow it? What then?*

Beneath this lay something deeper, more primal, more fixed, and fully terrorizing—the bedrock question upon which all other doubts rest—four words that reliably plague even the most accomplished and powerful people I know, four words that have followed me since I was a young girl on the South Side of Chicago: *Am I good enough?*

In that moment, I had no answer except for *I don't know*.



IT WAS BARACK who finally set me straight. Sleepless and still stewing, I had wandered upstairs and found him working by lamplight in his study. He listened patiently as I unloaded every last doubt in my head, detailing all the ways things could go wrong. Like me, Barack was still processing the journey that had led our family to and through the White House. Like me, he nursed his own private doubts and worries, his own feelings—however occasional, however irrational—of being possibly not good enough. He understood me better than anyone else.

After I'd spilled all my fears, he simply reassured me that the book was great and so was I. He helped me remember that anxiety was a natural part of doing something new and big. He then wrapped his arms around me and touched his forehead lightly to mine. It was all I needed.



The *Becoming* book tour was one of the most meaningful experiences of my life.

I got up the next morning and took *Becoming* on the road. And this kicked off what became one of the happiest and most affirming periods of my life so far. The book received excellent reviews and, to my surprise, set sales records around the globe. I put aside time on the book tour to visit with small groups of readers, meeting in places like community centers, libraries, and churches. Hearing all the various points of connection between their stories and mine was one of the most fulfilling parts of the experience. In the evenings, more people piled into arenas—tens of thousands of them at a time. The energy in each venue was electric: music

blasting, folks dancing in the aisles, snapping selfies and hugging one another as they waited for me to take the stage. And each time, sitting down with a moderator for a ninety-minute conversation, I told my truth full-blown. I held nothing back, feeling okay with the story I was offering, feeling accepted for the experiences that made me who I was, hoping that it might help others to feel more accepted themselves.

It was fun. It was joyful. But it was also more than that.

When I looked out into those audiences, I saw something that confirmed what I knew to be true about my country and about the world more generally. I saw a colorful crowd, full of differences, and better for it. These were spaces where diversity was recognized and celebrated as a strength. I saw different ages, races, genders, ethnicities, identities, outfits, you name it—people laughing, clapping, crying, sharing. I sincerely believe that many of those people had turned up for reasons that stretched well past me or my book. My feeling was they'd shown up at least in part to feel less alone in the world, to locate some lost sense of belonging. Their presence—the energy, warmth, and diversity of those spaces—helped tell a certain story. People were there, I believe, because it felt good—it felt *great*, actually—to mix our differentness with togetherness.



I DOUBT THAT anybody at the time could have guessed the magnitude of what was about to happen. Who would have forecast that the very type of togetherness we were reveling in at those events was, in fact, on the verge of sudden extinction? Who knew a global pandemic would force us to abruptly give up things like casual hugs, unmasked smiles, and easy interactions with strangers, and, far worse, trigger an extended period of pain, loss, and uncertainty that would touch every corner of the world? If we'd known, would we have done anything differently? I have no idea.

What I do know is that these times have left us wobbly and unsettled. They have caused more of us to feel cautious, watchful, less connected. Many people are for the first time feeling something that millions upon millions of others have had to feel every day of their lives, which is what it's like to feel off-balance, out of control, and deeply anxious about the future. Over the past couple of years, we have endured unprecedented

stretches of isolation, unfathomable amounts of grief, and a generalized sense of uncertainty that's truly hard to live with.

While the pandemic may have jarringly reset the rhythms of everyday life, it has also left older, more entrenched forms of sickness untouched. We've seen unarmed Black folks continue to get killed by police—while leaving a convenience store, while walking to the barber, and during routine traffic stops. We've seen vile hate crimes carried out against Asian Americans and members of the LGBTQ+ community. We've seen intolerance and bigotry growing more acceptable rather than less, and power-hungry autocrats tightening their hold on nations around the world. In the United States, we watched a sitting president stand by as police officers unleashed tear gas on thousands of people who'd gathered peacefully in front of the White House, asking only for less hate and more fairness. And after Americans turned up in droves to fairly and decisively vote that president out of office, we witnessed a mob of angry rioters tearing violently through the most sacred halls of our government, believing they were somehow making our country great by kicking down doors and pissing on Nancy Pelosi's carpet.

Have I felt angry? Yes, I have.

Have I felt despondent in moments? Yes, that too.

Am I shaken any time I see rage and bigotry masquerading as a populist political slogan about greatness? You bet.

But am I alone in this? Thankfully, no. I hear almost every day from people, near and far, who are trying to find their way over these obstacles, who are measuring their energy, holding tight to their loved ones, and doing what they can to stay bold in this world. I speak often with those who struggle with a sense of differentness, who feel undervalued or invisible, drained by their efforts to overcome, feeling that their light has been dimmed. I have met young people from all over the world who are trying to find their voice and create space for their most authentic selves inside their relationships and their workplaces. They are full of questions: How do I create meaningful connections? When and how do I speak up to address a problem? What does it mean to “go high” when you find yourself in a low place?

Many of the people I hear from are trying to locate their power inside of institutions, traditions, and structures that weren't built for them, attempting to scan for land mines and map boundaries, many of them ill-defined and hard to see. The penalties for failing to avoid these obstacles can be devastating. It can be mightily confusing and dangerous, this stuff.

I'm frequently asked for answers and solutions. Since my last book was published, I've heard many stories and fielded many questions, conversing with a wide range of people about how and why we navigate unfairness and uncertainty. I've been asked if I might have, in some pocket somewhere, a formula for dealing with these things, something to help cut through the confusion, something to make the overcoming easier. Trust me, I understand how useful that would be. I'd love to produce a clear, bullet-pointed set of steps to help you conquer every uncertainty and hasten the climb to whatever heights you hope to reach. I wish it were that simple. If I had a formula, I'd hand it right over. But keep in mind that I, too, lie in bed at night sometimes, wondering whether I'm good enough. Please know that, like everyone else, I find myself needing to overcome. Also, those heights so many of us are striving toward? I've reached a fair number of them at this point, and for what it's worth, I can tell you that doubt, uncertainty, and unfairness live in those places, too—in fact, they flourish.

The point is, there is no formula. There's no wizard behind the curtain. I don't believe there are tidy solutions or pithy answers to life's big problems. By nature, the human experience defies it. Our hearts are too complicated, our histories too muddled.



WHAT I CAN offer is a glimpse inside my personal toolbox. This book is meant to show you what I keep there and why, what I use professionally and personally to help me stay balanced and confident, what keeps me moving forward even during times of high anxiety and stress. Some of my tools are habits and practices; some are actual physical objects; and the rest are attitudes and beliefs born out of my personal history and set of experiences, my own ongoing process of “becoming.” I don't intend this to be a how-to manual. Rather, what you'll find in these pages is a series of

honest reflections on what my life has taught me so far, the levers and hydraulics of how I get myself through. I'll introduce you to some of the people who keep me upright and share lessons I've learned from certain amazing women about facing unfairness and uncertainty. You'll hear about the things that occasionally still knock me down, and what I lean on in order to get back up. I'll tell you, too, about certain attitudes I've let go of over time, having come to understand that tools are different from and entirely more useful than defenses.

It should go without saying that not every tool helps in every situation, or uniformly for every person. What's sturdy and effective for you may not be what's sturdy and effective in the hands of your boss, or your mother, or your life partner. A spatula won't help you change a flat tire; a tire iron won't help you fry an egg. (Though by all means, feel free to prove me wrong.) Tools evolve over time, based on our circumstances and growth. What works in one phase of life may not work in another. But I do believe that there's value in learning to identify the habits that keep us centered and grounded versus those that trigger anxiety or feed our insecurities. My hope is that you'll find things here to draw from—selecting what's useful, discarding what's not—as you identify, collect, and refine your own essential set of tools.

Lastly, I'd like to dissect some notions about power and success, reframing them so that you might better see all that's within your reach and feel more encouraged to grow your own strengths. I believe that each of us carries a bit of inner brightness, something entirely unique and individual, a flame that's worth protecting. When we are able to recognize our own light, we become empowered to use it. When we learn to foster what's unique in the people around us, we become better able to build compassionate communities and make meaningful change. In the first part of this book, I'll look at the process of finding strength and light within yourself. The second part considers our relationships with others and our notions of home, while the third is meant to open a discussion on how we may better own, protect, and strengthen our light, especially during challenging times.

Throughout these pages, we'll talk about finding personal power, communal power, and the power to override feelings of doubt and